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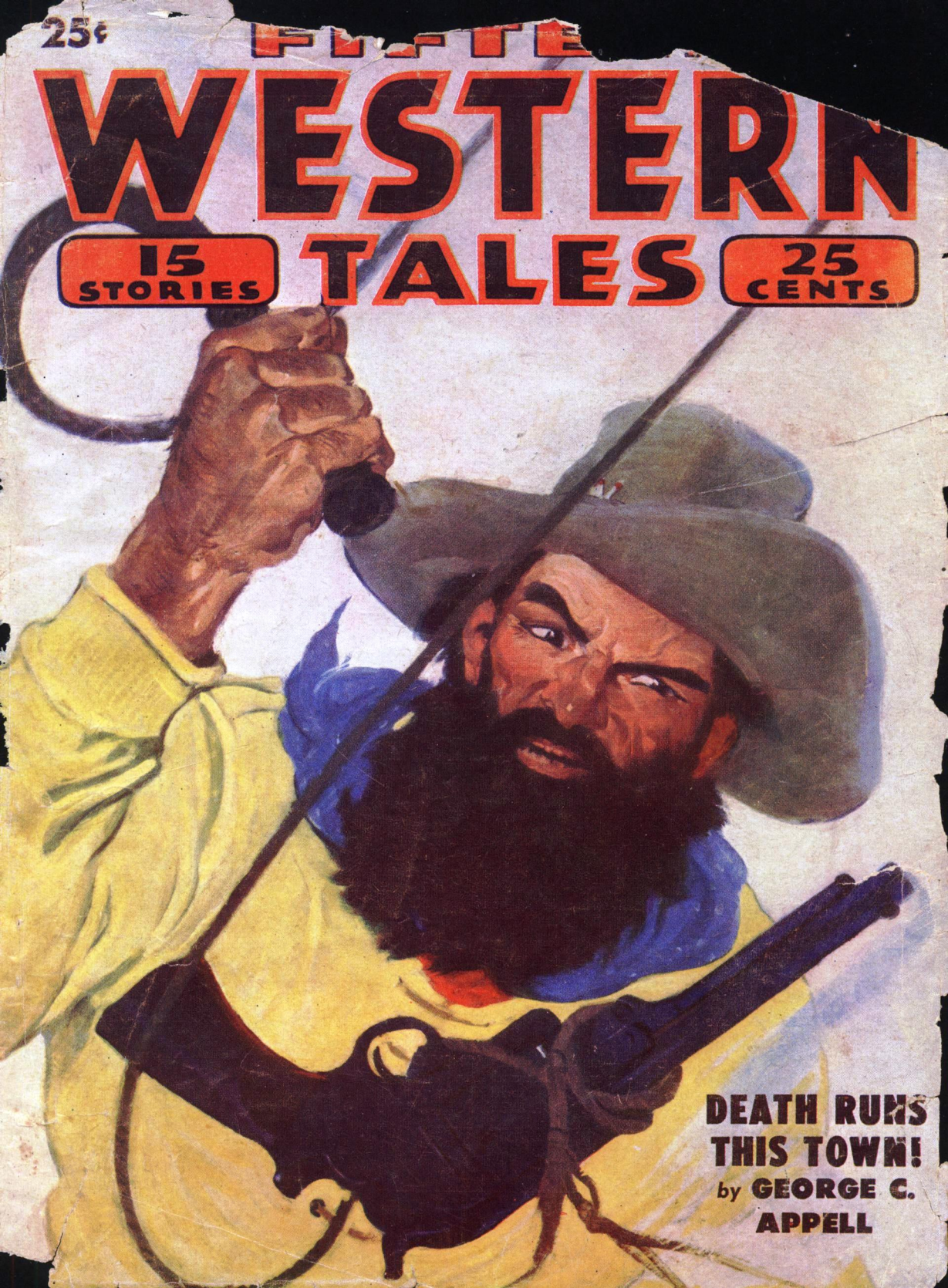

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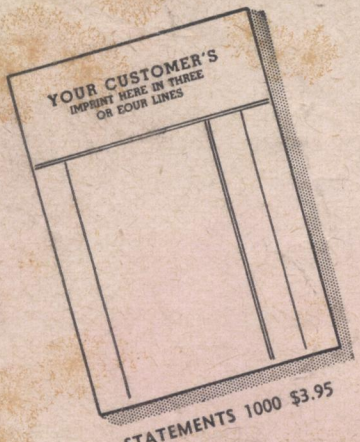

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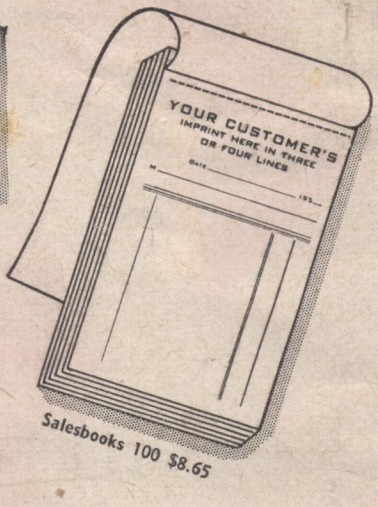

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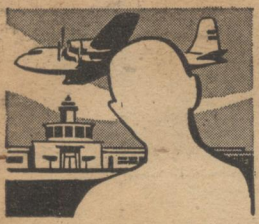

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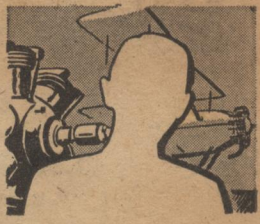

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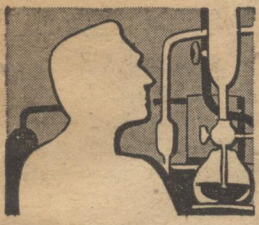

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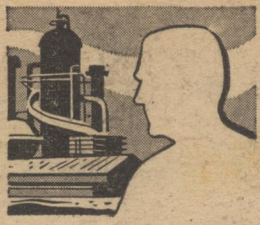

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VOLUME 24, No. 4 — NOVEMBER, 1951

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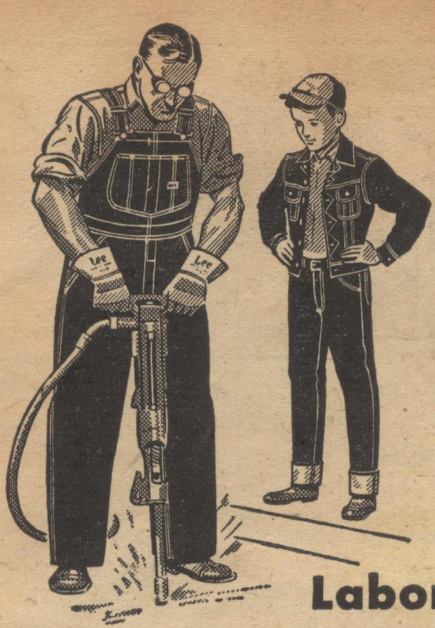

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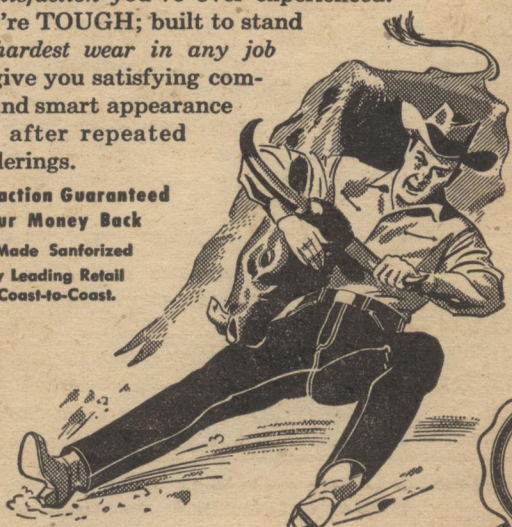

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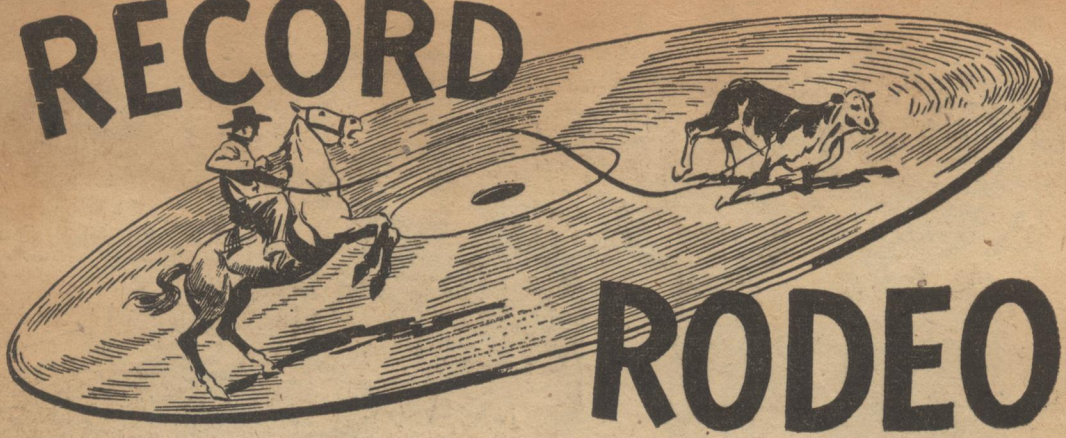

By Joey Sasso

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 two next best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letter to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

HOWDY, folks! Our record wranglers have just showed up with a cavvy of fine Western music. You'll find everything from ballads to blues, from novelty numbers to soft, romantic tunes. So step over to the music corral, and inspect the stock. There's something here to suit the mood of everyone!

TUMBLING TUMBLEWEEDS
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT LONESOME IS
PERRY COMO AND THE SONS OF THE PIONEERS
(RCA Victor)

In this RCA Victor discollaboration with the Sons of the Pioneers, the peerless Perry extends that range to the range in two sagebrush songs with Western rhythm and flavor. It is an unusual etching, both because Perry essays what is for him a comparatively untried type of song, and for one of the few times in his career he has been co-starred with a group. This waxing of *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* retains all the qualities which made the original Sons of the Pioneers version, written for them by former member Bob Nolan, an all-time hit, and gains added appeal from Perry's fresh-as-a prairie-breeze styling. Paired with it is *You don't Know What Lonesome Is,* cleffed by Country Washburn. On both sides the baritone and the sextette are musically assisted by the Western-Ayres, who are just Mitchell Ayres and his boys in chaps and spurs.

DEAD LETTER FILE
MY LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT
MONTE HALE
(MGM)

Popular Western movie star Monte Hale, favored by his movie-going fans for both his acting and singing, turns his attentions to that latter talent with fine effect on his latest MGM Records release. First he offers a moving country lament with pathos in every line. The number on the back is an unusual folk balled with a striking lyric. These sides are just as polished as one would expect from Monte.

RIDIN' DOWN THE RIVER
IN THE VALLEY OF MY DREAMS
ZEKE CLEMENTS WITH HIS MEN FROM MUSIC MOUNTAIN
(MGM)

The tune on the "A" side of Zeke Clements latest MGM release, is an appealing

(Please continue on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

little ballad which moves steadily and amiably with a nice jogging tempo. The lyric's a honey and in its delivery Zeke offers a brief sample of some fine yodeling. The whole side is neatly turned, so, if you're a Clements fan, be sure to catch a listen. A sweet ballad occupies the flip side.

I'M TYING THE LEAVES SO THEY WON'T COME DOWN
ESMERELDY
DICK THOMAS AND HIS NASHVILLE RAMBLERS
(Decca)

Dick Thomas of *Sioux City Sue* fame, sings two well-known Western tunes. The topside features Dick on the vocal with accompaniment by his Nashville Ramblers. The reverse side is an original composition by Dick with the Ramblers providing the backing.

SHENANDOAH WALTZ
BEAUTIFUL BROWN EYES
EDDIE ZACK AND HIS DUDE RANCHERS
(Decca)

The Providence, R. I. disc-jockey, Eddie Zack and his Dude Ranchers, play the beautiful new waltz, *Shenandoah Waltz,* on the top side. Cousin Richie sings the dreamy lyrics on this side and is aided by the Dude Ranch Sweethearts on the *Beautiful Brown Eyes* coupling.

JUST LIKE TWO DROPS OF WATER
I WAS SORTA WONDERIN'
LES "CARROT TOP" ANDERSON
(Decca)

Les "Carrot Top" Anderson sings the catchy tune, *Just Like Two Drops Of Water.* It's a lively number featuring an excellent guitar solo. On the reverse side is a slow-tempo'd ballad with Les again featured on the vocal.

THE STRANGE LITTLE GIRL
KENTUCKY WALTZ
TENNESSEE ERNIE
(Capitol)

Topside is reminiscent of the hit, *Roving Kind,* and should experience similar popularity. Ernie is supported by vocal quartet and band. The other side was a hillbilly hit sometime ago and is currently rising in the pop field. For the first time on this side, husky-voiced Tennessee sings a duet with himself.

IT'S ALL THE SAME TO ME
FALLING RAIN BLUES
JIMMIE SKINNER
(Capitol)

Country singer Jimmie Skinner offers two of his own songs, featuring excellent guitar and fiddle instrumentalists. Both are western love ballads. Jimmy is currently working at Radio Station WROL in Knoxville, Tenn.

STAINLESS STEEL
RAILROADIN'
SPEEDY WEST & CLIFFIE STONE
(Capitol)

Speedy, known throughout the country for his steel guitar plucking, offers two of his own instrumental originals, both projected with a good beat. Speedy is featured with Cliffie Stone's Hometown Jamboree Gang, heard daily on Station KXLA in Pasadena, California, and also appears on Cliffie's weekly TV show.

HOWLIN' AT THE MOON
I CAN'T HELP IT
HANK WILLIAMS WITH HIS DRIFTING COWBOYS
(MGM)

We know it can't be right, but it seems to us that each new Hank Williams record is the best he's done. Right or not, we feel pretty safe in saying, however, that Hank's latest MGM-er is one of his best at least. Both sides hold tunes authored by Hank himself, each of them nicely contrasted to the other, and since that means one novelty and one blues-ballad—what more could Williams fans ask? The novelty is *Howlin' At The Moon,* a song with lots of laughs in the lyric and brightness and brashness in the tune. Hank sings it wonderfully well. The blues-ballad is a moving lament called *I Can't Help It.* Hank sings it with sincerity and conviction in his well-loved blues style. No question about it—if you're a Williams fan you'll surely want to own it!

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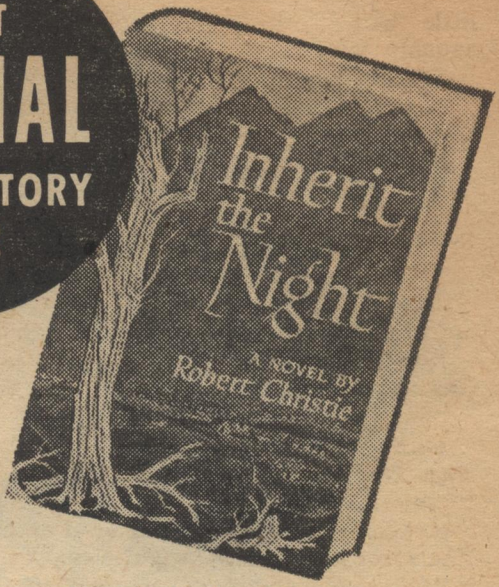

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SON OF THE GIANT by Stuart Engstrand
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Cliff Kent was the son of Willis Kent, the biggest man in a small Missouri town. Willis was president of the bank, a deacon of the church, active in civic works, courtly, charming, and a most eligible widower. And it was plain to everyone that Cliff would "never be half the man his father was."

But what people didn't know was that father and son hated—detested—one another.

For a time the animosity between father and son, though nearly overpowering, was kept under control. But when the older man brought young, spirited Helen into their home, the house could not contain the passions her arrival aroused, and father and son became locked in deadly combat.

This is a story of tense power and drama, a thorough, fascinating examination into the soul of a son struggling against the deadly barrier of his father's power.

OR

INHERIT THE NIGHT by Robert Christie
(Published at $3.00)

It was sundown when Kurt Werden reached the tiny pueblo high in the Andes. He carried a heavy pistol and an old newspaper clipping which read, ENEMY LEADER DIES IN BESIEGED CITY. He demanded an impossible thing—to be taken to San Cobar.

The villagers had heard of San Cobar. The old legends said that it was a place of great wealth. But it lay beyond the mountains from which no man had returned alive. True, El Borracho, the drunken trader, had returned from his mysterious wanderings with rich ornaments, but he was now far gone in drink.

The stranger showed El Borracho more gold than he had ever seen, enough to make him forget the terrible mountain gales, the yawning crevasses.

What happened beyond the mountains is an unforgettable story—the story of an arch criminal alone among a strange people who did not know the meaning of suspicion, of fear, of hatred, of death, but who were to learn.

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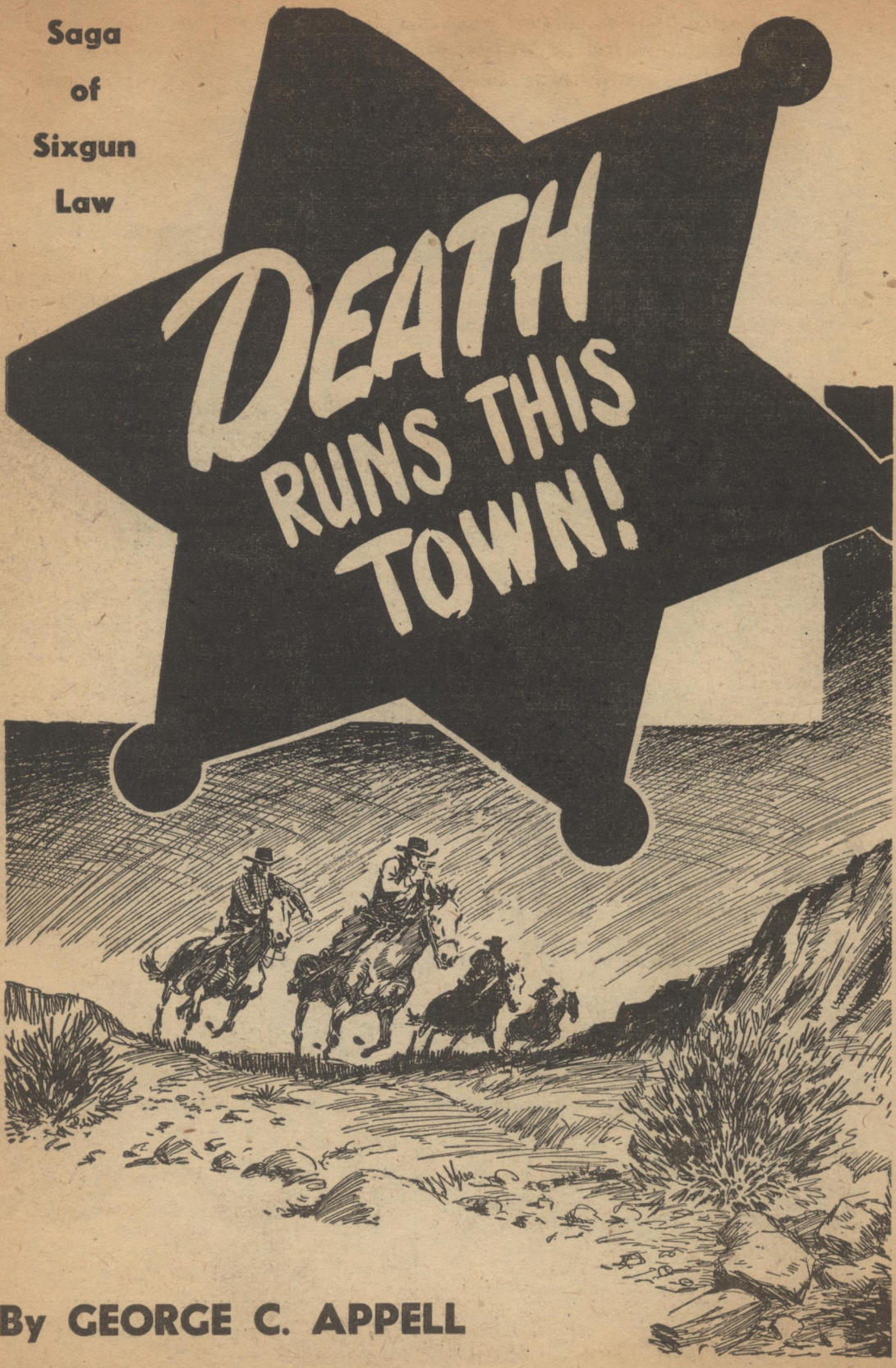


By GEORGE C. APPELL

Ives had a bullet-scarred past and a boothill future when they made him marshal of Maidstone . . . the town that was famous for feuding ranchers, bank robbers—and for quick-dying marshals!

CHAPTER ONE

Hangrope Shadow

THE man who was sometimes called Ives opened his eyes slowly, after the manner of shock-stunned people, and it was full daylight. For a moment—a moment of nausea and fright—it seemed impossible that day could have come; this day or any other day, because the night before had been a dark and noisy hell of flying hoofs and slapping guns and the deadly snap of a leaping noose.

Sandy yelped to the bite of a bullet. . . .

He forced his eyes open all the way, and let the feeling of nausea ebb back into him. He was lying on hard-angled rocks in a sloping coulee that he vaguely remembered from last night. Something was creaking in his ears—steadily, insistently, whiningly, like a loosely-hinged door swaying in a breeze. Though there was no door out here, no house, no breeze.

He sat up, and his skull burst into pain. He saw his horse neck down, lipping at brown grasses, tail switching at flies. After a moment, the pain in his head ebbed away, as had the nausea. The creaking seemed louder. Then he saw his gun lying in the yellow sand fifty feet beyond his horse, and he crabbed to his knees, pushed himself to his feet and limped toward the gun. He picked it up, snapped out the cylinder, and counted the cartridges. There were two left.

He half-turned toward his cropping horse, listening to the small sounds of early morning—the rustle of grass, the rubbly chomping of an eating horse, the distant twitter of a foraging bird.

It was coming back to him in fragments now, hounding his memory. He and Sandy had been riding into Maidstone for a quick crack at the bank—Maidstone was always burying its marshals and appointing new ones and Sandy had heard that the newest one was no good—and toward twilight they'd raised dust in a coulee. This coulee.

Sandy Grew had said, "I don't like that color, it's too dark." Dark dust is fast dust and fast dust is trouble. It was trouble, all right. It was Gentleman John Merrow and four associates who were planning to take the bank themselves, and the Gentleman was resentful of interference.

What the hell is that creaking?

The man Ives gazed down at his gun, then carefully filled the four empty slots in the cylinder. The new cartridges from his belt left wax on his fingers and he wiped them on his jeans, one by one. Let's see: Sandy had shouted and the Gentleman fired and then it became a chase through the evening. A long and dangerous chase around the hill and back across the slope, shooting at shadows and seeing flame stabs leap from pursuing shadows. A chase that swung back into this coulee. Sandy Grew yelping to the bite of a bullet—Sandy cart-wheeling off—Sandy's horse racing through the coulee and down onto the flatland.

Ives holstered now, and the rest of it returned to him. He had neck-reined and pulled around and reached down for Sandy and a hissing rope had snaked from the darkness behind him and caught them both. They'd swung Sandy up first because he was wounded and Merrow wanted to end his suffering, and presently Sandy was kicking and threshing to the final impulses of life.

Gentleman John Merrow had bowed in the moonlight. "You next, please. We got the franchise on the Maidstone bank—not you two punks."

Ives recalled being surprised at seeing only two men with the Gentleman. So two must have been hit during the circling. Then he'd lunged out with a leg and he took the Gentleman forcefully in the chest and wrenched free of the rope and leap-frogged onto his horse and clapped spurs.

And again that crazy circling, this time with a purpose. They'd never look for him back in the coulee, from where he'd just escaped. They picked out the clatter of Sandy's galloping horse and followed it down the distances and were gone.

He had been pulling down in the coulee to come to a soft walk when his horse tripped, stumbled and sprawled to one knee. Rocks against his head, sudden pain. Nothing.

Now he saw something moving back and forth across the rocks and he had his gun out and cocked. The something was a shadow. It was the shadow of legs. They were Sandy Grew's legs, and he stared up at the body that was moving gently under pressure of its own momentum. Sandy had been freckle-faced and tanned once, and with red hair and blond eyelashes. But now he was blue-faced and swollen, and green flies darted around his bloated head. The rope was creaking and whining, creaking and whining.

He took his time with the chores that had to be done. The Gentleman wouldn't be back. Merrow disliked daylight for his business operations. And Sandy Grew had all the time in the world. The ground was hard, under its surface, and the pack spade was blunt. It took three hours to get Sandy down and covered and protected with rocks.

IT WAS sun-high-noon when he strapped the spade back to his saddlery and got out makings and fashioned up a quirly. He

smoked contemplatively, wondering where the Gentleman's two shot riders might be laying. And then it came to him that the Gentleman might have retrieved them, mindful as he was of the laws of evidence and the inanimate accusation contained in a "Wanted" poster.

So he finished his smoke and took his horse and nodded to Sandy's cairn once, holding down the sorrow. Sandy Grew had been a good business partner. Never flinched. Like himself, in a way, because he had trained Sandy to the business, so to speak, and they'd been of the same age and equally eager to succeed in their chosen profession.

He pointed his horse toward Maidstone, figuring to arrive about twilight. That's the estimate he had made just twenty-four hours before, though he chose to ignore the omen.

Merrow wouldn't strike again this close to town—it was supposed to have a new marshal in it, which was why Sandy had argued in its favor—and if the Gentleman and his two remaining associates were already there, why, it would depend upon who saw who first, and ol' Homer Hollis could figure out the report. Homer Hollis was one of those paper-minded county sheriffs. Had to know everything the town marshals did or said or thought. Fussy old hound. But he was north of Maidstone, up in Gunnison, and there'd be no trouble from him in Maidstone.

There was brawling in Maidstone; Ives could hear it out on the star-struck desert. There was the nasty sound of ragged shooting and much hoarse yelling and the beating of hoofs.

A few seconds later, glass smashed to pieces in Maidstone, and he reined down and decided to circle a bit. Circling had worked last night, and it might work again. The shooting had stopped and no more glass broke, he heard voices shouting back and forth in violent disagreement. A hooded rig came spinning in from the opposite direction and sped across the moonlight. A doctor, that would be.

Maidstone became quiet, and he trotted into the single street and tied up and pushed his way through a curious crowd huddled outside the Twin Lamp Bar. He passed between the lamps that were still burning on either side of the slatted swing doors and edged his way inside. Gentleman John Merrow was not in the saloon, and if the Gentleman had been in Maidstone at all, he would have been inside the saloon or inside the bank.

The back mirror was in jagged pieces that were punctured with frosted white bullet holes. The bartender was just rising, egg-eyed and damp with sweat. A ponderously fat man was brushing sawdust from his baggy knees toward the rear. And closer, near the front, a small man in black broadcloth was turning back his cuffs preparatory to examining two inert figures on the floor.

A young man—about the new arrival's age—was leaning against the wall, breathing hard and clutching a torn sleeve. Stains were spreading onto his tight fingers.

The doctor moved to his work on the first figure, and presently shook his head and stepped to the other one. The fat man in the back finished brushing himself off and poked through his vest for tobacco. He was well-dressed, despite his baggy clothes, and he looked well-fed. He found a cheroot and lighted it and sat down, watching the doctor.

The doctor rose and turned down his cuffs and buttoned his coat. "Marshal's dead too. Both of 'em. . . . Perico!" A Mexican boy came from behind the bar. "Take 'em out."

Perico bent willingly to his labor. He was paid a dollar a grave by the town, and he'd collected six dollars this week already. Two of them had been for marshals.

The doctor stepped across to the young man with the wounded arm. The fat man made a motion to the bartender and trade was resumed. Perico had some difficulty getting the bodies out, so thick was the press of customers at the bar.

The fat man spoke the length of the room. "Who's that by the door?"

Faces turned that way, and trade was momentarily suspended. He ambled away from the door, toward the bar, and nodded to them all. "Call me Ives. I dropped in for a drink."

The fat man was saying, "This one's on me, Ives. After that you buy your own."

Ives looked at him, nodded again, and moved to the bar. Someone made way for him, and he rested his instep on the rail. Sandy Grew might have been wrong about

this pitch, for the triggers here seemed to be tender and sensitive. Maybe Gentleman John Merrow had found that out, somehow, and decided to try somewhere else.

Ives drank the first one to Sandy.

He'd have to get a new partner soon. He liked the cut of the young man the doctor was treating across the room. Ives could see it in the remains of the back mirror—the explorer prying into muscle, the dressing, the bandaging. But no wincing, no flinching.

The patient leaning against the wall had shut his eyes at the first cold thrust of the explorer, but when the bandaging started, he opened his eyes and saw the newcomer reflected in a fragment of back mirror. He saw a young man—twenty-five maybe—braced lightly against the bar with the slender ease that comes from years of fine riding. Fast riding, most of it must have been, for speed, not plodding, develops grace.

Ives took a last look at the patient's reflection, noting the unlived-in face and the mouth that was not yet hardened by physical emergencies; then addressed himself to his second drink, for which he paid.

"The Monty's an' the Alldray's ought to settle this thing, once for all." The man next to Ives drank down, all at once. He asked Ives, "You wouldn' know about that?"

"No, I wouldn't."

The man poured. "Montgomery's got a spread out here—that's his kid with the shot arm—an' Alldray's got one borderin' on it. They got fence troubles." The man was talking under the impulsion of nervousness, not from the desire to chatter. It was the nervousness that results from quick tension and quick release from tension, and Ives had seen it before—argument, threat, guns snagged naked and firing. Bullets whickering. One man bending backward, the other slumping forward.

The man drank hastily. "So when they meet off the range, it's most allus the same." He curved a thumb to his shoulder. "The kid yonner says his daddy lost some cows, an' young Alldray—him who was carried out first—calls him to prove it, an' the marshal stepped in. Alldray threw on the marshal an' the marshal responded in kind, an' then we called the doctor. Young Monty—over there—he took Alldray's slug after all, after it'd wandered through the marshal, like."

Dr. Jenney packed up, refused a drink from the fat man, and went out. Perico passed him in the swing doors and walked down to the fat man and handed him a badge.

And the man next to Ives laughed. "Third time he's lifted that tin off a body this week."

THE information was of considerable interest to the man called Ives. It meant that young Montgomery wouldn't be overly-eager to hit the fast trails, since he had a father who owned a ranch, and it meant that Maidstone was not a safe place in which to conduct business operations.

But there was still a possibility of employment in Maidstone, and Ives was taken by it. It would be the safest way in the world to look the town over.

The long metallic cry of wheels wailed up to the Twin Lamp and screeched to a stop in a slocking of brakes. The doors flapped open and a small girl with flashing green eyes and wild hair that was corn-bright stamped in and thrust out her underlip and cocked her head left to right. She was, Ives noticed, be-scattered with freckles that were dim against the lividness of her flushed skin. The tawny fur of her trimly-cut weskit had been carried originally by a mountain-lion. She had a thin quirt in one hand, and suddenly she levelled it at the wounded Montgomery and held it on him like a sword. "You start it?"

"I didn't finish it, sis. Marshal got in the way."

"Where's the marshal?"

"Out with the other two." The youngster stepped away from the wall. "It was Fred Alldray, this time. I seen him last week skulkin' by north fence, an' merely asked him to explain it."

She tucked the quirt under her arm and examined the bandaging. "Doc Jenney, by the neatness. You better come home. Dad says you better." She faced around to the silent men at the bar. "He telling the truth to me?"

A chorus of muffled "Yes mums" went from front to rear.

Her eyes struck Ives with the hot impact of green fire. It reminded him of cedar flames when they first lap from the kindling. "You have anything to do with this?"

"No mum."

The quirt came out.

"You mean that to sound funny?"

"No mum." He stared her down, stared through her; stared until the quirt dropped and the heat in her eyes flickered out.

"Not many people say No to me, mister."

"Ives." He put down his glass and bowed in imitation of Gentleman John Merrow's bow the night before. "You'd be Miss Montgomery, I take it?"

"You try to take it, you'll get your face ripped open with braided leather." She shook the quirt at him. "This leather."

Everyone was laughing when she propelled her brother out. The wheels cut into the night and were gone, and the laughter died with their sound.

The fat man was sucking thoughtfully on his gummy cheroot, blinking and spouting smoke. He made a gesture to Perico, and the Mexican sauntered forward and tapped Ives on the arm. "Meest' Parsons." Perico wriggled his thumb that way.

Mr. Parsons was smiling fatly when Ives reached his chair. He said, "I wouldn't ruffle her hackles, stranger. She'll do what she says."

"Did I ruffle 'em?"

"Seems to me you tried." Parsons lifted a brow to the burning end of his cheroot. "You ever been here before?"

A warning throb went through Ives. "That'd come under the heading of personal business—wouldn't it?"

Parsons shrugged a heavy shoulder. "Like it here?"

"So far." Ives was on the balls of his boots, ready. There was a window behind Parsons' great head, to the left of it.

"That's good." Rancid smoke spread upward. "I own it."

Ives relaxed a bit. "The saloon?"

"The town." Parsons shrugged again. "Mayor, guess you'd call it. What I wanted to say—an' I generally say what I want—is, don't ruffle the citizens. We got troubles enough without workaways stirrin' up more."

Ives' thin mouth stiffened. "Without what, Mr. Parsons?"

"Without workaways." Parsons shook a stubby finger at Ives. "An' lemme tell you something else. You won't get to sign on around here till the troubles are over. We got boundary troubles an' we got Merrow troubles."

"What's that—a hoof disease?" Ives was rigid again.

Parsons beamed like a cat. "He's a bank buster. Him, an' Bran Branner, an' Sandy Grew an' Dockmeyer." The mayor's slumbrous eyes half-closed. "'Cept Dockmeyer, he's a rustler too, in addition to other things." Parsons was watching Ives' hands as he spoke, because hands give away emotion sooner than anything else. But Ives had held them steady.

Ives said, "Seems to me you don't need riders here, you need a decent marshal."

"Like the job?" Parsons tossed the badge up and caught it, tossed it up and caught it.

And Ives said, "Sure. When do I start?"

"Right now." The badge flipped in a flashing arc and struck Ives on the chest and he caught it just in time.

He didn't see Parsons' broad wink at the bar crowd, because he was facing around to Perico. The Mexican was stooping behind him, at his heels, pegging a tape measure there and slowly extending it up his spine toward his head.

"For-r the grave, señor. I mus' know how long you are."

CHAPTER TWO

The Three Warrants

THE board cubby next to the livery stable was the marshal's office. It had a slanting roof, so that you could stand up on the stable side, but had to crouch on the outer side. Mayor Parsons had not seen fit to waste wood on a structure which had never been called home by anyone for long.

There was a springless cot and a wash stand behind the desk, and behind the cot was a heavy door which led to the single cell. No one had ever occupied the cell. Ives turned up the lamp and breathed once on the badge that was pinned to his left pocket. There was a folder on the desk and he proceeded to leaf through it. There were pictures in it—not pretty ones—and there were descriptions. These had come down from Gunnison and they bore the official seal of Homer Hollis himself.

Ives saw some interesting faces. Bran Branner's, for one—a poor likeness sketched from the stammered description of a cowering eyewitness five years before. Branner was wanted for several things, chief among them the unlawful acquisition of other peo-

ple's cattle. The small print told of how he had at one time shipped aboard a go-easter, cut the couplings and rolled twenty cars of stock down the grade to where friends were waiting to unload it and throw it into Mexico for sale. Bran Branner, the small print said, was alone when last seen, operating near Julesburg.

And Doc Dockmeyer was there, very much wanted for robbery, murder, and rustling. Dockmeyer's page bore no small print, it was all in large type. Gentleman John Merrow—"Damned fine resemblance," Ives said aloud—was greatly desired by peace officers as far east as Omaha and as far west as the Golden Gate. His roster of accomplishments matched Dockmeyer's. And Sandy Grew was there. Rustling, mail robbery, attempted bank robbery. $10,000 for him.

Ives closed the folder. There was a northbound stage due in at midnight, and he was supposed to supervise transfer of the mails. After that, he could turn in. This was beginning to look like a bonanza—stages coming and going, rolling heavy with loot; a snug and rickety bank down the street, cellar vaults rotten with cash. Enough mother lode here in Maidstone at this season for four men, five men, a dozen men. It was all in knowing how to acquire the stuff, and Ives thought he knew. It would be a good revenge for Sandy's death, and maybe some of the cash could be sent to Sandy's girl down in the Llano Estacado. That would be a pleasant salute to Sandy's memory, and a hell of a fine joke on Gentleman John.

The stages were rolling at night now, because of the troubles. And they always alternated routes.

Ives turned down the lamp wick and bethought himself of Miss Montgomery. There was spirit to match a man's zest. Eyes afire and steel wrists flexible and a challenge tossed to the world. Flesh like that had never whimpered, a soul like that had never cringed, even under the slash of a Saxon whip centuries ago. It was exciting to think about Miss Montgomery, and Marshal Ives was still thinking about her when the shot punched flatly and gasped into the night. There was a yell from the Twin Lamp and a chair went over and there was another shot. It thudded into the livery stable and caused startled yimmering among the stalls.

Ives ran low, gun out, ducking and bending. He came shoulder-tight against the front of the saloon and felt his way to the doors and plunged inside. A man was standing on the bar fanning a Colt back and forth. The bartender was out of sight, the mayor was behind his chair, and everyone else was lined up against the opposite wall. The man on the bar was the man who had been talking to Ives earlier. He sighted the marshal, and swung the Colt at him. "Back out, Ives!"

Ives backstepped as far as the doors. "You better put that thing away."

"Me?" The man laughed out loud, head back, Colt dipping. Ives threw himself against the bar and whipped up a hand and caught the man's near heel and spilled him cleanly onto his butt and dove on top of him and hit him once under the jaws. He got the Colt, rose, and wiped sawdust from his jeans. "What was he up to?"

The talking started all at once, the bartender reappeared, and Parsons climbed around his chair and sat down in it. "Claims someone said he was Bran Branner," the mayor told the marshal. "He was drunk, he got sore." Parsons pursed his mouth. "Don't blame him, either." He glanced up at Ives. "Where'd you learn that one?"

"Here, about two minutes ago." Ives gave Parsons the Colt. "He'll wake up in a little bit. Is he signed on?"

"Montgomery's M-Diamond."

The bar was closing up, and the man Ives had hit was coming to. Parsons got to his feet. "Drink?"

"No, thanks." Ives thought he heard the stage coming in. It would be just like Gentleman John Merrow to be aboard it the better to sack it further along the trail. That's the way Bran Branner had cut out those steers, by being aboard the Eastbound train.

Parsons lived over the livery stable, which he owned. The mayor's office was below, next to Number One Stall. The mayor was seldom in it. "Here's your stage, Ives." He glanced queerly at the marshal.

It was booming in from the south in an immense ball of dust that unraveled across the moonlight as it came. The teams skidded down to their haunches and the brakes took the axles with the scream of a train whistle and Perico darted out with grease. The dust settled flintily and the driver hopped down and took the pouch from the guard.

Mayor Parsons was there, doing a little

dance step with elephantine grace. "Any trouble?"

The guard spat over his shotgun. "One coyote seen, one rabbit hit."

"Hullo Jess—" The driver cut it off, extending the pouch. "Hell, thought you was Jess."

Ives received the pouch. "I'm wearin' his badge."

"Well—whaddaya know? Whaddaya know?"

Parsons peered into the open window. "Passengers?"

"Not a damn one." The driver was up on the box again, watching Perico change teams. "Back 'em in slow!"

There was small talk slung down from the box and slung up from the street; the man from the M-Diamond came out on the arm of a friend and they rode off without speaking. Then the whip smacked, the fresh teams strained into traces, and the stage rumbled north.

Mayor Parsons spat sideways into the settling dust of the stage's backwash. "I told 'em to pass the word to Hollis about we got a new marshal who seems pretty handy." He jerked his jowls once. "Maybe the sheriff'll be down to have a look at you." He wiped his mouth. "G'night, Ives."

The man called Ives gripped the mail pouch and leaned back against the front window of the Twin Lamp, hearing the stage rattle into the distances, hearing his heart thud against his high ribs. Hearing Parsons shuffle across to the stable.

After a moment, he crossed to his coop office, locked up the pouch and raised the lamp wick. He inspected his gun, opened the cylinder, and tested the trigger a few times. He removed each cartridge, wiped wax from it, and replaced it. Then he took off his hat, took off his boots, holstered, blew out the lamp, and went to bed.

HOMER HOLLIS sat his saddle like an Indian—hunched forward, heels out, knees high. He was riding slowly—he did most things slowly—timing his arrival in Maidstone for late afternoon. He meant to turn off and see his friend Martin Montgomery at the M-Diamond, then go straight on into town and pay call to that plump lynx, Mayor Parsons. The mayor had a new marshal, and Homer Hollis was interested.

He was small, this sheriff, and with a ragtag moustache that resembled a shaggy gray brush. The crown of his black hat was undented, uncreased, and dusty. His tired, patient features were a triangle of brown between his black hat brim and his dusty white shirt front. He wore neither collar nor tie. You never would have thought that he carried a reputation with him, a reputation for sudden retribution and painless death. For it was spoken through the valley and across the ranges that Homer Hollis had never wounded a man he intended to kill, and that he had never killed a man he intended to wound. It was further whispered that he had killed sixty-seven men in pursuit of his calling, and that eighteen of these had been scored before the sheriff was old enough to marry.

He was fifty-four now, and happily married, and long aware of the fact that law enforcement has to do first with human beings, and second with weapons. If you reverse the two, you are no longer enforcing the law properly, and you are not a peace officer but a state-paid killer.

But Homer Hollis was not holding such thoughts when he visited the M-Diamond, where the hospitality was lavish, and where young Matt proudly displayed his bandaged wound, and where Miss Cynthia told how she'd had to spin a rig into Maidstone to get her brother, and that by heaven if she were a man. . . .

And Hollis pushed on into town and tied up and ambled wearily into the Twin Lamp and sat awhile with Mayor Parsons.

The mayor was glad that the sheriff had come. "We got a heller, Homer. He may even live a week."

They chuckled together, those two, and smoked at length, and referred themselves to Old Anvil 100 Proof, and reminisced about better days when men stuck up stages in broad daylight and women didn't flounce around the place with braided quirts. Then Homer Hollis rose and excused himself and remarked that he had come to visit the new marshal, and that he'd better get to doin' it. He ambled across the street and ambled into the cubby next to the livery stable and leaned forward from the waist in semblance of a bow. The sheriff was always mindful of his manners, but he wasn't always sure of them.

Marshal Ives didn't rise. He couldn't. He

had a gun on Homer Hollis under the desk. He nodded and tried to smile and said, "You're the sheriff, I'll bet."

"Same." Hollis was feeling acutely embarrassed. He sat down and flicked out the dusty flares of his coat and balanced his hat on his crossed knee. He folded his hands around the hat's crown. "Haven't been here in some time."

"What brings you now?"

"Oh, you know how 'tis. Ol' man likes to see how the young ones're comin'." Homer Hollis asked a few questions—gently—about Ives' past experience in law enforcement, and received unsatisfactory answers, which didn't surprise him. He knew from the angle of Ives' right arm that Ives had a gun on him, and he knew from a recent batch of posters in Gunnison that he was talking to Bran Branner, who had last been seen near Julesburg, where up-to-date descriptions had been given.

"Old man, he don' get around much anymore. Last long chase I ever give"—Ives' right tricep swelled in his sleeve—"was after a boy named Ives Magowan. An' you know what? He got away from me, he was ridin' that fast."

IVES' gray eyes were icy. And then his right arm relaxed, and he holstered and put both hands on the desk. His eyes were less icy now, but more shrewd. "All right, Hollis. What is it?" The marshal swallowed dryly. "He changed his name to Branner."

Homer Hollis yawned mightily. "What do I call you? Magowan? Ives? Branner?" He took a hand from his hat and started to slip it into his coat. Then he stopped and shook his head at Ives. "Gun's on the hip, not in here." He thrust in his hand and drew out three folded papers. "These're all warrants for your arrest, Ives."

"Go ahead."

Hollis scratched the back of his neck and yawned some more. "Nev' did see such heat. . . . Miz' Hollis always takes it badly."

Ives Magowan could see Mrs. Hollis up in Gunnison puttering around a liana-choked porch with cold lemonade and a fan. Sitting down, finally, and rocking easily under the protection of a conscience that told her that no matter what her man was doing, it wasn't wrong. Ives Magowan had had a brief taste of that life once—of porches and calmness and easy ways. Of a hymn-sing on Sunday and a dance on Saturday and clean work through the week. That had been before he'd run off a neighbor's horse for the fun of it, and found that the law didn't see the humor in it.

Before he'd shot it out in youthful anger and fled in youthful pride. Before he'd joined up with Dockmeyer as lookout man, and Dockmeyer had left him one night as decoy for a posse and Ives had barely escaped the trap. Before. . . . He faced away from Homer Hollis. He didn't look at the warrants.

Hollis returned them to his inner pocket. "I won't shoot, if you won't shoot."

"Go ahead." He felt unclean with the memory of fire-green eyes and corn-bright hair.

Hollis took a deep breath and released it slowly. "What'd you come here for? The bank?"

"Possibly." Ives had bargained before in his young time, and he was figuring a way to bargain now.

"Alone?"

"Maybe."

Homer Hollis moaned something under his breath, and his eyes saddened. "How'd you get the badge?"

"Parsons gave it to me."

Hollis nodded. "Sounds like him."

"What are the three warrants for, Hollis?"

"Lessee . . . cuttin' the stock train that time was one. Lookoutin' for Doc Dockmeyer was another. Oh yes, an' runnin' off that remount cavvy for the Lazy L roundup. What'd you do with it?"

"I forget."

"Sure." The sheriff hugged his hat again. "Why don't you come along, an' do your time, an' start clean?"

"In what? Twenty years? Thirty?" Ives shouted it.

"Relax, son, relax. You'd only be 'bout half a hundred then."

Ives was on his feet. "We'll shoot it out here before I do that!" He couldn't tell this man what had happened to him in the Twin Lamp last night, when he'd been threatened with the lash of a quirt and challenging eyes and haughty lips. That does something to a man, all three together.

"Well, son, we're both holstered, an' even givin' you notice, I could let a hole into you. Let's not shoot." Hollis sounded weary. "I really disapprove of it."

Ives sat down. "Look, Hollis—I never killed a man in my life, except maybe two nights ago when—"

Fresh interest was brightening the sheriff's eyes. "Tell me of it, son. Tell me of it!"

"—when Sandy an' me got racked by the Gentleman. I think we got two."

"Sandy Grew?"

"Yes."

Hollis was sitting forward. "John Merrow?"

"Yes." And Ives realized where his bargaining point lay. "Look—I'll swap you a killer for a rustler each time. Merrow for me, Dockmeyer for me, and"—he swallowed hard—"Sandy for me."

"Where's Sandy Grew?"

"I'll never tell you unless you cancel out one warrant against me. If you don't, Sandy'll be an unclosed case on your head for the rest of your life."

Homer Hollis was a logical man. But logic, he knew, is a two-way proposition consisting of causes and effects, weights and counterweights, deductions and conclusions. "Would you turn in your partner, son? I know you been ridin' with Sandy since after Julesburg."

Ives smiled calmly. He had never felt so easy in his nerves in five years. "Yes, I would. Somethin' better has come up."

"May I ask what?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Hollis drew out a warrant. It was the one for the Lazy L cavvy. Lazy Lew Lockhart had retrieved most of it by having to buy it back, though he hadn't had to lay out ten thousand dollars, which was Sandy Grew's value to the law, dead or alive. "All right, son. Where's Sandy Grew?"

"In a coulee seven miles from here, under the rocks. I buried him, Merrow hung him. I got away."

"Can you prove it?"

"I'll take you there, and you can dig if you want to. But I won't watch it."

Hollis's strong fingers tore the warrant across. He slung it onto the desk. "Two to go—an' we'll dig today, son."

"Gentleman John can't be far from here. I think I know where."

"That'll cancel out that lookout job nicely."

Ives was up, reaching for his hat. "When do you want to start?"

"Sooner the better." Hollis pulled out a key-winder and snapped open the case. "I got a dinin' date at Montgomery's tonight—an' so have you, 'cause you won't be out've my sight 'til the third warrants torn up."

He snapped the watch shut. "Who've you got?"

"Dockmeyer." Ives sounded eager. "I think I know where he may be hidin' out, too."

The sheriff rose, put on his hat, and indicated the door to the cubby. "Aft' you, seh."

They went past the Twin Lamp and waved to the mayor and they went past the bank and waved to Perico, who was delivering the receipts from the saloon; and they went past the turnoff to the M-Diamond and lined out southeast for the broken hills that rose raggedly from the flatlands. Ives led Hollis directly to the coulee and showed him the cairn and walked away. He smoked several cigarettes, pretending not to listen to the scraping of the spade, and he pondered where Gentleman John Merrow might be.

Then Hollis rejoined him and said, "You can throw that torn warrant away. Now what about the Gentleman?"

"He won't try Maidstone with only two men, which is all he's got left."

Hollis looked glum. He blinked wearily. He took off his hat, blew dust from the crown, and slanted it over his brow. "What'll he try?"

"I'll bet the Gunnison stage, tonight, southbound."

Homer Hollis swung up and collected rein.

"What'll you do—go into a trance an' smoke up where Merrow'll be waitin'?"

Amber twilight was veiling the flatlands, and Ives was hungry. He had heard that the Montgomery's set a heavy table, though he had never expected to be invited to it, even at the point of a gun. "No, sheriff, I'll make Merrow come to me. Parsons has a buckboard, hasn't he?" They were riding back to Maidstone now, side by side, neither quite trusting the other. Questionable company can cause friendly-appearing formations.

"I don't foller, Ives. You got to do better'n that."

"After dinner, I will."

CHAPTER THREE

Rustler's Round-up

THE M-Diamond was a dog-trot place, the country was new and there were not any of your fancy-fangled verandahs and great rooms and second stories—they would rise later, as the population of boothill lowered—and between the chinked log end buildings four long planks had been set, with firewood stumps for chairs.

Martin Montgomery greeted the marshal of Maidstone gravely and wished him well, though he had the feeling that he was shaking hands with a corpse, and his son Matt sat so that his arm bandaging showed clearly, quite willing to display his badge of manhood.

Miss Cynthia was wearing a blouse and a cotton skirt and the quirt was out of sight, and when she lanced a slab of beef it was the signal for the guests and the hands to do likewise. Ives, sitting at her right, was unable to recall that he had an appetite, and only when he felt Homer Hollis' eyes on him did he pretend to take food. He heard the sheriff murmur, "Somethin' better, all right."

Martin Montgomery was growling about the Alldrays. He was planning to set up loaded shotguns at strategic fence corners, with trip wires on the triggers to discourage loitering. "It gets so a man can't leave his herd alone at night with one-two singers to keep 'em quiet. He's got to double the guard an' inspect it himself, like Phil Sheridan used to do when he had insomnia, which was of'en."

Ives asked, "You ever see an Alldray cut out stock?"

A rumble of protest beat on his ears—from Montgomery, from Matt, from the foreman. You don't have to see an Alldray, you see figures sneakin' around. Who else would it be? The M-Diamond and the A Bar A are the only borderin' outfits around here.

Homer Hollis wiped his moustache with his sleeve, delicately, and found a toothpick. He located his favorite cavity, and sat back. "Thing is, you both sittin' on a powderkeg. An' these little explosions in town are wearin' down your riders."

"Little!" Young Matt thrust his bandaging forward. "Call that little?"

Hollis waved a hand soothingly. Of the eleven bullet holes in the sheriff's body, three still contained the sources of injury. "What I mean is, if you could pow-wow with Alldray, you—"

"He doesn't step onto my place!" Martin Montgomery slammed the plank with a fist, and the platters jumped. A candle fell over and Ives grabbed it and righted it.

Some of the hot wax caught his fingers, and he was reminded of cartridge wax. That embarrassed him, because Miss Cynthia was looking at him. "You're not hungry?"

"Oh, some. I been fillin', here."

The foreman said, grinning, "You better eat, marshal, 'cause yore next meal is highly questionable."

That got a laugh, and Ives joined in it. He liked this place. It reminded him of his home as it had once been but could never be again. His home, he had heard, was no longer there. His mother died, after he'd been run out by the law, and his father moved East somewhere.

You don't forget the first twenty years of your life easily, they become an irresistible pattern determining most of your future conduct. And when you can't reach back to them except through the tenuous means of memory—the memory of voices, of laughter and hope and ruddy good humor—you can become introspective and thoughtful and slightly frustrated.

Cynthia Montgomery had laid down her fork and was concentrating on this strangely silent marshal sitting next to her. Somewhere he had learned elaborate manners, he spoke well and he carried with him something she had trouble defining in her own mind, something alien to Maidstone as it was then. Was it cleanliness? Cleanliness of bearing? She couldn't be sure of that, but she was certain of her sympathy for him.

Homer Hollis snapped open his watch case. "Ives?"

They rose and took their hats. Ives said, "We have some old business to 'tend to. Thanks for a fine evening."

Cynthia followed them out, and she stood for a long time in the yard, watching them trot through the gates and onto the road and away through the darkness. After awhile she went inside, speaking to no one; and presently she went to her room and shut the door and curled up on the bed and started to cry. She didn't know why, she didn't care why. She was all female then, and the

haughtiness and command, the challenge of eye and quirt, were completely gone from her.

Mayor Parsons showed Hollis and Ives to the buckboard and, being a businessman, asked for a deposit. He waived double rates after midnight in the interests of law and order, and wished them well.

Hollis put his horse on the tailgate lead and handled the team, while Ives rode ahead up the alternate route Hollis had said the southbound stage would follow this night.

They circled wide of it first, favoring the western approaches, Ives having figured that Merrow would ambush from eastward, where he'd hanged Sandy Grew. Fifteen miles to the north, about halfway to Gunnison, Ives snaffled his horse and mounted the buckboard next to Hollis. "I think we're well north of him now. You ready?"

"'F you are." Hollis pulled down his hat brim. "You say he hates interference, that it?"

"He did three days ago, an' I see no reason for him to change. Let her spin."

Hollis whipped up the team and put it south along the rocky trail, leather smacking, wheels racketing. He kept to the gallop for a mile, then pointed. "Elbow's just ahead!" Ives cocked his gun and aimed at the night skies as the team raced into the narrow bend of the trail. Then he squeezed off six shots and yelled mightily and bellowed, "Passengers toss out wallets please!" And Hollis fired into the rocks and brought the team down and braked. Ives reloaded, and kissed the barrel of his gun.

They jumped off, staked the team and scrambled up the side of the Elbow and lay flat in the scrub. They lay for perhaps ten minutes, hearing only the blowing of the team and the uneasy hoof chops of the led horses.

HOLLIS frowned suddenly, and thrust his gun muzzle directly across the slot of the Elbow. A silhouette was there, half a man, not moving. Then another joined it, and a third.

Gentleman John Merrow's rowel-sharp whisper was clear in the still air. "What the hell's a rig doin' on a stage route?" Then, "Don't move down there!" The three slid down onto the trail and sprinted up to the

buckboard from three different directions.

Hollis was up on his knees. "Don't move down there!"

Gentleman John's blue sash glinted in the moonlight. His arm moved and Ives fired and the two shots crossed each other and Merrow's whickered aimlessly toward the stars. The Gentleman was rolling on his chest in the shale, coughing and choking.

The two with him sprang for the opposite wall of the slot and one whirled and fired and Hollis fired back. Then one was left on the wall of the slot, and for a moment he looked like a husky black spider caught in his own web. Boots pushing, arms pulling, head jerking.

He lost traction, wind-milled wildly for a hold, and dropped all the way down and landed on the man Hollis had shot. He twisted around and threw out and Hollis fired again.

Ives was kneeling by Gentleman John Merrow. The blue neck sash was sticky with blood, the blazed weskit was black with it, and the delicate features were pasty from loss of it. Merrow coughed—hackingly and wetly—and shuddered. His eyes were closed, and without opening them he asked, "Branner?"

"That's right."

"Thought . . . Sandy . . . dead."

Ives leaned closer. "That's not Sandy—I'm ridin' with Homer Hollis now!"

John Merrow died from the shock of the bullet in his body, but with the shock of that statement in his brain.

Hollis holstered. "I'm gettin' old, Ives. See there? I figgered to hole this one jus' over the nose, an' look—it's a quarter inch off!"

"Too bad. Shall we pack 'em in, an' give Perico a shot at three more dollars?"

Homer Hollis was standing straight, listening. "Better get the rig off the trail. Here comes the stage from Gunnison." He chuckled then, and tugged at his moustache and shook his head disbelievingly. "I nev' did figger to ambush an ambush." And he drew out a warrant, tore it four ways across, and pitched the pieces into the ruts.

The stage plunged into the slot and thundered past and was gone, and the sucking blast of its wake dragged the shredded warrant after it, spun the shreds, and scattered them for five hundred yards.

Hollis climbed up, released the brake and turned onto the trail. "Now what, marshal? Dockmeyer?"

"No, Sheriff. Mister Alfred Alldray, and his neighbor Mister Martin Montgomery. We'll herd them after breakfast in the mornin'." Ives touched spurs to flanks. "Hell, Sheriff, I'm hungry!"

* * *

The four of them sat their horses in the cool sunlight of morning, facing each other from four different directions. They were down-slope of Trouble Run, as they had named it, which bisects the southern boundary of the M-Diamond and the A Bar A.

Ives was doing the talking, keeping his voice low, modulating it. "That's what you'll have to do, if you want peace. You want peace, don't you?"

Martin Montgomery growled something about a man's pride, and Alfred Alldray—narrow of face and judging of eye and with a wisp of white chin whisker—allowed that if the M-Diamond would stay holstered, there'd be peace.

Homer Hollis spat toward the boundary post, and the brown ribbon of it looped over once and wrapped around the post and stained it. "The marshal, here, knows somethin' of Dockmeyer's methods, an' I suggest you do as he suggests."

Alldray said to Ives, "I don't know you, youngster, but I do know Homer. If he recommends it, I'm willin'." He found something wrong with his cuffs. "I guess."

Montgomery was taking great interest in some cloud scud over the horizon. " 'Course if the sheriff wants it that way. . . ."

Hollis said, "It's the marshal's idea, not mine. The idea worked last night, didn't it?"

Alldray looked up from his cuffs. "That was a two-bit stickup. This is a full-scale rustle."

Montgomery lost interest in the clouds. He was almost smiling. "At least, if we both lose all our stock, there'll be no cause for further trouble."

Alldray softened around the mouth, Hollis chuckled, and Montgomery laughed. Ives said, "All right, then. Saturday night at the M-Diamond?"

Hollis turned his horse away. "We'll take care of the posters, that it?"

"The likker an' music are mine," Montgomery said.

Alldray touched his hat brim. "I'll bring the food."

Ives and Hollis rode side by side toward Maidstone, not speaking for a mile. Then the sheriff mentioned Perico. "I think that boy can letter some signs for us, an' spread 'em around the country. What should they say? You been to school."

"Well, they should say. . . ." Ives had to think back to the days of his own Saturday dances, when an invitation to such was an offer of fun and not gun fighting. "They should say, 'Jamboree At The M-Diamond, Bring Yourself But Not Your Herd—Come One—Come All—Saturday Night—8 P. M.' And they should say, 'Whoever Is Sober By Midnight Will Be Dealt With According To Law'."

"That sounds fine to an' ol' man like me." Hollis chucked up his horse. "We got to hurry, Ives. Only two days left to spread the word."

The posters were tacked on fences, on gate posts, and on isolated trees far outside of town and far beyond the ranges. They appeared in thickets, at stream crossings, and at points along the stage routes. They were seen by many persons, and read by all. The word was going around—the fence feud's over, Monty an' Alldray are shakin' hands at the dance.

Many men made plans for that Saturday night that they otherwise would not have made, and there were many conferences on the ranges, in the town, and in the hills. Leather was polished with ash and brick dust, linen and flannel were washed, and boots were cleaned. So were guns. Everybody was anticipating Saturday night at the M-Diamond, though each in his own personal way.

THEY came to Montgomery's according to their stations in life, most on horseback, some in buggies, one or two on buckboards, and a very few on foot. They brought friends and they brought children and not a few brought bottles in case the liquor ran out.

The hands filed in off the ranges, and the A Bar A riders kept their guns out when they crossed M-Diamond's home lands, still suspecting an elaborate trap. One night guard was left for each five hundred head, and he would be relieved in four hours, he hoped.

Perico had a brother—all Mexicans have brothers—and the brother brought a guitar. Mayor Parsons' stable hand could swing a fiddle, and Old Man Trimmer who worked in the bank toted his squeeze-box along, and got ready to call the reels. At ten minutes past eight, the three-piece band struck into a polka and the jamboree was on.

Messrs. Montgomery and Alldray presided jointly at the punch bowl, and Cynthia assisted the cook at the covered dish table. It was necessary that each rider there take food frequently in order to blot up the punch and keep his mind clear, for there was work to be done soon. Cynthia declined each offer to dance, though Ives was the only man she apologized to.

Ives stood against the wall after that, and presently Homer Hollis joined him. It was easy to talk above the urgent rhythms of the music. "Where d'you guess, Marshal?"

"Trouble Run."

"What time?"

"After midnight."

"We better leave earlier than that."

"We will."

And one by one the riders scooped hot food from the covered dishes and ate it; one by one, weapons were returned, checked, holstered. The music went on, and Old Man Trimmer stood to call the reels, and the women folk started dancing with themselves or with the townsmen, and one by one the diners slipped out and took their horses. One by one, guided by either Montgomery or Alldray or Hollis or Ives, they were escorted to various points of vantage along the southern boundary; were told to dismount and peg their horses.

The pattern, as Ives explained it to young Matt Montgomery, was that of an ambush. Trouble would come from the north slopes above Trouble Run, and push down this way toward the timber in the south. The waiting men were mixed together on opposite sides of the crossing at Trouble Run—M-Diamond men and A Bar A men alternating each other, so that no simmering feelings could be blown off by having the poised ambush erupt too early.

Ives sent Matt with the reminder: Fire only at riders, not at men on foot.

There was nothing to do now but wait, and listen to the distant throb of the music, and envy the yowling dancers. In the night, in the moon shadows, they sounded like coyotes gone crazy.

And a whip-poor-will warbled from north-

ward beyond the run, and Ives caught it and alerted his trap. The warbling came again as the lookout herder warned those to southward of trouble. Trouble rolled down onto the run—a compact mass of pounding steers with moon-bright eyes and clicking horns. Trouble melted with trouble as the drive from A Bar A fell alongside the M-Diamond's herd and avalanched down slope to the crossing.

A hoarse bellow rose above it all. "Doc—it's all of 'em!"

And Dockmeyer criss-crossed his arms from upslope: "Cover the drag in case they foller!"

Ives stood up, thumbed back his hammer, and took a breath. "M-Diamond?"

A ragged volley tore into the passing riders and whipped them flat and rolled them into the spading hooves that were chopping the ground to mush.

"A Bar?"

It came again—a long, irregular rip of gun fire that passed brokenly from the crossing down to the timber. A silhouette spun about and clutched at air and dropped screaming and was pulverized. Shrieks were sounding back there and shots stabbed back and forth as men dueled like opponents in a dark room. The drag clumped out of the run and plunged after the main herd and left spinning mud clots and bits of shale in the air. They dropped back to earth, clouting a man here, a man there.

Homer Hollis blew smoke from the lip of his revolver and swung up. "All of you on this side—git to hell north an' ride down those others! You opposite—git after the rustle an' turn it!"

They made blood with their spurs and they got to the high grazing ground above Trouble Run and they raced across the moonlight after Dockmeyer and his drag men. Two night guards from M-Diamond were ahead; then one darted out from A Bar's north fence and more shots slatted sharply down there. Ives couldn't find a target, there was only the moon-washed ground and trees beyond. Then he galloped past a crumpled shape, then past another.

Hollis bleated, "Dockmeyer!" And jabbed a finger behind him.

Ives told the M-Diamond foreman, "Guess you won't have any more shapes sneakin' around your wire. They're all hash now."

"Dockmeyer lookin' us over, huh." The foreman proceeded to refresh himself with a cigarette. "I'll get a shovel detail out here. I want these dead men out the way afore the herds come back. . . . Red! Shortlegs! Micky!" He spurred off in an up-whip of dust.

The crystal moon edged higher, and a coyote sobbed from somewhere far to the west.

Homer Hollis sighed wearily. He was tearing a folded paper across and lengthwise. He shook the shreds free, and they fluttered across the moonlight and vanished. "I was just thinkin', Ives."

"About what, Sheriff?"

"About Bran Branner, lyin' down there all cut to pieces so's you could nev' recognize him. I guess this closes his case."

Ives needed to ask, "You mean—that Magowan kid who changed his name?"

"That's who I mean, son. The one who's dead an' 'bout to be buried."

Mayor Parsons was holding Cynthia Montgomery back when they trailed in and tied up at the dog-trot. Parsons was grunting and whuffling and spouting smoke. "She says there's a battle like the Little Big Horn, an' damned if she don't want to get in on it."

"Ives!" Cynthia saw him, took a step backward, and threw out her chin. "Why didn't you tell—"

"The first name's"—Ives winked at the sheriff—"Homer, just like his."

She blew out her lips, and green fire glinted in her raised eyes. "I don't care what it is! If you think you can leave me here to—" She saw her father and brother coming in, hesitated; then ran to them.

Homer Hollis winked back. "Somethin' better, for sure."

The music struck up as they entered, and Perico himself served punch. Mayor Parsons shook his jowls sadly, unable to enjoy the mixture. "I'm glad I'm just a dumb mayor, and not a smart marshal." He pointed his cheroot at Ives. "Y'know, I thought all along that you were Bran Branner, an' that if I hung the badge on you, someone'd get you if Homer Hollis didn't. . . . Well, here's luck all around."

The marshal of Maidstone drained his glass, tossed it to Perico, and strode to meet the softening green fire that was coming through the door.

THE END

COLT-LAW KID

By W. J. REYNOLDS

Somewhere the horse thief was hiding, young Jay Linton knew, and the button intended to follow him on foot . . . all the way to a hogleg showdown.

JAY LINTON walked out of the timber onto the slope above the little log cabin settlement deep in the East Texas piney woods at noon on Monday. He stopped at the timber's edge and let the faint breeze cool his heat-flushed face, and poke refreshing fingers through the rents in his linsey-woolsey shirt. His gray eyes, under the black slouch hat, squinted against the glare of the sun after the gloom of the pines. The steady purpose in his eyes was not eased by eagerness as he looked down the two-hundred-yard slope into the town of Tucker's Bend. Instead he sat down and started to tug off his old, weather-cracked boots.

But he did not take them off. After the heat of walking, his feet would swell until he couldn't get them on again. He rubbed and prodded his feet gently, trying to ease the blistered ache of the last six days of walking, but his mind was more concerned with his mission here.

It would not occur to Tidmer that a wet-eared kid would walk a hundred and fifty miles to hunt a stolen mare—and a girl. Jay's thoughts moved shyly around the girl while he told himself that it was his

mare, Molly, that he had come for, and that he did not care about the girl. But his thoughts always returned to her.

Abruptly, he stood up, a lean, loose young man, almost skinny, and with a farmer's calloused hands. A long-jawed kid with too much anger in his eyes for his nineteen years.

He stood for a moment looking down upon the town. It teemed with farmers and ranchers, and the river men from Jefferson. There would be sharpies of all sorts from the Texas river port, and if Jay had heard correct, there'd be a killing or two before the day was over.

It looked peaceful enough now, though. Kids ran and whooped, showing off. Horses milled and pranced as men moved among them, poking at them to reveal a defect. Dogs growled and bayed and fought; men grouped, and eddies formed at the edges and became other groups.

Jay had heard his Pa tell of these First Mondays. It was the day set aside each month for trading, and men brought whatever they had to sell or trade. Merchants usually offered prizes for the womenfolks, too. Jay looked on past the men and horses nearest to him and saw those backwoods women along the short street with its dozen stores. The scene was brilliant with calico and vari-hued sunbonnets as the women gossiped and exchanged six-months-old news.

Jay brought his eyes back to the horses, and almost at once his gaze sharpened and riveted upon a dozen animals in one bunch. The early summer coat of a coal black mare shone against the yellow clay of the dusty group.

Jay's eyes hardened, his young face going grim beyond his years, and his sunburned hand rubbed the butt of the Navy Colt in his waistband. His hand, when he removed it again, left some of the sweat from his palm upon the blackened cedar butt plates, and the sun made tiny, wickedly yellow, glints on the brass caps.

So Tidmer had brought Molly to Tucker's Bend—to First Monday. The girl who had been with the horse thieves—Tidmer and Big Bart—would be here too.

Big Bart would not. A freighter had told Jay that Big Bart had been killed in Jefferson three days ago. Jay was sorry to hear that. Big Bart had never bothered the settlers along the Horse Thief Trail. But that fact had not stopped Tidmer. Jay had hoped to enlist Big Bart's aid in getting his mare back.

Jay started down the slope, his cowhide boots making little puffs of dust where the ground had dried in the open. He walked directly toward the milling group of horses where he had seen Molly.

Jay stopped suddenly still short of the crowd's edge. He saw Molly rearing and plunging while a short, potbellied man hung to her halter and wielded a blacksnake whip against her sleek sides. Jay sucked in a tight breath as he saw the many welts already there.

They had beaten Molly, the little mare who would obey Jay's every command. He had taught her to count with her hoof, lay down, or waltz to his whistle, or whirl and kick to his pinched signal. The lump in Jay's throat was full of hate for Tidmer.

He started forward again, thinking that he must be cautious. He would not get but one try for his horse. Bart was dead, so he must do himself what could be done.

He hesitated at the crowd's edge. Everybody seemed to be in an argument. A big bay gelding was dancing and pulling at his halter as he was prodded by a trader. With shrill yelping, a dog charged out of the mass and another nipped at his tail. Jay leaped aside as they shot past. Jay edged around the flank of the crowd toward a log building where a group of younger men were throwing long hunting knives at a pine cone suspended against the log wall. Squaring his jaw, Jay started through the milling men.

He paused momentarily outside a ring of men who yelled and boosted something inside the packed bodies. Jay craned his neck and saw that a rooster fight was in hot earnest, feathers flying, steel spurs glinting. He edged closer to the back of the log building that must be a restaurant from the tantalizing smells coming from its open back door, and started again toward his horse.

HE DIDN'T see the seventeen-year-old girl who appeared in the door with a pan of suds and threw it out, almost drenching him. He didn't see her casual, weary glance pass over him or the startled happiness in her small face.

She called in quick excitement, "Jay!" and was before him with a flurry of skirts.

Weakness touched him, and at once he was tongue-tied and conscious of his cracked cowhide boots, his ragged shirt and baggy knees and torn trousers. His face got brick red and he opened his mouth to speak her name. Then he remembered the company she kept. She had been riding with Tidmer and Big Bart when they'd come by Pa's house a week ago. The greeting died in his throat, and his face set again.

He remembered how he had stumbled over his feet all day when they were there, yet trying to spark the girl because she seemed to like him. Mighty easy for her to've been leading him along so Tidmer could steal his horse. . . .

He looked straight at her, seeing how different she looked in a dress. That day she had worn old cast-off men's clothes. Now, in a checked calico dress that revealed her youthful body, and with her golden hair tumbling over her shoulders from the bright ribbon that bound it behind her neck, she fair took his breath.

But she had been with the thieves, and the pound of his heart could not erase all the frost from his eyes. He forced words past his stiff lips. "Howdy, Miss Marie." That much he could say.

"Jay!" she clutched his arm. "What are you doing here?" There was a dawning hope in her eyes, a quickening in her voice. But there was a fear there, too. "Jay, what—what did you come for?"

Jay's lips tightened on his flood of words. Did she think he was a fool? He had more sense than to blurt out his business to a member of the gang—to a girl who rode with horse thieves.

"I'm just a-lookin'," he said. That wasn't a lie either. He was looking. He was looking for Tidmer and Molly.

"Jay," she breathed, and her eyes held stars, "looking—for me?" Her face was quickly rosy, and her fingers bit into the flesh of his arm.

Jay stared at her in stunned astonishment. There had been wild thoughts of her in his head in unguarded moments, and but for Tidmer and Molly, he would have thought of nothing else, even knowing who she had been with. But could he dare believe that she had had thoughts like his own—only about him? He felt dizzy, his mind fuzzy,

and blinked, seeing the close-edging, grinning faces of those nearby.

"I came for Molly!" he blurted out. "My horse!" He stared wildly, cornered, as loud guffaws burst out around him. Then he forgot those grinning faces as he looked into Marie's stricken face.

"Molly?" Her eyes were wide, and the color drained from her face. "Molly?" she choked then went on, her voice barely above a whisper, "But Tidmer said you sold him Molly. He said you wanted the money to get—get married!"

Jay swallowed the lump in his throat, wanting to sink into the ground for somehow hurting this girl. "He did?"

She seemed to sense a little of his feelings, for the deep hurt in her eyes eased a bit and her faltering eyes met his squarely. "Yes, he teased me. He said that I was to meet you down by the persimmon patch the night we left. But he didn't tell me until next morning. He laughed at me with his twisty lips. He—he said I needed a real man like him. He made me stay with them after he killed Big Bart until the gang was ready to come on here."

"Tidmer killed Big Bart?" Jay hardly heard his own question. His mind was whirling with the things she said, his heart a tight knot in his chest. He blurted the question that had been in his mind for a week, "What—how come you with them thieves?"

"Big Bart was my cousin, and so is Tidmer on my papa's side," she said, looking at him anxiously. "I was coming here to live with Aunt Julie, she's all the kin I got besides Tidmer. Aunt Julie owns this cafe here." Suddenly she was holding tightly to his arm again, a new fear in her eyes. "Jay, please don't look for Tidmer. He's a gunman. He'll kill you!"

Jay felt his back against the logs of the cafe and his eyes darted about the crowd, seeking some way to handle this situation. But there was no help, the men who had grinned had moved away, their interest captured by other things. Jay was alone, hemmed against a log wall by a wisp of a girl.

He looked down at her, his chin sticking out. "Tidmer stole my horse. I aim to have her back."

His six-day-old anger flamed anew. Tidmer figured him for a dumb-headed farmer. It had never occurred to the little thief that a clodhopper kid would set out afoot to find his stolen horse. Only Pa used to live here in Tucker's Bend, and he'd known that Big Bart lived here, and got rid of a lot of his stolen horses here. Remembering things his Pa had said, Jay knew it too.

He fingered the gun in his waistband.

Suddenly Jay was craning his neck at the flurry of movement yonder among the horses where he had seen Molly. He saw her again whipped and prodded to the forefront, and men were crowding around her. From those men a whining voice lifted.

Jay couldn't see the owner of that voice, but he knew what he looked like. The little mean eyes would be shifting, not meeting the solemn stares of the backwoodsmen. The crooked, twisted lips hardly moving, yet alive with lies.

Tidmer.

As that voice whined in his ears, Jay forgot the small girl looking with fearful anxiety up into his face. He forgot everything but the gun under his hand and the determination to have his pet mare back.

Jay lifted the gun free and started toward the sound of that hated voice.

Marie hung to him with surprising strength. "Jay! You can't go against Tidmer. He'll start shooting the minute he sees you and you looking like that! Jay, please listen. He's a killer—"

"He's a horse thief," Jay said.

"Please!" She clung tightly, desperately. "We'll see Aunt Julie. We'll make her help, get the marshal—"

"I know better than that, girl!" Jay cut in angrily. "Tidmer comes here regular. People know he's a thief, the marshal knows it. They'd work together, say I was a smart kid trying to get a horse. I'd never get Molly back then!"

"Jay, you'll be killed!" she wailed. "Aunt Julie could make the marshal help, she—"

Jay growled deep in his throat. "Marshal, hah!" Then the youthful uncertainty spilled over in anger, lashing out at her. "The whole mess here are thieves, and helpers of thieves. The people that feed them, and harbor them and take their goods. A nest of thieves!"

She recoiled from him. "Jay, that's not so."

He saw that he could not have hurt her worse if he had hit her. It made him even more angry to know that he had done so, and that he did not want that. He saw that

her eyes were very near to shedding the tears she desperately held back, that her lips were quivering.

"I don't think you're a thief, girl," he blurted gruffly. "But you leave me be!"

HE PUSHED past her, and strode toward that saw-edged voice. The milling men did not bother him now. He walked straight toward them, or shoved them roughly aside. Rough men with rising oaths looked at the youth with the Navy Colt and bit the words off short, others saw him coming, saw the wildness of rage in his eyes, mentally added to it the twisted hurt of his face, and moved hastily aside. Jay stopped at the fringe of the crowd and lifted the Colt.

"Look out!" a man jerked out. "It's a fool kid with a gun!" Men scattered wildly.

The rage burst from Jay in a single word. "Tidmer!"

But Tidmer was busy talking, holding the lunging Molly, and didn't hear him. "Ever see a better mare? I'm givin' her away at a hundred and . . . ." He noticed the stillness behind him, and shot a glance over his shoulder.

His little eyes popped, and his twisty lips worked alive but soundless as he stared down the bore of Jay's Colt. He seemed to know that he was staring at death.

Without raising his voice now, Jay said, "That's my horse, Tidmer. I've come for her."

Tidmer stared at the gun, seemingly hypnotized by the gleaming caps, and the ear-back hammer.

Then words burst from him in a flood. "Well! Well, kid. Sure she's your mare. Sure, kid, I don't doubt it for a second! We'll talk this over, kid, me and you and these gents here. We'll talk this over like men. I bought that mare, but she could have been stolen from you, like you say. I ain't sayin' she wasn't, I ain't sayin' that atall. Maybe she was stole from you!"

"She was," Jay said. "You stole her." Jay could not take his eyes from Tidmer, but he could see some of the audience from the corners of his eyes. They hadn't moved yet, intent on this, watching him, making up their minds.

Tidmer licked his lips. He had a big .45 under his coat, but he kept his hand well away from it. "Now, kid," he said hurriedly, "you be careful with that gun. That's a hair trigger kind of gun you got there. These men know me, and they'll tell you I ain't a thief! Look at them, ask them. I ain't a man to steal a kid's horse. Just ask them, kid. How about it, men?"

Uneasiness crawled into Jay as the crowd shifted a little. He could sense their growing doubt, he was losing his element of surprise. Jay saw the reflection of the crowd in Tidmer's little eyes, the fading of alarm, growing confidence. "Somebody get the marshal," Tidmer said.

Jay's eyes flared. "Move away from that mare, Tidmer," Jay said. His voice rose. "Don't nobody move!"

Tidmer's face lost its confidence and went pasty. He backed against Molly, staying pressed against her and she shifted uneasily. "Now, kid, easy now!" Tidmer's voice had lost its whiny edge to hoarseness, his mouth seemed mighty dry. "You'll shoot your mare, kid, now put up that gun, we'll talk and I'll tell you how I come by her!"

Movement in the crowd toward the back, muttering voices told Jay anything he was to do had to be done at once, but he had to get Tidmer. The growing knowledge that in Tidmer's fright he would have to shoot him made a steadying deadliness in Jay.

Jay raised his voice, desperation putting a dangerous edge to his rage. "Get away from that mare, Tidmer! Get away now, I tell you!"

Tidmer's eyes glued to the leveled gun, the tense finger around the trigger, and his face went the color of piney woods clay. "Don't, kid. For Heaven's—"

Molly lunged suddenly as she heard Jay's voice raised in anger. The lunge cut off Tidmer's words, drowned his words and knocked him sprawling in front of Jay. He lay staring up at Jay, his mean little eyes wild. His hand was raised and half across his shirt front toward his gun. He lay there paralyzed with the terrible uncertainty.

Jay shifted in unease, wanting to be on Molly's back, wanting to look at the other faces around him but not daring. Yet he had to get out—now. "Molly! Here, girl!" The mare neighed and started to whirl, then she looked at Jay and started at a mincing walk toward him, uneasy at all the men.

Jay's voice was hard. "Get up, Tidmer, you go with me till we're—"

Jay's attention was focussed sharply upon

Tidmer, and the lunge of the mare drowned the slight pad of the town marshal's feet. The barrel of his gun whammed Jay behind the ear and cut his words abruptly off. Then Jay was nuzzling the ground, nose full of the thick yellow dust.

Faintly he heard a woman's scream, then hands were on him, and Marie's voice calling his name. The thunder in his head turned to silence.

SOMEONE was talking, talking, a voice that made Jay squirm. His head wheeled and spun and the voice was a chattering sound, raw and vibrant. Slowly the spin slowed and stopped, leaving only a fuzziness. He heard the whiny voice talking loud and fast, and making the lie sound mighty like the truth.

". . . son of a friend back up the Jefferson Road to the Prairies," Tidmer was saying. "He's in hard shape, and had to sell this little mare here. The mare sort of belonged to the kid here, and his Pa didn't want him to know she was sold. He said he'd tell the kid here she'd been stolen. We never once figured on the kid startin' out afoot huntin' her, much less findin' her and givin' a honest man trouble!"

Jay tried to call the lie to Tidmer's words, but he could make no sound other than a mumble come from his mouth. He tried to get up but he didn't have the strength, and the roar in his head became louder. Where had Marie gone? She was here, if she'd help him a little. . . .

His voice smooth now, Tidmer went on. "I'll take care of the kid here, marshal. I couldn't stand it if anything happened to him. His Pa would hang my hide on a limb! I'll start back with him right now. I'll just give him his mare back. I'm a fair man, I think that he's earned her! Just think, the kid walked a hundred and fifty miles. What you think, fellers?"

There was a ragged chorus of approval, it was a gesture that these backwoods farmers and ranchers understood. At one time or another, nearly all had most likely had to sell a kid's favorite pony or one that a kid had claimed as his. They knew how it was, he was winning them, and Jay could only mumble his protest. Tidmer had been shrewd enough to hit them where it would tell.

Jay tried again to get to his feet, and made it as far as his hands and knees, before the dizziness overpowered him, and he propped there, waiting for the spin to stop.

Jay tried to see the men around him, shook his head to clear it, but merely made it worse, their legs and rough cowhide boots were a blur. They thought Tidmer was doing the right thing, the big thing. What they did not know was that the little twisty-lipped thief would take him back into the piney woods and put a bullet in Jay's head. . . .

"Well, all right, Tid," a man said, and Jay reckoned it was the marshal. "If that's the way it is, I don't see any reason why you can't get him set straight. Givin' him his mare back ought to do it slick."

In the marshal's mealy voice was the fear-inspired respect for a dangerous gunman. It was the easy way out for him, and he wouldn't incur the enmity of Tidmer, and the gang who worked for the horse thief.

"I'll get him right, I'll take care of it," Tidmer said. "Why, it won't be no chore atall. With him wakin' up already sittin' on his mare he'll be the happiest button in East Texas. He ain't the kind of kid to hold a grudge when there wasn't no guilt behind it. A fine kid!"

Tidmer's hands were pulling at Jay then, and Jay tried to strike at him and fell flat on his face.

"Some of you fellers give me a hand," Tidmer said. "We'll put him on the mare, and I'll start right out. He's awake enough to start right out. I'd like for him to come to joggin' right along on her! Up we go, son."

Jay felt himself being lifted, and they didn't even seem to notice his attempts to struggle. He felt the sleek back of Molly under him. She moved under him, and he dimly saw the blurred faces move past him as Tidmer mounted his horse, and led Molly through the crowd.

Neither his muscles or voice would obey his fuzzy thoughts. All he could do was try to stay on Molly's back. Hot tears of mortification filled his eyes. This was a hell of a way for a man to ride out of a town, sprawled like a scared button on a mare.

A man ought to be sitting up, facing his enemies, not sliding on a tame mare's back. A flash of color caught his blurred attention, and with all his might, Jay focussed his sight on it.

It was Marie's golden head. She stood

behind the crowd of men, and her face was white, her eyes wide and full of fear. Her hands were clenched tightly around Jay's Colt.

Jay shut his eyes. She had his gun, and Tidmer had his horse. Tidmer had Jay too. Marie was one of the gang. All that about being Big Bart's cousin was a windy, most likely. She had been afraid he would kill Tidmer. Like a green button, he had believed her, and allowed himself to be trapped in the bargain.

The red clay of the slope passed beneath him, and became the carpet of needles in the woods. Jay remained on Molly more easily now, as the strength tingled in his arms and legs. He tried to think what to do.

It would have to be soon. They were getting deeper into the woods, the heat and mugginess would deaden the sound of a shot quickly. There was no use in trying to make a dash for it. Molly's lead rope was tight to Tidmer's horn, and the little thief was a dead shot. Jay knew he wouldn't get ten feet.

Jay remained flat on Molly's back. His legs felt stronger, and his arms too. But to raise up would quicken the end. But they were far enough away from town now. The sound of a shot wouldn't be heard there.

Jay began to sweat with the cold clamminess of fear. Any moment now, Tidmer would turn and fire. . .

THE HORSES slid down into a brush-filled ravine. A thirty-foot clearing was only sparsely covered with brush, tramped to bare dirt by the cattle that chewed noon day cuds there. A half a dozen cows and calves went crashing down the ravine as they entered.

It was the place Tidmer had picked, Jay guessed, as he pulled his horse to a stop, and Molly stopped too. Jay was tight with tension now, knowing this was it. His only chance lay in disconcerting Tidmer long enough to get his hands on him.

"Molly, girl," Jay said under his breath, "don't fail me now! "

Tidmer reined back beside Jay. "Wake up, you smart little devil! I don't want to hurt a hundred-and-fifty-dollar horse puttin' a bullet in you!" His boot toe hit Jay's shin with an agonizing crack. "Wake up! I want you to know it when I put a bullet in you!"

Jay's fingers dug into Molly's neck, and his heel touched her flank. "Wheel, Molly!"

The little mare spun like a flash, her heels shot out and hit Tidmer's horse's side with a hollow boom. The horse crashed over, and Tidmer screamed as one of Molly's iron-shod hoofs crushed his leg. He screamed again as he was torn from the saddle by a bush, and almost trampled by his frightened horse. Jay saw Tidmer's gun fly from his hand and land fifteen feet away across the clearing.

Jay leaped off Molly, and charged at Tidmer who was scrambling toward his gun, broken leg dragging. He saw Jay would cut him off and threw a fist-sized rock. Jay dodged, and his boot hit a billet of wood and his foot turned. Pain flooded his ankle, and Jay fell heavily.

Eyes wild with hate, agonized with fear, Tidmer was almost upon his gun, and his triumphant curse burst out.

Jay came to his feet, gritting his teeth against the pain in his ankle, blinking dirt from his eyes. He went in a grim, hopping charge at Tidmer. But he saw he would never make it. Already Tidmer was reaching for the gun.

"I'll fix you now, damn you!" Tidmer panted thickly. "I'll blow you apart—" He broke off, his eyes darting to the lip of the ravine as a flurry of hoofs sounded there, and a shrill cry.

Dirt and pine needles spilled into the ravine, showering down upon Jay as Tidmer swung his gun, yelling a wild curse.

Jay dived aside and the shot missed. The move brought the ravine's edge into his vision, and his mouth opened in an amazed yell. Marie was there on a wild-eyed pony. Something blue spun through the air at Jay.

"Your gun, Jay!" she screamed.

Jay snatched the gun from the air, hearing his own yell without knowing what he'd said. He whirled as his fingers closed on the butt, and felt the shock of Tidmer's bullet as it hit his arm just above the left elbow.

Jay worked the hammer of the Colt, saw the mushrooms of smoke reach half way to Tidmer. He fired until nothing but clicks answered his efforts. Tidmer was a still shape there at the clearing's edge.

After Marie had tied up the hole in his arm, and tenderly clucked over the sore-as-a-boil spot behind his ear where the marshal had hit him, Jay managed a grin at her.

He felt mighty flighty, but there was a thing or two he had to get straight. He felt it gnawing at him already, and he might as well git it over right now. Once a man had a thing straight, then he knew what he had to do.

"How come you to show up?" Jay asked. "Why'd you bring my gun after the way I treated you?"

Wild eyes that had been anxiously examining him, were suddenly hidden behind lowered lashes. A faint redness crept into her cheeks. Her hand tightened suddenly on his arm.

"Why?" Jay said.

There was a flash of blue as she darted a glance at him. The color in her smooth cheeks grew deeper at his steady regard. "I —I didn't want you killed! I—you thought I was a thief too!" Her hand twisted tighter into his sleeve.

Jay managed to sit up, the pain in his arm nothing compared to the indignation that flooded him. Her a thief? "Well, by thunder!" he shouted. "I don't think no such thing!"

"I—I hope not, Jay." Her words were a bare whisper.

She looked at him suddenly, full on, and Jay was sure he had been shot again. The flash died, and there was a wistful softness in her face, a yearning in her eyes, and something else that made Jay weak. If he had been on his feet, he would have fallen sure as shooting.

Maybe she thought of him sort of like he did about her. She had sure thought enough about him to come after him, to bring him his gun.

Jay swallowed. "Pa told me a while back that I could have half the farm anytime I thought I needed it," he said. His face got red. "I sort of figure next year will be a good time to take him up on it. I . . . that is, I mean . . ." Jay floundered and bogged down.

This marrying business was a mighty sight harder than he'd figured.

Her smile was a bright and lovely thing to see, and her eyes were gentle with a woman's gentleness. "You do, Jay?"

Jay took a grip on himself, remembering his pa's advice: "Son," his pa had said once, "if you've got a thing to say, then say it! Don't hem and haw."

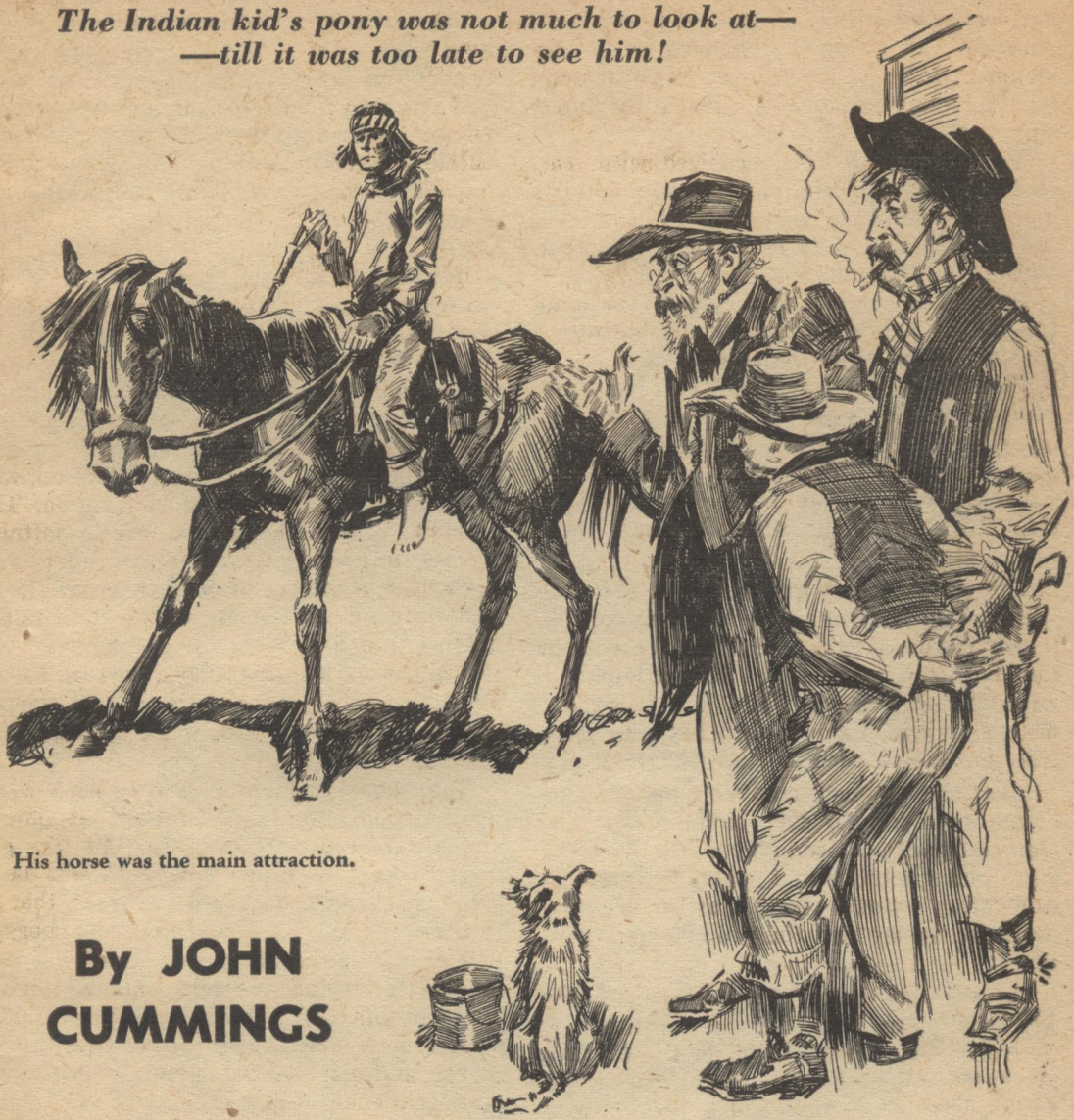
"Yes, I do," Jay said firmly. His face, he knew, was about ready to burst into flame, but a man that had gone this far might as well hang and rattle.

He reached out and got hold of her. He even managed a scared grin. "I figure so," he said. "And, well, I'll need me a wife, I reckon!"

She put her arms around his neck. "I know just the one, Jay," she said.

Wrong-Way Cannonball

The Indian kid's pony was not much to look at—
—till it was too late to see him!



His horse was the main attraction.

By JOHN CUMMINGS

THE town of Eden consisted of two rows of dusty, wind-beaten buildings that sprang up on either side of the road leading from Hellbent to Dead Broke, in the Washoe mountains. It was a cow-town, presided over by "Colonel" Alexander Claybottom, who, it was rumored, had been of one of the first families of Virginia, before "distressing circumstances" forced him to leave.

The Colonel was an overbearingly honorable man with a personally developed code that admitted of no questions about his past, and a keen eye for turning a quick dollar or two. Unfortunately, his methods for doing so were more ingenious than honest. One of them was his political leanings—he was the mayor of Eden.

Eden's main source of income came, in a thundering, adventurous flood, at the end of every month. At that time, some one hundred and fifty men rode in from the surrounding ranges to spend the forty or fifty dollars they had accrued since the last time, in a wild and frenzied celebration over the fact that they had not been gored by a

bull, trampled by a horse, or bitten by a snake for all of thirty days.

Considering these points, it is not unnatural that Colonel Claybottom, as the mayor of Eden, in an attempt to bolster the town's resources and his own economic status, should propose a giant festival and rodeo to celebrate the good year that the cattle ranches of the locale had enjoyed, and to try to draw more of the business of the ranch hands away from the neighboring Hellbent's saloons.

It was late summer of the year 1874, and the Colonel hoped to make it a momentous year for Eden. The rodeo was planned as the main part of the celebration. The town council voted an appropriation for a suitable prize for the best contestant, and the three main ranches of the territory also added sizeable sums to the purse, bringing the total to seven hundred dollars, for first prize.

The rodeo arena was built on the outskirts of Eden, but as close to the saloons as possible, and it was the largest corral in the county when finished. Six cattle chutes were put at one end, and the farsighted Colonel added tiers of benches on either side, for the comfort of the spectators.

Soon the planned jamboree became one of the most popular even in the state. The *Carbon County Clarion* played it up in every issue, and spectators and hopeful contestants came from a hundred miles away, lured by the prize money and the promise of a good time.

On the day before the Carbon County Festival, more than fifty contestants for the rodeo prizes were listed in the *Clarion.* Spectators filled the town hotel, as well as any private home that had a bed to rent, and overflowed on the outskirts toward Apache Flats, in tents and lean-tos. The Silver Dollar put on an extravaganza stage show, with real dancing girls. John Rockhill's poker and faro tables in the back room of the Paradise were doing a land-office business, and the town jail had standing room only. Eden was booming.

Only one fact marred the expansive pride of Colonel Claybottom about the affair. He had no clown, no comic interlude to give the audience an occasional laugh. A man with a deep sense of the theatrical, he decided that the somewhat volatile tempers of the people involved in his production needed something to tone them down. Something to laugh at was what he had in mind.

The Colonel's problem was solved on the night before the rodeo started. The most incongruous entry the town had even seen rode carefully in that night and announced his name, Crying Fox, and his intention, to win the seven hundred dollar top prize money. He became the town laughing stock immediately.

CRYING FOX was apparently a Ute Indian, a small, unassuming boy of about seventeen years, wearing faded levis, faded shirt, and a bright yellow kerchief bound around his head to hold a clump of straight greasy hair in place.

His horse, though, was the main attraction. The animal was as big as any of the cowponies entered, but seemed on the verge of falling asleep all the time. He stood hipshot next to the boy, with his head down. Though his chest and hind quarters were well developed, his legs were spindly, and his neck obviously was too long for the rest of him. Sweat and clay caked his sides, and a town wit commented, "If he warn't wearin' that overcoat o' dirt, we could probably count his ribs.

The Ute was inordinately proud of his pony, though. He watered the shaggy, gaunt animal carefully, checked his hoofs, and tried to pull most of the burrs out of his long mane and tail. Word got around that the boy figured his pony to win the horse race, and the whole town joined in the laugh. Here was the perfect practical joke—an ignorant young Indian trying to win a race with a gaunt, spiritless horse.

The crowning touch was yet to come, however. On the afternoon of the first day of the rodeo, Colonel Claybottom climbed to the judges' stand above the arena chutes, grasped a large megaphone in his hands, and announced the names of all the contestants. The last one on the list was, ". . . and finally, the man from somewheres out on Apache Flats, Mister Cryin' Fox, sittin' aboard . . . Cannonball!"

Waves of laughter thundered from the audience at the ironic name of the horse, as the arena was cleared to make room for the rodeo.

The first event was calf-roping. It was just after round-up time, and the cowboys were ready to give good accounts of them-

selves. Cliff Saunders, who was foreman of the Lazy-J ranch and general candidate for top honors in the rodeo, swarmed all over his calf. The animal was dropped and the pigging string whipped around its hoofs, in close to twelve seconds. Even in Eden, that was good time, and not one of the other entries could beat it. That is, until Crying Fox came out on Cannonball.

The calf streaked out, and then a "Hyah!" floated from the pens, and the Ute duo came out after it. Cannonball didn't take more than fifteen running steps. When his master swung the loop, he just stopped and stood there, gazing about him, while Crying Fox threw himself from the saddle. The horse stepped back, almost nonchalantly, the rope grew taut, and the calf found itself on one side. It no more than raised a cloud of dust when the Ute jumped on it, whipped the pigging string about three legs, and threw up his hands to signify that the job was done. Colonel Claybottom coughed and stared at his stopwatch, and a whoop of surprise ran through the crowd. His time was a cool eleven seconds!

After that, it became one of the best rodeo celebrations in the state, as well as a race for top prize money between the unassuming Ute and the Lazy-J's top hand, Cliff Saunders.

At night, in the mirror-walled confines of the Paradise, the "crazy Indian" was discussed pro and con by everyone in Eden, especially Cliff Saunders. He was a big man, given much to bragging, and when he had a skinful of the Paradise' popular product, he would narrate to anyone in hearing distance how he wasn't gonna allow any Indian to win all that prize money. Seven hundred dollars, Cliff held, was too much money for any Ute to handle.

The Indian and the Lazy-J foreman ran right together through the three days of contests, however. Interest built up to the point that the town of Eden was almost unmolested by excitement-yearning cowboys during the day. Everyone watched the rodeo contests, and they saw Crying Fox and Saunders build up a big lead over the other contestants, but not an inch over each other.

Saunders took the bulldogging event in his stride. He galloped out next to the big ani-

mal, grabbed its long horns, and twisted it down to the ground in a glorious splaying wave of dust and dirt. The wiry little Ute, about two-thirds the size of the Lazy-J foreman, got tossed around and dragged to one side of the arena before he finally grappled his bull to the earth.

But in the next event, the bronc riding contest, the tables turned. Every ranch in the district had contributed its wildest outlaw horses, and the rules of the contest stipulated that the longest and most exciting ride would win. Saunders came out on a wild-eyed black that had killed two men. He dug his spurs in, waved his hat at the animal's eyes, and stayed aboard the running, quick-turning bundle of fury for almost a minute.

Crying Fox, however, laid it all over him. He had drawn a short-shanked, long-legged pinto that had a reputation for being able to outthink most men. And the Indian seemed to play on that very quality. He sat on the horse like a growth from the animal's back, and coaxed and goaded evil thoughts and killing intentions from the pinto in a way that would have made the devil proud.

The horse buck-jumped and sunfished and tried to smash the Indian's legs on the side of the corral for almost two minutes before he finally shucked him to the ground and tried to trample him. They dragged the Ute out of the way, though, and awarded him first place in the bronc-busting event.

"Hell," said Saunders, "everyone knows a Ute is half horse, anyway. No wonder he got such a good ride. I'll run rings around him in the race, though."

On this point, nobody argued with Saunders. In fact, there was a gleeful agreement among all that the Indian didn't have a chance, except for second place. They saw from the calf-roping contest that the Ute had a smart, well-trained horse, but it was known that Cliff Saunders had the fastest and best cutting pony in that part of the state.

It tickled Eden's sense of humor to think that the Indian, who set such store by his raggedly, spindly horse, would eat Saunders' dust. The stolid, uncommunicative red man had won admiration for his ability in the other contests, but the thought of seeing him lose face brought the whole town to the final event, the horse race.

John Rockhill even left his gaming tables in the back of the Paradise to attend the event, and his offers of fifteen to one odds on the Indian went begging.

ALL the contestants for the race—about twelve riders—lined up on one side of the arena, and prepared to race out through the open gate at the end, down the road to a wagon placed there for the purpose of marking the course, around the wagon, and back to the center of the arena, where Colonel Claybottom would judge who came in first.

As a conspicuous act of charity, Crying Fox and Cannonball were placed in the front line of riders. Several wits in the stands opined that they'd better "move aside, or get run over," but the Indian duo didn't seem to hear. They just sat there, a wiry, slouched Ute on a shaggy, hung-head bay, apparently oblivious of everything. The crowd laughed and called jokes at them up to the starting gun.

At that point, however, everything stopped. Colonel Claybottom's Navy Colt bellowed the starting signal, and the stands stilled to an amazed, hushed silence. At the sound of the gun, Crying Fox leaned forward on the pony's neck, and grunted, "Hyah!"

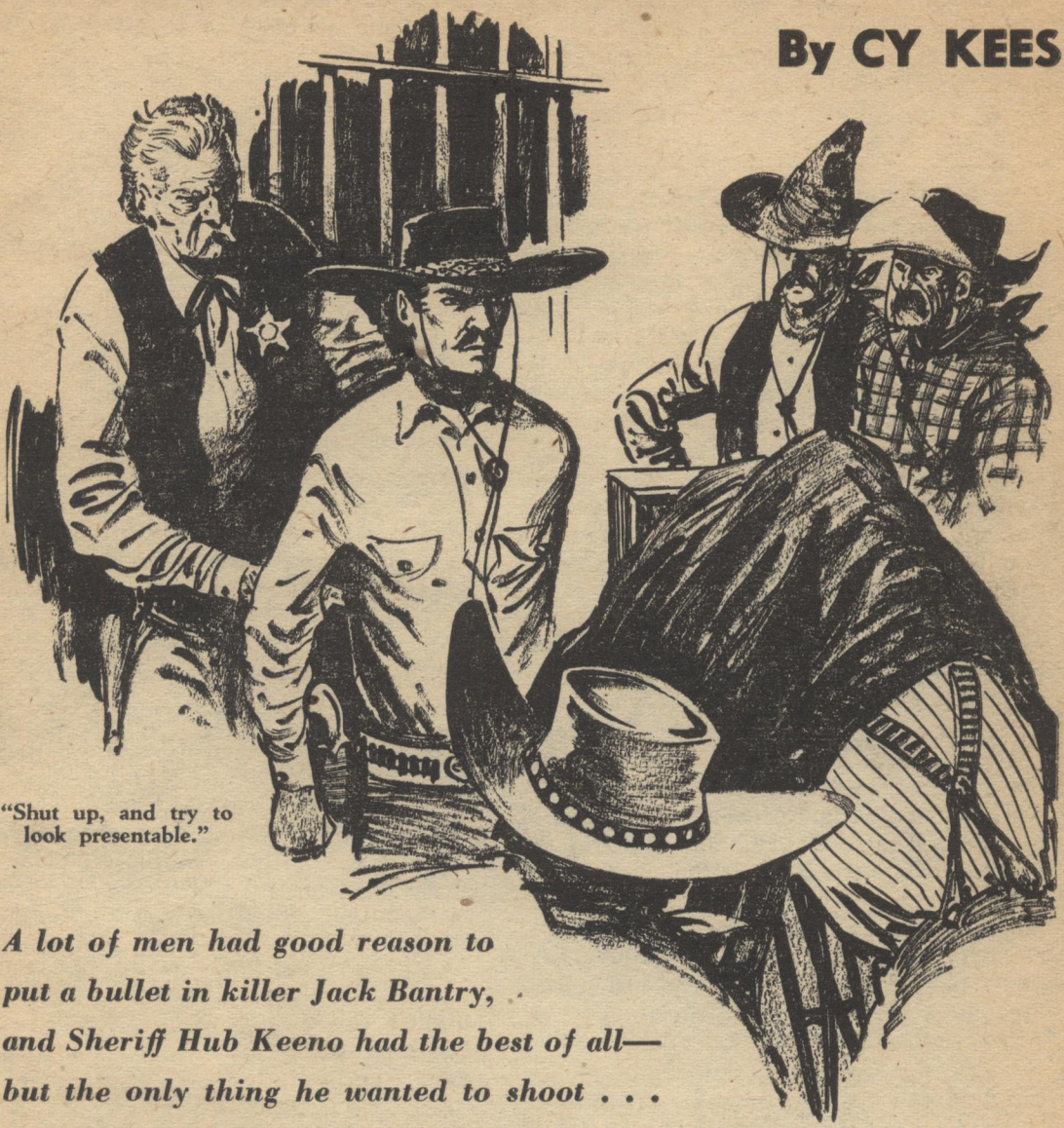
And Cannonball woke up. His big hindquarters surged into knotted muscles, and he leaped out, fairly flying. His head came up and formed a straight line with his neck, body and tail, and his spindly legs churned into a blur of action underneath. He shot through the open gates in a frenzied rush, and kept running like he was trying to get away from his tail. He swiveled around the wagon, a quarter of a mile away, in a cloud of dust, and streaked back, his spindly legs still churning steadily. He hammered by the Colonel a full three lengths ahead of Saunders, and then the Indian said, "Hup!" and pulled back on the reins. Cannonball skidded to a halt and stood there with his head hanging, while his chest heaved. The onlookers were still in a stunned silence, unable to believe their eyes.

Within an hour, Crying Fox had collected the seven hundred dollars, piled his few belongings in a roll behind him, and had ridden out of Eden, never to be seen again.

(Please turn to page 110)

PICTURE OF DEATH

By CY KEES



"Shut up, and try to look presentable."

A lot of men had good reason to put a bullet in killer Jack Bantry, and Sheriff Hub Keeno had the best of all— but the only thing he wanted to shoot . . . was Bantry's picture!

WITH a faint feeling of guilt, Sheriff Hub Keeno opened the letter. A letter addressed to Jack Bantry, wanted for murder! The single lamp, its wick turned too high, threw flickering shadows over his scarred desk.

As he pulled the letter from the envelope, a picture fluttered to the desk. It landed face upright. Hub stared at the face of a little, white-haired woman. It was such an appealing face that it sent a wave of pity through Hub's tough hide. Nervously, he shifted in his chair.

He hadn't expected this. When the postmaster had brought the letter, forwarded many times, it had meant only one thing. Here was a chance to get the killer who had eluded him three years before. Avoiding the gaze of the picture on the desk. Hub unfolded the letter. The single white sheet was covered with neat, large feminine writing. Hub read:

Dear Jack,

It has been over a year now since I've heard from you. It seems so long, just waiting.

I know somehow that it is not your fault. If you get this, please write, and if you can, send me a picture of yourself. I'd like it so much.

Love,
Mom

Slit-eyed, Hub folded the letter carefully back in the envelope. He gazed for a long moment at the picture and came to an abrupt decision.

"You'll get 'em," he muttered. "You'll get 'em right soon."

It would take some getting, Hub decided, even if he was lucky having a photographer handy. Grinning, he remembered Casper Hindel, the photographer, urging his jaded, bony horses into town on his yearly visit. A timely visit, even if getting Bantry was the real problem.

Bantry—wanted dead or alive and always swearing he'd never be arrested. Hub thought about it, raking his stubbled face. And the rumors had it that Bantry was tougher than ever since returning to the rangeland he had deserted three years before. Deserted, with Hub hot on his trail. Suddenly, something in the atmosphere of the town jerked him from his thoughts.

The town of Tenpost was quiet—ominously quiet. Too quiet, Hub decided with a grimace. He swung his legs from the scarred pine desk, grunting with the pain of the bullet in his side. The bullet that had been planted there by Killer Jack Bantry. A sharp pain lanced his leg near his ankle. Stooping, Hub reseated his small, hideout derringer inside the top of his boot. Peering through the dirty window, Hub studied the darkened street.

Maybe it was the silence around the Silver Spur Saloon. Hub stiffened. Yes, that was it. Any quiet around that dirty den was usually a danger warning that trouble was brewing.

"Maybe Newbolt's right," he murmured to himself. "Maybe I am gettin' too old for this job." He grabbed his battered black hat, silently cursing Newbolt and the other people who blamed him for not stopping the series of robberies that was plaguing Tenpost. Footsteps pounded outside the office.

A wild-eyed youth flung open the door. Startled and a little annoyed, Hub stared at him, seeing the naked fear in the blue eyes. Agog with excitement, the kid tried to speak, but no words came.

"Easy a minute, son," Hub said kindly. "Then spit it out all at once."

"Breed Brady," the kid gasped. "He's got a sawed-off and—"

Aroused, Hub lunged for the door. When drunk, Brady was as dangerous as a sidewinder with two heads. He pushed his tired legs to greater speed across the dusty street towards the saloon. Hub scowled, wondering what brought the breed back to Tenpost after avoiding it since Hub had run him out weeks before.

Puffing up to the batwing doors, he heard a nasty cackle from inside. The sound chilled him. Brady would be drunk—crazy drunk—and he was hard enough to handle when sober. Feeling the cold, comforting butt of his .45 beneath his hand, Hub lunged through the batwings.

BRADY sat on the end of the bar to his left, a yellow-fanged leer contorting his face. A scattergun laid over his knees, aimed in the direction of the other worried-looking customers.

Calmly, Hub walked towards him. He stared steadily at the mottled brown face, trying to freeze the breed into indecision with his slate-grey eyes.

But the dark, bloodshot eyes of the breed did not waver. Hub read the triumphant look on his face, and silently he cursed his own hesitation. Brady cackled.

"You, Sheriff," he sneered. "You soon be dead. My good frand, Jack Bantry. He come back. He kill you!"

Fury lanced through Hub, and he jerked his gun, training it on the breed's greasy shirt. Coldly, Hub noted the fleeting look of fear and surprise that flashed over the breed's ugly face.

"You'll be watchin' it through bars," Hub snapped. The breed's dark eyes gleamed slyly.

"You the Sheriff," he said. "You know best." Shrugging his shoulders, he started to slide from the bar. Hub watched him through slitted eyes.

"Put that gun on—"

The deadly scattergun tipped up towards him. Desperately, Hub jerked the trigger, and his pistol bucked against his palm. The bullet smashed a bottle back of the bar, missing Brady.

Brady bleated and threw the shotgun on the floor. Breathing heavily from the narrow escape, Hub stalked to the shivering breed. Eyes downcast, Brady cowered, no more fight in him.

"You take long chances, Keeno," the bartender murmured from behind the bar. Hub glared at his fat, sweating hulk.

"You fill your glasses," he said roughly. "I'll do the sheriffin'.'

"The man's right, Sheriff," a low voice said from someplace in back of Hub. He wheeled around, locating him. The inevitable cigar stuck in his slit mouth, Hamilton Newbolt gazed calmly back at him. He had the same smug look he'd had when he urged Hub to resign from office. Hub scowled back at him.

"Same goes for you," he said. "Ride herd on your greasy deck of cards and let the law enforcement to me." Newbolt shrugged his shoulders.

"As head councilman in this town, I have something to say about your law enforcement. But I'll come to see you about it in the morning." He paused dramatically. "I want to find out why your aim's so bad you can't hit a target thirty feet away." There were murmurs of assent from the scared-looking customers.

Confused, Hub turned away, knowing that his shot had hit to the left of where he had aimed. Unsure of what to say, he steered the overawed breed into the darkness outside and headed him toward the jail.

While Hub shoved breakfast under the door to his sullen prisoner the next morning, Newbolt strode in. Freshly shaven, a new cigar in his teeth, Newbolt came straight to the point.

"You've come to the place where you'll have to make a decision, Keeno," he said, flicking a stray ash from his whipcord riding jacket. "Either resign your office or we'll call a special election and vote you out." Hub straightened and squared his thick shoulders.

"Call it," he challenged mildly. "I was voted in so there's no reason why I shouldn't be voted out." He watched Newbolt's teeth clamp tighter on the cigar.

"You know damn well you're not fit for the job anymore," Newbolt ground out. "Last night Brady might've killed half the

people in the saloon if he hadn't yellowed out. You—"

"I no yellow out, you fool," Brady contradicted in his whining voice. "I just want my good frand, Jack Bantry to—"

"You missed two feet from where you were aiming," Newbolt cut in furiously, drowning out the Breed's voice. Hub stiffened with anger, but he knew that Newbolt was speaking the truth.

In desperation, to stop the breed and the deadly shotgun, he had aimed at the chest. It was just blind luck, he reflected bitterly, that the shotgun had not spewed its load.

"When I get Jack Bantry behind bars, I'll resign, not before," Hub said stubbornly. "I got a special reason for wantin' him now." Newbolt raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"What's that?"

"Got a little chore for him to do," Hub answered, knowing that the words would merely whet Newbolt's curiosity to hear more.

"Chore?" Newbolt said in a coaxing voice. Hub tried to look mysterious.

"Yeah, personal chore." Apparently becoming aware of his needling, Newbolt whirled angrily towards the door.

"You're getting very funny in your old age, Keeno," he snarled. "You won't be so smart after I dump you from under that badge." He slammed the door and stomped past the window down the street.

Alone in his office, Hub slumped wearily, and he wondered why he didn't quit. He'd done his duty, forty years of it, and now the cool precision was leaving his gunhand. He flexed his blunt right hand, feeling the stiffness that was becoming more noticeable. It wasn't that he needed the money.

Wistfully, he thought of the letter his son, Tom, had written urging him to come and spend the rest of his years on Tom's panhandle ranch. Smiling to himself, Hub recalled those welcoming lines.

"We're still waiting for you to come and join us," Tom had written. "I'd feel safer out on the range having an old gun toter like you looking out for the wife and buttons. And you might even teach them to ride."

"My good frand, Jack Bantry. He come and take me out," Breed Brady rasped from the cell, breaking Hub from his pleasant thoughts. Disgusted as he was, Hub couldn't help grinning at the childlike confidence apparent in the breed's voice.

"If he comes around here, they'll be two of you in the cell," Hub retorted. "Not that you two wouldn't make a good pair. Neither one of you could scrape up an ounce of good sense."

An indignant expression clouded Brady's face, and Hub felt his spirits rise. Maybe that would hold the breed for the morning anyhow, he thought. He limped back to his desk, the bullet in his side nagging him at every step. The picture of Bantry's mother looked up at him from the desk.

Hub read the letter again, sensing the anguish between every line. The hurt that would increase as time went by if no word came from Jack Bantry.

"You'll get 'em," Hub promised again. "I'll see that he sends 'em." He stared into space, determination growing in him to nail the wayward son who had deserted her. Through the window, he spied Casper Hindel plodding across the street like a plowhorse, his bullet head bobbing up and down. Grinning, Hub stepped outside to greet the solemn-faced traveling photographer.

"How's the picture business?" Hub asked cheerfully. Hindel concentrated a moment.

"Well, it's not just too bad," he said slowly. "Only Hamilton Newbolt won't buy the picture I took of him. Said it wasn't a good likeness."

"He ought to pay double for favors like that," Hub said, chuckling. "Get your camera fixed yet?"

Hindel blinked owlishly.

"Nothin' wrong with the camera, Sheriff," he said in a puzzled tone. "Exceptin' maybe the lens mount is a little out of kilter."

Still looking perplexed, he backed away and shuffled down the street. Farther along, he stopped at his wagon, an unsightly conglomeration of odd parts and patches. Shaking his head, Hub watched the doleful figure.

AT NOON, Hub walked through the baking sun to the eating house. At every step, he cursed the rule, amended by Newbolt and the council, which allowed only two meals a day for prisoners.

"No wonder they're so damn hard to catch," he muttered, wishing he had a chance to apply the ration to Newbolt himself. Wiley Oates, the lanky proprietor, had the sandwiches ready, knowing Hub's habits

well, after their years of friendship.

Grumbling, Hub paid for them out of his own pocket. When he took them, he spied Hamilton Newbolt hunched over a plate in the corner, trying to look small.

"How many meals does he eat in a day?" Hub asked, jerking his head towards Newbolt.

"Why, three," Wiley said innocently, a repressed smile crinkling the corners of his mouth. "Breakfast, dinner and supper."

"Don't give him but two from now on," Hub ordered, winking broadly. "He claims that's all men need that don't work."

Flushing deeply, Newbolt kicked his chair back and strode toward him. An ugly sneer twisted the gambler's face. "Long as we're talking about work," he stormed, "what do you think you're getting paid for? Bart Frober was in here at nine saying he spotted somebody that looked like Bantry over near Twin Buttes."

"Bart Frober's spotted every outlaw that's ever been within fifty miles of here," Hub commented blandly. "Only it always turns out he read the sign wrong. Hell, it gaunts a man down, runnin' false leads."

Newbolt's lips curled in a disgusted knot. Without a word, he strode out the door. Hub followed.

"Why don't they come and tell me? They're quick enough to yap when they get robbed," he muttered to himself, thinking of the endless times the saddlemaker had described the watch he'd had stolen. Frober, Hub guessed, was trying to make a hero out of himself as always. But it was worth a try.

Loping out to Frober's ranch, Hub ruminated on the queerness of the position he was in. In running Bantry out of the country, he had caught a bullet which now throbbed painfully with every movement of the horse.

"If anybody should be wantin' revenge, it should be me," Hub mumbled, easing himself forward in the saddle. "Exceptin' for his pride, he didn't suffer any. Yet I'm the one that's got to hold back and see that he stays alive." As he swept into the yard of the rundown ranch, Bart Frober shuffled timidly out of his house.

"Hear you got some news on Jack Bantry," Hub greeted the ratty-looking rancher. Frober swallowed, convulsing his scrawny neck.

"Aw heck, Hub," he squeaked. "I thought I did. But it was just a puncher up looking over some cattle. Was that dang paint horse of his that fooled me."

Hub hid his disgust by silently looking out towards the Twin Buttes country. He felt sorry for the little rancher, now drawing circles in the dust with the toe of his boot.

"Well, the ride did me good anyhow," Hub said kindly. "Keep a sharp lookout, and if anything turns up, let me know." Hub watched the bowed rancher straighten up from the implied compliment.

"You bet, Hub," Frober said earnestly. "I'll sure let you know if I see anything."

Dusk was falling when he got back, and he ambled into Wiley Oates' eating house. The place was almost empty. Immediately Hub noticed Wiley's sour look.

"Newbolt missed his supper," Wiley announced dryly. "He sulked most of the afternoon over at the Silver Spur. Then he went roarin' around town like a locoed bull getting the councilmen together for a special powwow. They appointed Beartracks Stevens to take over the sheriff's office until they can have an election."

Stung by the news, Hub slumped wearily in a chair. "Where's Beartracks now?" he asked.

Wiley chuckled.

"Still over at the meetin' house. He's sittin' there with the usual dumb look on his map, scared to death something'll happen before they can swear him in tonight. He ain't takin' any chances. He's campin' right there like a big tub of lard."

"Well, you lose a customer, and I lose a job," Hub told him sadly.

"I won't lose a customer," Wiley said with a wide grin. "Oldbolts has to eat here—on account of it's the only place to eat. I reckon I'll see he gets the tough steaks from now own." Hub chuckled, wishing his own problems were as easily solved. He took the meal for Brady and left for his office.

BREED BRADY stared anxiously as Hub came in. Hub set the tray down and lit the lamp. Something out of place, something he couldn't put a finger on, drummed a warning. Hub picked up the tray and approached the cell cautiously. Brady's dark eyes were gleaming.

"You got keys?" he asked casually.

"Yeah, so what?" Hub snapped.

Brady didn't answer, but his eyes gleamed again. Suddenly, Hub noticed that they were looking past him—over his shoulder.

Impulsively, Hub lifted the tray over his head, heaving it backwards. Someone cursed savagely, and Hub threw himself to the floor, tugging his gun.

A heavy form hit him, and his gun jarred out of his hand. Smashed against the floor by the suffocating body, Hub clawed desperately for the derringer in his boottop. A cold, round gun barrel pressed against the flesh under his chin, and he froze.

"That'll be more like it," the ominous figure said softly, crawling off him. "Play along and you might live."

His attacker scraped potatoes out of a long, black beard. Groaning, Hub sat up. The bearded stranger unhooked his keys and released Brady.

"My frand, Jack Bantry, he come," the breed burst out jubiliantly. "I tole you he come."

"Scared to show his ugly face?" Hub sneered. "This ain't Bantry."

"He go rob safe," Brady said. "You no stop him."

The back door swung open and Hub counted five—six shadowy forms slip into the room. Instantly Hub recognized the leader. He had the same cocky sneer, the same venomous green eyes as always. Killer Jack Bantry.

Bantry ignored him completely. He shook off Brady's ingratiating hand with a curse. Hub stared. They didn't seem so chummy after all.

"Should've shot that Fancy Dan tinhorn instead of tyin' him up," Bantry raged. "Then that wall-eyed photographer wouldn't have seen us. Damn his pryin' eyes!"

"Frand Jack," Brady said in an oily voice. "You kill Sheriff."

"Shut up and let me think," Bantry snarled.

"He say you no got ounce sense," the breed said accusingly. "You no let him say that." Hub noticed the livid color that was rising in Bantry's face, but evidently the breed did not.

"You no got ounce sense if you no kill him," Brady blundered on in a flat, contemptuous voice.

"Breed, I owed you a good turn for that time down in Fresno," Bantry said in a very gentle voice. "That's why I let you out. I had to come and get the safe anyhow." He sucked in a deep breath and exploded. "But you and your big yap just talked your way back in again!"

"No, no," Brady pleaded. "Good frand . . . "

"Lock him up, boys," Bantry boomed. "Nobody talks to me that way."

Brady begged sorrowfully but to no avail. Hub snickered inwardly at his reversal. But even as he did, despair settled over him like a palling cloud.

Bantry would never co-operate to write that letter now. Hub narrowed his eyes, concentrating. Almost unwillingly, he recalled those plaintive lines. *It seems so long, just waiting.* Bantry's mother would wait endlessly for a letter that would never come.

Hurrying footsteps sounded outside, breaking him from his thoughts. Casper Hindel thrust his bullet head in the door. "Sheriff," he called excitedly, blinking against the light of the lamp. "There's some mighty suspicious men—" He spied the outlaws, and his voice ended in a gurgle.

Holding his breath, Hub slipped the hideout derringer from his boot while they were staring at Hindel. Slowly, noiselessly, he pushed his legs up under him, keeping a close watch on Bantry's unsuspecting back. It's now or never, Hub thought grimly.

Teeth bared, Hub lunged, jamming the derringer in the base of the outlaw's spine. A curse exploded from Bantry's mouth, and he started to spin.

"Don't move a muscle!" Hub warned tensely. "Not a muscle!"

Bantry's back stiffened under the hideout. Then he relaxed and laughed raucously. "You got lots of gall," he hooted. "You shoot me and my men'll put sixteen holes in you."

"Neither one of us'll get hurt if you do as I say," Hub said, trying to make it sound as placid as he could. "Cap, go and get your camera. We're goin' to take his picture."

Bantry gasped loudly.

"Of all the damn fool stunts. Why—"

"Go get it," Hub cut in. Hindel scurried towards the door. The bearded outlaw grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and

jerked him to a stop. Hindel bleated piteously.

Hub gouged Bantry in the back with the hideout. "Tell him to lay off," he warned flatly. "I'm givin' the orders."

A red flush crept up Bantry's neck. He jerked his head towards the door. "Stay with him," he ordered the bearded outlaw sullenly. "And don't let him try anything." Ominously silent, they waited while Hub's nerves tautened under the strain.

A FEW minutes later, Hindel catfooted back into the room, nervously sidling around the gun-hung outlaws.

"Should've come to my wagon," he grumbled. "Got everything set up there."

"So that's what that was," Bantry said in a taunting voice. "I thought that wreck was left there by some foozled Indian."

"It serves my needs," Hindel said stiffly, frowning at the outlaw.

"Still looks like it went through the sheep wars," Bantry sneered. Hindel thinned his lips, an angry expression on his face.

Haughtily ignoring everyone, he balanced the camera perilously on its rickety tripod. He shoved a plate in the side with professional ease. Closing one eye, he aimed the camera. Hiding the derringer, Hub threw his arm over the outlaw's back. Smiling, he gazed at the huge, round eye of the camera.

Bantry sniffed. "I still don't get—"

"Shut up," Hub snapped. "And try to look presentable."

Hindel doubled his lank frame like a hinge, and tossed a black cloth over his head. He groped for the knobbed end of the long, frazzled cord hitched to the side of the camera and jerked. There was a low, hollow clack. His bullet head reappeared, and there was a satisfied smirk on his face.

Hub relaxed with a sigh.

A creaking board shrieked a warning from behind him! Before he could move, a savage hand chopped his wrist, and a jarring pain shot up his arm. The derringer dropped from his numbed fingers.

Bantry laughed harshly and stepped away. "You should've done that an hour ago," he crowed. "Now I'll fix that damn camera!"

He strode forward to where Hindel huddled protectively over his camera. Hub rushed forward.

"You can't," he choked. "Look on the desk! Look on the desk, man! You'll see why you can't."

Bantry hesitated, curiosity playing over his rough face. Rubbing his chin, he stepped to the desk and glanced down. He stared closely at the picture on the desk.

Understanding flashed over his face and he looked up. For a brief moment, Hub spied an incredible softening of the outlaw's harsh face. Then it was gone, replaced by a flush.

"I've got a letter," Hub said, leaning forward eagerly. "You—"

"No!" Bantry waved towards the door. "Let's get the hell outa here," he grated. "We're wastin' time."

Hastily he herded them towards the door, not looking back. He started out, slowed and stopped. For a long moment, while Hub waited breathlessly, his frame froze in the doorway.

He turned jerkily, his face twisted in a terrible knot, the lines of hurt and shame cut deep. "I'd give my right arm to read her letter," he said very quietly. "But I don't deserve it." A frozen, crooked grin contorted his face. "I won't be seein' you no more. So take this—you might need it for postage." The sack of loot hit the floor

and Bantry was gone into the darkness.

Thunderstruck, Hub stared at the package at his feet. Dimly he heard the drumming hoofbeats getting fainter in the night.

Curious, scared townmen filtered in to investigate the noise. Recovering from his surprise, Hub explained Bantry's strange action. With a big crowd gathered around, Hub dumped the bag of loot on the floor. A long hush filled the room and they all stared with bugging eyes.

"My watch!" the saddlemaker screamed. "My watch!"

He was joined by other eager men, claiming property lost in robberies. Brain seething, Hub groped for the words spoken by Bantry about the owner of the safe. Something about a Fancy Dan, he remembered. Who could Bantry have been talking about?

The front door crashed loudly, tearing the attention of the group from the loot. Hamilton Newbolt staggered across the room, a piece of frayed rope hanging from his crumpled, whipcord jacket. He glowered, his thin lips puckered in a brutal knot. Ont of the corner of his eye, Hub saw Casper Hindel stride forward purposefully, clearing his throat.

"Mr. Newbolt," he said politely. "A man called Stevens—Snaketracks I think he called himself—asked me to tell you—"

"Don't make smart cracks to me!" Newbolt roared, shaking with rage. He glared furiously at Hub. "Having fun, aren't you?" he snarled. "Having parties while my safe's robbed."

His safe, Hub thought, staring at Newbolt in astonishment. Then he must have done the stealing. He shook his head in amazement. No wonder Newbolt always yapped the loudest.

"So it was your safe, eh?" Hub stalled for time while Wiley Oates and two irate townsmen maneuvered themselves behind Newbolt.

"Well, just don't sit there," Newbolt stormed. "Get busy and . . . " Spotting the loot, he stopped uncertainly and edged towards the door. But eager hands grabbed him and shoved him, struggling wildly, into the cell with Brady.

Intensely pleased, Hub watched Hindel shuffle out to develop the picture. Wiley Oates slapped him on the back. "Oldbolts is now on his own two-meal ration," he announced joyously. "That calls for drinks on the house."

"Not tonight," Hub said and watched them file through the door.

A thin edge of disappointment cutting him, he walked to his desk. If he could have just got the letter and sent . . . Suddenly an idea flashed through his mind and he grinned.

Why couldn't she have the letter too? Why not, by damn! This was something he could do often, he decided happily. Pulling the battered drawer from the desk, he drew out a sheet of white paper and a pencil.

He hunched over the desk, furrowed his brows and began to scrawl laboriously.

Dear Mom,
My hand is sprained so I am having my good friend Sheriff Keeno write to tell you...

FIGHTIN' WORDS

The expression "hell on wheels" originated with the construction gangs on the U. P. Railroad. The portable towns along the construction route were stewpots of crime and murder. Because they were moved on flat cars to keep up with the head of construction, the towns got to be known as "hell on wheels."

—J. W. Q.

* * *

When a man in the West said he'd like to have a shot of lamp oil, he wasn't to be taken literally. Asking for lamp oil was just another way of ordering whiskey.

—J. W. Q.

* * *

It was a practice among the Pawnee Indians to change their names after every battle.

—J. W. Q.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 109)

HOW'S your knowledge of cow puncher lore and the West in general holding up these days? Pretty fair? Then try your hand at answering the twenty rangeland brain twisters listed below. Answer eighteen or more of them correctly and you're a fit poke to ride anybody's spread. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. But answer fewer than fifteen, and you land in the white collar cowboy class. Good luck, amigo!

1. What is the meaning of the cowpoke term, "anti-godlin"?

2. What person does the cowpuncher refer to as the "big auger"?

3. True or false? A "box canyon" is a canyon having only a single opening.

4. True or false? The cowpoke uses the term "comin' grass" in reference to the approach of spring.

5. If the ranch boss sent you for a "cookie pusher," which of the following should you return with? A waitress from a restaurant? A special instrument found in every camp kitchen? A cowpoke who has the reputation of eating too much?

6. True or false? A horse is said to be "coon-footed" when he has long, very low pasterns.

7. In the old days, the term, "corn freight," referred to freight that was shipped by which of the following? Bull team? Mule team?

8. If a cowpoke refused to give another the makings for a cigarette, even though he had plenty, would this be considered an insult by rangeland standards?

9. What is the meaning of the cowpoke slang term, "mining for lead"?

10. What is the meaning of the Spanish word, *"mochila"?*

11. What color is a palomilla horse?

12. If the ranch boss sent you to the "ram pasture," to which of the following places should you go? A nearby field on the ranch where sheep are kept? A saloon? The bunkhouse?

13. What state would a cowpoke likely be from if he referred to the rear cinch as the "rear girth"?

14. What's the general meaning of the cowpoke slang expression, "riding with an extra cinch-ring"?

15. What are two meanings of the term, "rustle"?

16. True or false? A "shoulder draw" is a draw made from a shoulder holster under the armpit.

17. If a cowpoke acquaintance of yours referred to a "swivel dude," which of the following would he be talking about? A gaudily dressed man? A special type of saddle horn? A California stirrup?

18. In the language of the cowpuncher, what is "swimming water"?

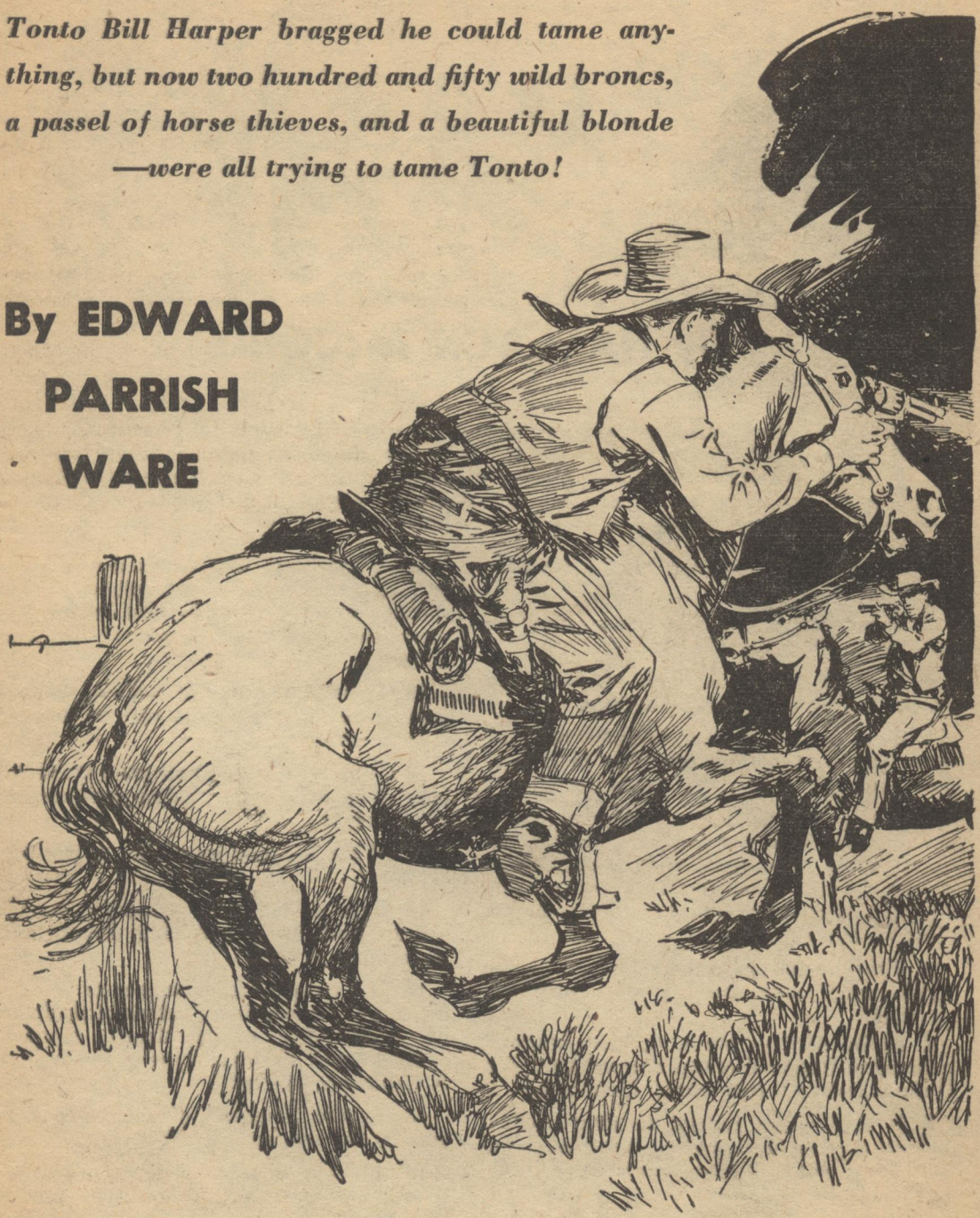
19. True or false? "Wedgers in" were a special old-time type of horseshoe used on horses which did much of their traveling over rocky ground.

20. True or false? The "wreck pan" is the receptacle dirty dishes are placed in after a meal in a cow camp.

THE BREAKING

Tonto Bill Harper bragged he could tame anything, but now two hundred and fifty wild broncs, a passel of horse thieves, and a beautiful blonde —were all trying to tame Tonto!

By EDWARD PARRISH WARE



Action-Packed Frontier Novelette

OF TONTO BILL

CHAPTER ONE

Cut Wires!

TONTO BILL HARPER wasn't exactly what any hombre would have called downright miserable, but he was a considerable ways short of being happy. What with four straight years of drought, herd-bulls dying off, no calf-crop the past two seasons, the cow business shot plumb to pieces—at least for a small-spread hombre like himself. Well, there hadn't been a more hopeless person in the whole of Arizona.

Then had come that cavalry remount contract—two hundred and fifty selected young broncs, broken to saddle and carbine-fire. Hadn't been for that, Tonto Bill Harper would probably right then be riding the

"Hell's fire," Slats Blake ejaculated, dragging his bronc onto its haunches. "It ain't Shorty!"

rangers and hitting up the chuckline—just another saddle-tramp.

But in just three months . . . Shucks, it didn't seem possible! Two hundred and fifty broncs, the pick of the wild ones, at one hundred smackers per. Twenty-five thousand berries! True enough, the broncs had cost plenty time and trouble catching them up, plus one year's care, and adding the expense of two tophand twisters to the total, all would add up to a right considerable amount.

And Tonto had trouble on his mind. He had to have grain and baled hay. Lots of it. Those remounts must be turned over in prime shape. But Tonto had no grain, no hay, and precious little money. As for credit, there just wasn't any credit at all.

"Can't figger no way round it," Tonto assured himself dolefully, as he hooked his elbows over the top rail of the corral in which dozed half a dozen mounts of his personal remuda. "Ain't no way but to get a bank loan on them remounts—onless I crave to have 'em turn out just so many skins fulla bones . . ."

"Hi, there, Tonto—you got company!"

Tonto knew that voice. It was his neighbor on the east, Jack DeSpain, hailing him. DeSpain, who, two years ago, had tried to buy Tonto's Bar 2 spread—to add to his own much larger spread which adjoined—and at a quarter of the price it would have brought before the drought set in. DeSpain, who, a month ago, had tried to buy Tonto's remounts—at thirty dollars a head.

DeSpain knew what Tonto would soon be up against in the matter of feed, and had bid accordingly. Therefore Tonto Bill Harper liked Jack DeSpain not even a little bit. He turned leisurely and walked toward the front of his two-room log ranch house.

"Get down, DeSpain, and rest your saddle," he invited. "Them two twisters of mine'll be in pretty soon, and we'll heat up the beans, put on the coffee-pot—"

"I didn't come to eat warmed-over beans, nor to drink stale java," DeSpain cut in disagreeably. "I rode over to ask you a question. It's this—are you going to take thirty bucks a head for them remount broncs, cash on the nail, or let 'em starve to death?"

Tonto felt a quick tension up and down his six-foot-two inches of bone and muscle, and the anger within him was as red as his hair. But he checked himself, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"Neither," he answered briefly. "Got some more questions you crave to ask?"

"Nope. You just answered the only one I brought along with me." Then, with a wide, malicious grin, "A month from now, Harper, you probably will sing a different tune—and I doubt if broncs, even them remounts of yours, will be worth half what I'd give for 'em today. Yeah, when them ponies of yours set in nickering, pawing and begging for feed you ain't got and can't get—"

Tonto's long legs carried him to the head of DeSpain's horse in two strides. He seized a bit-ring, holding the bronc in his tracks, and, his rugged, homely face white with anger, blazed, "You're a skunk right from Skunkville, DeSpain! I been thinking that you was for a long time. Now you done proved it right to the hilt. So get off this spread, and don't come back. I ain't got no time to waste palaverin' with scrub stock such as you." He released the bit-ring, stepped aside and added: "Now lemme see you foggin' away from here—and pronto!"

DeSpain, face contorted with rage, dropped a hand to the butt on his lowslung forty-five—then saw that Tonto had beat him to it. He let his hand drop away, wheeled his bronc, looked over a shoulder and shouted, "You'll remember paying high for this, damn you! Mark my words!"

"Git!"

DeSpain went away in a fog of dust, leaving Tonto deeply troubled, hurting with restrained desire for action—and deeply disgusted. Mostly, he was disgusted. If that Jack DeSpain was a good citizen, then Tonto was damned glad he didn't rate as one!

THE lack of feed to carry the broncs for the ensuing three months was, of course, a major trouble. All other troubles were dwarfed by comparison. There was just one chance for Tonto to get the feed-money so badly needed. Jack DeSpain owned the general store at Lodgepole, likewise the livery-stable, principal saloon and only hotel, but he didn't own the bank or any part of it. Old man Ritchie controlled the bank, and Ritchie was a square shooter.

"I'll get me a loan," he decided. "That'll knock the socks off my main trouble—"

More trouble came riding Tonto's way just then. Shorty Furgeson and Slats Blake, his two bronc-twisters, stopped at the corral gate, stripped their sweaty mounts and turned them inside. Tonto thought nothing of that, it being a regular procedure. But when both men entered the corral and roped out their personal mounts and saddled up. . . .

"You fellers aiming to ride somewheres tonight?" he queried when the pair moved on to the cabin.

"Yeah, Tonto," Slats told him shortly. "We're both of us ridin' for keeps. You got enough jack to pay us off—or do we rope out half a dozen of them broncs and take our wages outa them?"

Tonto stood for a moment in silence. He was astonished, and no mistake. Blake and Furgeson were tophands, and he'd surely need tophands during the coming three months. He was behind only two months with their pay, and they'd agreed to that. Now they were rearing up.

"You fellers know you'll get your pay—" he began.

"Yeah—and right on the barrel-head," Shorty cut in. "Else we annexes half a dozen them babies of yourn, then pays ourselves."

Tonto relaxed his long frame abruptly. He shrugged—and let his hands drop toward the butts of his holstered sixguns. Plenty of men in the Southwest would have warned that such was Tonto Bill Harper's fighting stance, had they been there to do it. Tonto's gray eyes were slitted narrowly and his mouth was a straight, thin line. Presently he spoke.

"Before you put a paw on even one of them broncs," he advised quietly, "you gotta prove how good you are with them smoke-wagons you're luggin' around. You crave to argue it out on them lines—now?"

Shorty Furgeson shifted from foot to foot uneasily, and kept his gun-hand well to the front. Blake's eyes were cold and his manner unruffled.

"Gun-talk won't settle nothin'," he pointed out. "Give us our jack, Harper, and there's going to be no trouble."

"Trouble!" Tonto sneered derisively. "Wish I didn't have no more trouble than the pair of you could make for me. Now—listen. I aim to ride to Lodgepole day after tomorrow and raise enough jack to pay you fellers and see me through—"

"We ain't waitin' till then!" Slats Blake snapped. "We aim to ride pronto. So how about our jack?"

"Anyhow," Shorty contributed, "we understand that your partner in Phoenix, Sam Teale, that's been furnishin' you with the jack to run on, got them broncs plumb covered up with a mortgage. How about that?"

"There's a whoopin' liar been running loose in these parts lately," Tonto surmised. "And I figger Jack DeSpain to be that liar. Sam Teale will be in Lodgepole day after tomorrow," he went on, "to sign with me at the bank and get us a loan. But you fellers put your cards down. Reckon I can manage to pay off a pair of double-crossin' ki-utes right now. Glad to do it and be rid of you."

Tonto's hands dropped away from his guns. With his right hand he reached for a wallet on his hip—

That was what Slats Blake was waiting for. He streaked for his sixgun, slapped palm to butt—and snatched it away again.

Tonto's left-hand gun was out in a blazing

flash, and a bullet plowed into the heavy holster on Blake's hip. There was a sound of lead smacking steel, and Blake staggered back, tossing his hands high.

"Deal me out!" he yelped.

Tonto swiveled around with a catlike coodination—and another slug from his gun sent Furgeson's drawn weapon out of his grip just as though the waddie had thrown it away.

"Two of you dehorned now," Tonto commented icily. "Unbuckle your belt, Blake, and drop your artillery—and make it sudden!"

Blake obeyed immediately and carefully. Then he stepped away from what was probably a wrecked and useless gun. He gulped twice and asked, "What—what you aim to do about this here?"

Tonto made no answer just then. He had a worn and tattered wallet out and was thumbing through the contents. Finally he nodded and said, "One-twenty owed each one of you two months work. Two-forty all told. Take this here tally-book," he continued, taking one from a pocket in his shirt, "and scribble me out your receipts for pay in full. Then git the hell away from here—and stay got."

Five minutes later, two disgruntled and completely dehorned bronc-busters were fogging it away toward Lodgepole.

TONTO lay in his bunk that night, sleepless, taut as new-stretched barbed-wire. He had a strong hunch that more trouble was headed his way. Another major trouble. Probably worse than what he already had. He had not the faintest idea what it would be or from what source it would come. But he was certain that it would show up before long.

That DeSpain had hired his twisters away from him was a foregone conclusion. And Tonto felt sure that his men had been bought off in furtherance of some scheme which did not show on the surface. Not having the help he needed would cripple Tonto some, but it wouldn't be fatal—unless, of course, he failed to get new men on the job soon.

Well, with the loan from the bank, he could hire himself another pair of horsehands. A helluva lot depended on that loan. Mainly it would save those broncs from going about with lean bellies and thin flanks.

When them ponies of yours set in nickering, pawing and begging for feed you ain't got and can't get—

Tonto was suddenly seeing red. He got up. No use trying to sleep. He glanced at the tin clock on the shelf. Ten. A pot of coffee, right on top of a double shot of rye, failed to pacify him. In all his twenty five years of life, Tonto had never been as low in mind as he was right then.

"Reckon I'll hit the breeze for an hour or so," he finally decided.

He forked a bronc and rode out along the north line of the big fenced pasture into which his broncs were thrown each evening. To tell the truth, Tonto Bill Harper was in love. He'd been in love a few times in the past. Sort of experimentally, likewise transitorily.

But his present love wore a different brand from all the others. He was in love with two hundred and fifty hand-picked, gentled and well cared for broncs, being even more jealous of their safety and comfort than, he told himself, he could have been about any woman.

So he rode along his east line, knowing he'd find his pets bunched up somewhere in the pasture. Sleeping. Depending on him for food and care.

At the northeast corner of the pasture he reined up abruptly, head forward, listening intently. When a shod hoof strikes against rock there's no mistaking the sound, and that was what Tonto had heard. Silence after that. Still he sat motionless in his saddle and waited.

Then came another sound. A different but no less identifiable sound.

The sound of pliers contacting barbed-wire!

Tonto waited no longer. Rounding the corner of the pasture, he dug his gigs in and went racing down the east line—the butt of a sixgun gripped tight in an eager hand.

Suddenly he was conscious of a dark, moving mass coming swiftly from farther up in the pasture and headed, it seemed, for the east-line-fence. There was the rumbling thunder of many hoofs. Somebody was hazing his broncs along hell-for-leather—straight for that east fence!

Somebody meant to stampede and scatter his horse-herd to hell and gone! Somebody who knew he hadn't any punchers to side him. Scatter them and pick them up at leisure.

DeSpain's chips were down at last—and Shorty and Slats and Lord only knew how many more, were sitting in the game with him!

Tonto no longer saw red. He was, in fact, quite cool. He was always like that in action—and certain it was that swift and deadly action lay right ahead.

A snapped wire sang a high, whining song—and then Tonto saw him. The stooped man with the pliers. He was in the act of cutting the ground wire. Tonto rode hell-bent straight for him. The wire-cutter straightened suddenly, looked around quickly, then in panic leaped for the brush twenty feet away. He did not reach cover.

Tonto's bronc struck him breast high, and he went down under flashing hoofs, the startled cry of fright, just begun, choking off—just a gurgle in his throat.

Tonto wheeled and rode back. Running his glance southward along the fence, he estimated the damage done. The barbed-wire was down as far as he could see in the light of a dim moon.

And those broncs were being choused down toward where the gaps had been cut in the fence!

CHAPTER TWO

Two-Legged Polecats

HE SPURRED hard, leaped the down wire, rode rapidly towards the oncoming broncs—firing into the air and yelling at the top of his lungs as he went. The pace of the massed broncs slackened, almost stopped—then the leaders whirled, frightened, and raced at left angles toward the safe and secure north line.

When the drag of the horse-herd had flashed past him, Tonto peered out across the pasture which lay only vaguely revealed under the moon. He saw movement, then heard an angry shout.

"Hey, Shorty—what the hell! That you doing all that blastin'?"

A short wait. Then: "Damn your hide, Shorty—"

The rider then saw Tonto, vaguely. Probably he mistook him for Shorty Furgeson, for he spurred towards him, snarling in a high-pitched voice, "What sorta foolishment you up to?"

"Hold it, Blake! Go high—or fill your hand!"

"Hells fire!" Slats Blake ejaculated, dragging his bronc onto its haunches. "It ain't Shorty!"

Off to Tonto's left, a matter of fifty yards, a rifle snarled viciously. Lead sang just above his head. Tonto flattened out over his mount's withers—and rode straight toward Blake. Blake's gun roared, and a fiery pain shot through the flesh of Tonto's left arm.

Then his own gun blasted. One shot. Blake was going down—was down—and his bronc was off to one side, snorting in fright.

Again that snarling rifle came into play. Expecting that, Tonto had leaped his bronc ahead—and just in time. He wheeled on a dime, rode a swirt course towards where he had seen the spurt of flame from the rifle's muzzle. A cloud masked the moon briefly, throwing the pasture into pitch-like darkness. It cleared as abruptly as it had come—and Tonto found himself almost against the rifleman, who had dismounted, rifle even then smacking its butt against his shoulder.

Tonto's gun flamed, roared, jumped in his fist—and the rifleman buckled at the knees, swayed helplessly from side to side, and went down on his face.

Tonto ejected the empty cartridges from his gun, thumbed in fresh ones, then rode back to where Slats lay on the ground. No need to bother looking at the rifleman. He was dead when he hit the grass. Tonto knew that. But it might be different with Blake, and Tonto was unwilling to leave even an enemy helpless and down.

Blake was alive, right enough—but his right shoulder was badly blasted. He groaned in pain, rocking back and forth. Tonto, watchful for a trick, stepped down and went to him.

"You got about half what you had comin' to you," he commented, untying Blake's neckerchief and binding it around the wound. "As it looks now, you'll live to hang. Or mebbe you ain't knowin' that Arizona folks hangs cow-thieves and hoss-thieves without any trial atall."

"You ain't got nothin' on me!" Blake whined. "Shorty and me allowed we'd come back to work for you. We didn't find you at home, but we did hear a commotion in the pasture. So we come out to help."

"And," Tonto said sarcastically, "Shorty brought along a pair of pliers to do his

helping with. No use, Blake. I've got you dead to right, and you know it. Now—up on your hind legs, polecat. I'll toss you onto your kak. Then we're going to see Shorty. That hombre ain't feelin' none too good right now, I'd tell a man!"

They found Shorty—pliers with him. He was badly bunged up—and had one arm dangling helplessly at his side. He sat on the ground, swearing savagely when they rode up. Tonto dismounted and prodded him to his feet, forced him to bring his bronc out of the brush and mount.

"Head for the home-grounds," he ordered. "And try a getaway if you feel that hopeful. I ain't ever shot a man in the back—but I'd pop it to a pair of polecats just any old how."

As he had expected, Tonto found his broncs bunched up in the northwest corner of the pasture near the cabin. They'd be safe enough for a while. Meantime, he had to get his captives safely out of hand.

Back of the cabin there was a root-cellar. It was a shallow, square hole in the ground, without windows and with its only exit guarded by a heavy plank door. Tonto ordered Blake and Shorty down, prodded them into the cellar and, in spite of their yells and protests, locked them in.

Twenty minutes later he was back with the body of the rifleman, a rannie he had never laid eyes on before. A drifter, probably, who craved jack and didn't care how he got it. DeSpain's jack, of course.

Opening the door, Tonto tumbled the dead man down into the black hole. "Here's your sidekick to keep you company!" he called out. "His luck was in, fellers. He won't hafta hang."

Shorty yelled, "He done kilt Bigmouth Bennett—kilt him deader'n hell!"

"Harper," Blake pleaded, "take me outa here! I'm bleedin' to death—"

"Want me to git word to your folks to come git your carcass?" Tonto enquired solicitously. "Or does skunks have any folks?"

He slammed the door, locked it and rode off to where the broncs were bunched. He rode slowly, talking to them as he was in the habit of doing. After half an hour of coaxing he had all of them safely in a small upper pasture. Safe for the time being, at least.

Tonto, tough as a strip of rawhide though he was, had begun to tire. He corraled his mount, went into his cabin and made a light. A good feed of bacon and beans, washed down by huge cups of black coffee, soon took the edge off his weariness. Come to think of it, he had a heap of things to attend to that day.

He had to get the sheriff out, also the coroner. A doctor, too. Tom Harris, the sheriff, could be counted on to cut the deck square. One of the few a fellow could speak that well of. DeSpain didn't own him, or any part of him.

Also, Tonto had to find out if Sam Teale had sent an answer to the letter he had written a week before. A letter requesting him to show up in Lodgepole the following Thursday to sign up for that loan at the bank.

The loan was more important now than ever. The fat would be in the fire and burned to a crisp without it. Sam knew that, so he would naturally be on hand as requested. Good guy, Sam. One of the best. Salt of the earth, in fact.

Day had come and Tonto was about to set out to look his prisoners over, when a bronc in the corral gave out a long whicker of welcome—and that took Tonto to the door in two long strides. What he saw amazed him, but he opened the door wider and stepped out. He had doubted his eyes for a moment, but now he knew it was true.

A girl—a very pretty girl—was short-loping a bronc straight towards him!

JUST when it looked as if the pretty girl was going to ride Tonto down, she dragged her mount down. She gave Tonto a dazzling smile and a friendly nod.

"Light down, ma'am, and rest yore saddle," Tonto began hospitably. Then, eyeing a small, black case thonged to the horn of her saddle, he added, "No need to, though, if you're peddling something. I'm plumb busted."

The girl looked a bit surprised as she stepped down and hitched to the ground. A lovely blonde girl, dressed in fawn-colored riding britches, handsomely stitched range boots, flannel shirt with a rolled collar, doeskin jacket, and a cream-colored Stetson which tried to, but couldn't conceal the alluring curl in her corn-silk hair.

"I'm not peddling anything," she assured Tonto promptly. "Not even giving

away samples. And I'm not at all interested in the state of your finances—unless you happen to be somebody I'm looking for. Are you?"

Tonto felt ill at ease, but he answered, "I wouldn't know if I am or not, ma'am. What sorta somebody—"

"A man. I'm looking for a man. His name is Tonto Harper. Tonto after a mountain, river, or something like that. Do you know him?"

Tonto was now not only adrift at sea but he was beginning to feel somewhat disturbed. "I am him," he told her. "I mean, I'm this here Tonto Harper. Called Tonto, ma'am, because I used to live a heap up in Tonto Basin."

The young woman flashed Tonto a friendly smile, advanced and offered him a small, neatly gloved hand. Tonto took it diffidently.

"Sam sent me," she informed him. "I'm Sam's sister."

"I get it!" Tonto beamed. "You mean Sam is your brother!"

"Sure," she laughed approvingly. "You are certainly a quick-on-the-trigger hombre. Tonto, you—you old warthog. Sam said for me to speak your own language to you." Then, noting Tonto's half-frown, "Did I say something awful?"

Tonto took advantage of her pretty confusion to size her up more fully. He was an excellent judge of horseflesh as well as beef-on-the-hoof, but inexperienced in the matter of lovely blondes. However, he approved of what he saw of this one. A trifle gant, perhaps, but rangily built. He liked her general conformation, especially the length of her stride. Good ankle-and-knee action, too, he had already observed. About twenty years old, and a purebred he summed up.

"Not if you don't aim it to be," he allowed gallantly in answer to her question. "What I wanta know, ma'am, is where is this same Sam?"

"Oh," the girl exclaimed. "I was forgetting to tell you about it. Playing polo with the Phoenix Bears against the Tucson Peaches, Sam got a leg broken. I'm one of the Peaches, you know. Sam's pony fell—"

"My good gosh!" Tonto cried sympathetically. "Sam busted a leg, and sent you to tell me about it—"

"No!" the girl interrupted. "He sent me with this—I think you call it a power of attorney. I'm here to sign with you and get some money from the bank. And Sam said for the love of heaven send him five hundred. His leg isn't all that's broke about him."

That brought Tonto back to the present with something of a jerk. The present, and the immediate problems confronting him. And he was curious about Sam's little sister.

"Howcome you to be riding so bright and early, ma'am, im you don't mind saying?" he queried.

The girl didn't mind. She puckered up her face, probably to indicate distaste and disgust, and said:

"I got to Lodgepole at midnight. The man at the depot directed me to your place, or did his best, no doubt. He suggested that I stop at the hotel until daylight, but my business wasn't the kind that could wait. Sam's in an awful sweat right at this moment, you know. So I hired this hammer-headed plug at the livery stable and shoved off. Got off the trail a few times, and couldn't get the plug out of a slow jogtrot most of the time. I don't wear spurs, and he pays no attention at all to bare heels. Came daylight. Got my bearings, and here I am."

TONTO nodded slowly. Here she was, sure enough. And with her hand out. For Sam, of course. That meant a loan of two thousand dollars instead of fifteen hundred he had planned for. Okay. Sam needed it, and he'd get it.

"Reckon you could stand to rest up a while, and put away some grub," he opined. "Step right inside, ma'am, while I put up your bronc."

"Prop him up would be better," she offered sourly. "Looks like he might fall down any minute."

Tonto grinned. "You evidently don't savvy these here simon-pure bronc hosses," he told her. "This here one is a notorious loafer and staller. He's fresher right now than you are, ma'am."

"Give me a decent saddle," she remarked boastfully, making a face at the stock kak which she had forked, "and a high-stepping polo pony under me—and I'll ride rings around anything this gosh-awful desert waste can produce. Want to bet?"

Tonto shook his head sadly. "Ma'am," he said, plaintively, "I've got just exactly

three silver dollars between me and the chuckline. Please don't banter me into betting them."

"You're comparatively rich, Tonto," Miss Teale applauded with a cheering smile. "I've just a lone four-bit piece between me and a job slinging hash—if it should turn out that I could sling hash. And that reminds me," she finished, "I'm hungry as a wolf."

"Gosh!" Tonto muttered as he led the hammer-head to the corral. "She's hungry as a wolf—and flapjacks and blackstrap ain't exactly provender for no wolf."

But he did the best he could. Miss Teale put away the flapjacks and blackstrap with gusto. She even downed two cups of coffee—strong as sheep-dip and black as the heart of Satan—without even blinking her unbelievably blue eyes. Then she sighed contentedly as she smoked a brown-paper cigarette which Tonto rolled for her.

While she smoked, Tonto told her about the happenings of the night before, or as much as he thought she needed to know. The girl's cigarette, neglected during the swift narration, grew cold. Anxiety darkened her eyes, brushed the roses from her cheeks. In short, Sam Teale's sister was more than just a little frightened.

"They—they tried to run off the broncs, and to kill you!" she gasped finally. "It's hard to believe that there are such people in the world!"

"Ma'am," Tonto advised her, "there does happen to be a scatterin' of such folks here and there. Usually they git what's due 'em in the end. I know a few hereabouts that's plumb asking for it—and I aim to see that they git it. But here's what I figguer you and me has to do. I'll load them shot-up jaspers into my buckboard, and the corp along with them, and deliver the whole caboodle to Sheriff Harris in person. You can fork one bronc and lead another for me. That jibe with you?"

"Of course, Tonto," she agreed.

"Thank you, ma'am. It's important that we git that bank business fixed up today. Them broncs been getting along on mesquite beans and a little baled hay for quite a spell. Ain't no browse no longer. Plumb burnt out. The ranges, I mean. Well, I'll hook up a team to the buckboard, saddle them broncs, and we'll fog away from here—in case you feel rested enough, ma'am?"

"I'm rested plenty," she assured him. "But can't you call me something else than ma'am?"

"Miss Teale?"

"That's still worse."

Tonto got a notion just then which split his face in a wide grin. "Peaches, mebbe?" he chuckled. "You allowed you was one of them Peaches."

The girl laughed merrily.

"Okay, Peaches," he said, starting for the door. I'll go and hook up—"

He broke off, stood on the doorsill and looked away down the trail from the main road. A moment later he turned to the girl.

"Half a dozen fellers ridin' this way," he told her, his face grim. "You better stay inside, Peaches, unless I give you the word to come out."

"Okay, Tonto," she agreed in hushed tones. "Anything you say."

Tonto went outside, closing the door after him.

CHAPTER THREE

Tonto Gives Up

AS THE riders came nearer, Tonto began picking out those known to him. Sheriff Tom Harris and Deputy Hillman, were two. Tully Sampson, ramrod of the Circle Dot, a foreign-owned spread half a dozen miles to the north, another. Two punchers from DeSpain's neighboring Slash Bar J—and DeSpain himself.

Without appearing at all concerned, Tonto backed slowly until he had the log walls of his cabin behind him. He lifted his sixguns from leather, allowing them to slide back lightly.

"Looks a heap like that second batch of big trouble I been expecting is now showing up," he grunted to himself. "DeSpain wouldn't be along without he thinks he's got a good card in the hole. And mebbe his ain't as good as the one I got."

The riders came on to the front of the cabin and pulled up.

"Howdy, Tonto:" Sheriff Harris, a grizzled, skimpy man with a big reputation, greeted the horseman.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Tonto gave back.

"DeSpain, there," nodding towards the rancher-merchant, " has got a coupla riders in the fog—so he says. Fellers that quit

you yesterday, Tonto, and hired out to him. Slats Blake and Shorty Furgeson, they're named. You happen to know anything about them jaspers?"

"I might," Tonto answered.

"He knows a heap, Tom!" DeSpain declared, shoving his bronc forward.

"You better keep that there skunk quiet, Sheriff," Tonto advised pointedly. "I warned him off my spread yesterday, and I'd be chousing him off now, only he come under your protection. Now—git this business done with, Sheriff. I ain't got no time for fooling around."

"Okay. Slats and Shorty hired to DeSpain early last night. They left town to ride out here and pick up their bedrolls and warbags, agreeing to show up on the Slash Bar afore midnight. They ain't showed up yet. Furthermore, they spilled it to DeSpain that you'd went on the prod when they quit cold. Done a little shart-shootin', they claim. Figgered you'd make 'em trouble, some time or other. Now—coupla DeSpain's punchers, ridin' home from a dance afore midnight last night, heard a lotta gun-talk over this way about then. That's what brung us out here, Tonto. Got anything on that?"

"Plenty. Them hombres rode off about five o'clock yesterday, and they took bedrolls and warbags along with 'em. Likewise two hundred and forty dollars, being their pay to date—"

"Hell!" DeSpain broke in. "You refused to pay them busters. They said so. Refused to pay an honest debt!"

Tonto took two steps away from the wall, his eyes cold and menacing. Sheriff Harris rasped, "Keep outa this, DeSpain, else rattle your hocks down the trail. I'm doin' the talkin'. Me an' Tonto. Go ahead, Tonto."

Without wasting a word, Tonto described accurately the happenings of the night before. All listened in silence until he had finished.

"Now—what about them fellers in the root-cellar?" he asked.

"We'll ride 'em into town. Hook up your buckboard, an' we'll git goin'."

Presently, Tonto wheeled his buckboard up before the root-cellar, got down and unlocked the door. Shorty Furgeson, pale, red-eyed and sheepish, came out first. Blake, bloody and patently in pain, followed. His eyes, finding DeSpain, registered a measure of relief at seeing his new employer.

"Ain't no fault of Harper's," he snarled viciously, "that I ain't bled to death. He jumped us up for nothin' atall!"

"That's my bet, too, Harris!" DeSpain cut in harshly. "I can tell when a jasper is out and out lying—and that's what Harper is feeding you, Sheriff. A pack of lies!"

Tonto wasn't taking that. Before DeSpain could do more than snatch at his gun-butt, he was jerked from his kak and hurled with force to the ground. He completed his draw—and the toe of Tonto's boot sent the gun spinning a dozen yards away.

DeSpain bleated in agony, wringing his right hand, on which two fingers had been broken. He got up quickly, reached inside his shirt for his hide-out gun.

Tonto's hard fist caught him smack on the nose, and an equally hard left to the chin sent DeSpain down again. He lay there, shouting for his two riders to side him. Then Sheriff Harris, anxiously eyeing Tonto's two guns which were now palmed and ready, took the play himself.

"Put up them hoglaigs, Harper!" he snapped. "You rannies sit tight—else I'll do some gunnin' on my own. Git up from there, DeSpain, an' try to act like a man. You got what was comin' to you. Best not to call a man a liar in Arizona, nor spit in his face. You asks for it if you do. Now," he said to Tonto, who had leathered his guns, "you help load that corpse onto the buckboard, an' we'll rattle along."

Tonto and Tully Sampson loaded the body, covered it with a blanket, then helped the two wounded men into the back seat. Just then Deputy Hillman rode up.

"Fence is cut just like Tonto said it was," he reported. "Found where at Tonto turned that hoss-herd last night. Looked the ground over good. Picked up a coupla busted rifle cartridges, and I reckon them was the ones from Bigmouth's gun. Found some forty-five empties, scattered about—and I reckon Tonto has told us the right of it. Tom, I sure do."

Sheriff Harris nodded agreement. "Aim to ride those hombres to town and jug 'em," he said. "Don't expect they'll stay jugged for long, though, knowin' what Arizona stockmen does to hoss-thieves when they're ketched red-handed. I figger this pair was so ketched. I'll do my best to pertect 'em—but I ain't guaranteein' my best will be

enough. You drive, Hillman. We'll come along behind."

Shorty, having heard the sheriff's significant reference to the fate of horse-thieves, now fixed agonized eyes on DeSpain. The latter, mounted again, looked down at him coldly. Shorty gulped, and bleated:

"DeSpain—you gotta help us outa this! You can't leave us to git hung that way! You can't do that there to us!"

"You jaspers ain't got any call on me," DeSpain told him with a shrug. "I hired you to ride for me. That's all I know about this business."

"You lie, an' you know it—" Shorty began, but broke off when a smack to the mouth from Slats Blake's free hand split his lips and loosened a few teeth in front.

"Shut your trap, you damned fool!" Blake snarled. "Any more outa you, an' I'll crack your neck for you!"

Deputy Hillman turned around in his seat. "Put a paw on Shorty again, Slats," he said quietly, "and I'll bend a sixgun barrel over your conk. Savvy that, don't you?"

Without waiting for an answer, the deputy gathered the reins in his hand and wheeled away towards Lodgepole.

"I'll follow you in, Sheriff," Tonto told Harris.

The sheriff merely nodded and rode off.

When Tonto went into the cabin, Peaches was nowhere to be seen. He pushed open the door of the second room and found her.

She was cuddled up in a bunk, and sound asleep.

"Holy smoke!' he ejaculated under his breath. "I've heard about cold nerve before—but this here is the simon-pure article!"

TONTO and Peaches ground-hitched in front of the bank in Lodgepole near the noon hour that day. They were greeted affably by Old Man Ritchie, president of the bank, and, as Tonto had foreseen, there was no difficulty at all about arranging a loan.

"I know about those remounts, Harper," the banker told him. "Reckon twenty-five thousand in good horseflesh ought to carry a two-thousand-dollar loan. It's dinnertime now. Come in at one o'clock and we'll get the business done."

Tonto was just one broad grin, and Peaches was happy too, as they entered the hotel dining-room, chose a table and ordered.

"Gosh, Peaches!" Tonto exclaimed, unable to contain his exuberance longer. "That takes a load off my mind! Sam gits his five hundred. You go back to Tucson, ridin' in style—an' above all, them broncs eats sound grain and good hay plumb until they're turned over to the Government. And here I was thinking another big trouble was headed my way! Just shows what fool notions a fellow can git, especially when he's low in his mind already. Sure does!"

"Gee, Tonto—I'm happy too!" Peaches smiled at him. "Happy for Sam and his broken leg. And mighty happy for you, too, you high-chinned old owlhoot, you!"

Tonto let go of half a gasp—but bit it off. Some day when Sam Teale's leg was as good as new, he'd give that hombre a fine working over for that dirty business. Peaches, he observed, was looking at him out of anxious eyes. She asked, almost in a whisper, "Did I say something awful again, Tonto?"

"Shucks, it don't amount to nothin'," he reassured her. "Only, Peaches, don't ever call anybody else that—please!"

Sheriff Harris came to their table just then. Invited, he dragged out a chair and sat down. After he had ordered, he said:

"I figgered Shorty would pop wide open, Tonto. Spill the beans proper. DeSpain, I make no doubt, hired them three no-goods to rustle your stock—an' proof of that would fix his clock for him in these parts. Besides sending him up for a stretch. This country would be a lot better to live in if he wasn't in it. But Shorty has froze tight. More scared of Slats than he is of gettin' strung up. If he stays froze—well, DeSpain stays in the clear. I'll hate that a heap—damn it all to hell! Beggin' your pardon, miss," he apologized to Peaches.

"Tonto's thinking worse than that," she laughed. "Just hasn't got what it takes to open up with it, Sheriff. That's all!"

The staccato bark of a sixgun broke up the sheriff's merriment and wiped the grin off Tonto's lips. Both men tensed. The single report was followed almost instantly by half a dozen blasts. Leaving the girl where she sat, the men raced to the door and out into the street.

The street was deserted—except for a group of some three or four riders who were just disappearing southwards in a fog of dust.

A wildly excited young woman ran from the bank, half a block away. "Help!" she cried. "They robbed the bank—and shot Fred Buckley! Help! Get a doctor—quick!"

The sheriff and Tonto were entering the bank as she finished. Other citizens were hurrying up by then, most of them armed. Doc Bradley, bag in hand, rushed inside.

Buckley, the cashier, was lying on the floor back of the teller's window. His face was covered with blood—but the blood could not conceal a small hole between his eyes.

"Dead," Doc Bradley announced after a brief examination. "Died on his feet, I guess. Anybody else hurt?"

The young woman bookkeeper answered in a strangled voice.

"No. We were alone in the bank. Dinner hour. Two men came in, stuck us up, looted the vault and counter-tills, putting all in a grain sack. They started backing out—and poor—poor Fred reached for the gun under his window. A tall man, carrying the sack in one hand and a gun in the other, shot him down. Thart's all I know about it."

IT WAS enough. Enough, at least, for Tonto Bill Harper. Almost blindly, he made his way out of the bank. Peaches had joined the crowd before the door. He took her by the arm and walked her half a block down the street.

"We're blowed up higher'n hell, Peaches!" he gulped finally. "Bank robbers took all the jack. Not a dollar left. We don't git that loan—and my broncs starve to death. I can almost count their pore ribs right now!"

"What—what are we going to do, Tonto?" Peaches quavered.

Tonto stopped in his tracks. He was thoughtful for a moment. Then: "I got an idea."

"Well, Tonto," said Peaches, her panic vanishing, "this is a mighty good time to have one! And is it one includes me—you old sidewinder?"

Tonto disregarded the offense, merely chalking it up against Sam Teale.

"It's like this," he explained, while his heart dropped towards the bottom of his stomach. "You ain't got any money and I ain't either. Sam's got a broke laig. The ponies ain't got any feed, and I can't get any credit. So—we got to sell. Can't have 'em starving—so we'll just hafta sacrifice 'em. Lord knows I hate to do it, but there ain't no other way. You come along with me."

Peaches slipped an arm in the crook of Tonto's, and went with him toward DeSpain's general store. She didn't know that the tall puncher was right then hating himself with consuming wrath, but he was doing just that.

"—Wait until them ponies of yores set in nickering, pawing and begging for feed you ain't got and can't get—"

Well, damn it all, things wouldn't come to that pass, anyhow!

The sheriff and the town marshal, heading a posse of twenty-odd, galloped past them and headed southwards. Passing through the dust cloud their going had raised, Tonto told the girl to wait under the wooden awning of the general store. He probably wouldn't be gone more than a few minutes. Two minutes later he was back.

"Nothing doing," he said helplessly. "My idea blowed up on me. So I reckon, Peaches, there ain't but one thing you can do. Ride out to the ranch with me, and stay there until I can make a deal. Let's be ridin'."

Half an hour later, and after Tonto had spent his three dollars for grub to pack out, they rode off northwestward over the hot sands of the desert, heading towards Dusty Ford and the horse ranch.

Two hours out, opposite where the dim trail skirted in towards the Lava Beds, Tonto saw something that caused him to pull up to a dead stop.

It really wasn't anything of importance. Just that some careless person had spilled perhaps a double handful of speckled brown beans there in the sandy trail. And Pintos selling at five cents a pound!

"Almost one entire snack of beans," he allowed presently. "I reckon we might as well have 'em—"

"There's some more!" Peaches broke in, pointing.

Tonto looked off to the side of the trail where the lava beds sent up heat waves to the sun, and saw a couple of brown beans glinting. Then, astonished, he looked farther and saw a couple more.

Without commenting, he rode onto the lava beds, and kept riding for a quarter-mile or so. Peaches followed.

More brown pintos. Every hundred or so feet he found two more. Presently he drew up, and turned toward the girl a face she had not seen before. A grim, set-jawed face.

"I think I savvy," he said, his voice chilly. "Them pintos wasn't spilled in the trail by accident. They were put there. So was the ones we been seeing lined out across the lava. Hell, Peaches, if you wasn't with me, I'd—"

He broke off, seeing that he had brought a hurt look to the girl's face.

"If you don't want me with you, Tonto," she offered meekly, "I'll go back. I can follow the trail."

Not want her with him?

Tonto hadn't given it any thought before, but now he suddenly felt a sort of all-goneness. An anticipatory all-goneness. Gosh! Of course he wanted her with him!

"Like hell you'll go back!" he covered up angrily.

"C'mon. Back to the trail."

She followed obediently, and watched in silence while the lank puncher got down and carefully collected the double-handful of beans from the sand. Furthermore, he walked onto the beds and picked up all the shiny little pintos which could be seen from where she sat. Then he returned, mounted, and set a stiff pace on down the trail.

CHAPTER FOUR

To Catch a Thief

ONE MILE farther, Tonto pulled up. The lava had nearly petered out at that spot. He got down and carefully dumped a double handful of pintos at the right hand side of the trail. The trail to his own spread.

"Follow me," he bade Peaches, "and not too fast."

Taking her cue from the abrupt change in Tonto, who had gone as savage as the country around them, Peaches rode after him onto the blistering beds, and made no comment. She merely kept her eyes on him, and wondered what he was up to.

After so carefully picking up beans farther up the trail, he was now strewing them all over creation, or part of it any rate, with equal care. He was dropping beans as he went along. It was hardly believable!

"Tonto," she ventured, after they had covered a mile, and the tall puncher had stopped to take a paper bag of beans out of his saddle-sack, "should you be wasting our food that way?"

"You savvy jackpot, don't you?"

"Sure. Something to do with poker, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Fellers sit around a table an' sweeten up a pot with jack. So'm I, Peaches—only this is a beanpot I'm sweetenin'. Just up now, an' don't talk."

Then, leading his bald-face gelding as before, he went right on across the gentle up-slope of lava—scattering pintos behind him.

Two miles more up into the juniper-clad crests, and then his ranch house abruptly revealed itself in a copse of pinon and oak which skirted the clearing.

Tonto opened the door of the cabin, tossed his grub-sack inside, and said, "Peaches, we're home!"

He reached up, took her under her arms and swung her out of the saddle.

"You go inside and make yourself at home, while I corral the broncs," he ordered.

She went into the cabin and dropped wearily onto the first soapbox she came to. Soon Tonto came in.

"All right. Now what?" Peaches asked quietly.

"I'll hand it to you for being a right sensible gal, Peaches," Tonto said admiringly, "besides which you're pretty as all git-out along with it. Swell combination. I'm telling you!"

"Thanks a heap—you mossy-horned old outlaw," she offered, using another phrase with which Sam had supplied her. "But tell me something that's got dew on it. For instance, what's it all about?"

Tonto was then occupied intently with a can of oil, a soft cloth—and his pair of sixguns. After he had cleaned and oiled the weapons, he saw fit to talk a little.

"We probably will be having company right soon," he told her. He shoved cartridges into the cylinders of the sixguns, holstered them and continued. "Pretty soon you'll go up into the scrub until I come and git you. If I don't come—well, you can ride to Lodgepole later and tell the sheriff about

it. Reckon you better lope up into the scrub right now, Peaches," he ended.

"I won't!" she refused flatly. "I'm afraid of bugs and snakes and—and things that crawl around in trees and on the ground. So I'll stay right here in this cabin. If you can protect yourself, you can protect me too. If you can't—well," with a shrug of her shoulders, "I'd rather be man-bit than snake- bit, or bit by those horrible toads and bugs. So that settles it."

She ceased abruptly. Tonto's head had come up and she saw his spinal column stiffen. He closed the door quickly.

"You little fool!" he snarled, turning blazing eyes upon her. "You got to take it now, whether or not you want to! You wouldn't take to the timber— But, hell, what's the use? I just can't get mad at you good and proper. But for the love of Mike, don't come down until you know it's safe to."

And Peaches, before she could even protest, was seized in Tonto's bony hands and literally tossed through an open manhole into the loft above.

"Listen, Peaches!" he called after her, and thrust the butt of a rifle through the manhole. "Take this gun. When you hear me bawl out again, poke the barrel through a crack and try to hold it steady on some special man that's amongst them now a-coming. Don't you let out a squeak. Just wiggle the gun-barrel to attract attention, and let 'em think there's a he-man holding the iron on 'em. Now don't fail me in no particular!"

PEACHES certainly didn't intend to fail Tonto. She crawled forward to the front peak of the loft, dragging the rifle after her. She saw a long slit between two logs, and peered out through it.

Three men, riding single-file, were then entering the far side of the clearing. Peaches saw at a glance that they were saddle-weary and their broncs badly blown. One of the men had a meal-sack across the front of his saddle, its contents balanced over his bronc's withers.

All three riders were heavily armed.

"Hello there, Jack!" the meal-sacker called, bringing his bronc to a halt about ten feet from the door. "Show yoreself, pardner! We follored yore bean trail like directions—and now we crave to eat some!"

Where was Tonto, Peaches wondered wildly. The other two riders had stopped back of the leader, and were waiting.

"Go high with 'em, all you bullies!"

Tonto made his whereabouts known right

at that instant. As far as Peaches could tell, he was back of a big boulder.

She remembered instructions then, and poked the barrel of the rifle through the slit between the logs. She made plenty of noise doing it, so as to attract attention. She succeeded. The three men, stiff as icicles at the sound of Tonto's command, lifted their glance to the threatening rifle-barrel, and Peaches could see from where she was how completely flabbergasted they were.

"Hold that rifle tight on the one sitting in the lead, Sam, old pard!" Tonto called from back of the boulder. "If he bats an eye, let him have plenty!"

Peaches wiggled the barrel understandingly, then held it steady on the meal-sacker.

Tonto sauntered with seeming casualness from behind the boulder. He had both of his six-shooters in his hands, and he was covering the two men back of the leader.

"Rest your saddles, hombres!" he commanded, stopping where he could cover all three. "Do it with your paws held high!"

When he had taken away their weapons, Tonto herded them into the cabin, lined up flat on the floor and used a bunch of ropes on them in a highly professional manner.

Then he called out to Peaches, "You can come down now. All jake down here."

The girl descended the ladder and stood looking with approval at the job Tonto had done, happily conscious of the fact that she had had a part in it.

An amazed bandit bleated, staring at her sheepishly: "Is *that* Sam?"

The crash of breaking brush, the clatter of hoofs, drowned the comments of the other two. Tonto was outside in a flash, and the girl ran to the doorway and peered out.

A sorrel bronc, carrying a heavyset man with long black mustaches, came to a sliding stop in the clearing. The rider was reaching for a gun with his left hand.

"Sit tight, DeSpain!" Tonto warned brittlely. "You've done just what I figured you would. You tumbled to the fact that I'd switched them beans from the trail you marked to your spread and laid a trail to mine. Easy to figger out, when them important bandits, all strangers hereabouts and brought in by you to pull that bank job, failed to show up. They won't show up. I've got 'em tied up inside. Git down, DeSpain, and join your sidekicks—"

DeSpain, who had appeared to be frozen by the surprise of Tonto's revelations, came out of it. He snapped erect, and his sixgun swiveled up.

Tonto's draw was so lightning fast no eye could have followed it. His gun blasted once.

DeSpain, drilled between the eyes, pitched out of his saddle and was dead before he sprawled on the ground.

AT TEN o'clock that night, a blonde girl came out of the depot at Lodgepole. She had a telegraph sheet in her hand, and stopped where the agent's light streamed through a window. Then a tall puncher came out of the shadows and joined her. He was looking pretty much down in his mind.

Tonto Harper was realizing just then that he had been absolutely right about that second batch of trouble. That double measure of big trouble coming his way. It was Peaches. Yeah, no more, or less. Just a few hours and she'd be on a train for Tucson—and that would be that. And Tonto knew blamed well that her going would trouble him more and make him far lower in his mind than he'd ever been before in the twenty-five years of his life.

He took the message from her mechanically. He wasn't really interested.

"It's to Sam," she told him. "I thought you should read it before I send it off."

Tonto held the sheet in the shaft of light.

TONTO CAPTURED SOME BANK ROBBERS FOR TWENTY FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD STOP HAS SPLIT IT THREE WAYS STOP SENDING YOUR CUT TOMORROW STOP NOT RETURNING TUCSON STOP STAYING TO HELP TONTO TAKE CARE PONIES STOP IF HE WILL HAVE ME STOP LOVE STOP

Tonto gasped.

"You don't really mean it, Peaches—do you!" he managed.

"Of course I do, Tonto!" Peaches exclaimed, when he let her get her breath again. "You brush-poppin' old maverick, you," she added happily, thus exhausting her vocabulary of cow-country terms of endearment.

THE END

A low-slung shadow backed from the doorway. . . .

By RICHARD DEMING

GUN WIDOW

To the easy pickings on Widow Vance's farm drifted the West's outcasts, and she greeted them all — with blazing lead!

THE spring spurted from the creek bank in an ice-cold stream, splashed down a wooden trough into a sunken wooden tub and overflowed the tub to dribble into the creek. The quick way to fill a bucket was simply to dip it in the tub, but Emma Vance always set the bucket at the edge of the tub directly beneath the trough and allowed it to fill slowly.

It took two full minutes for the bucket to fill, which was why Emma did it, for it allowed her two full minutes simply to stand and look around without feeling she ought to be getting on with some work. And since it was the only real loafing she did, her conscience remained clear about it.

Not that looking around offered much satisfaction, she thought as she surveyed the North Dakota plain without enthusiasm. The vast splendor of rolling green prairie, dotted here and there with roving cattle, the majesty of purple buttes humping their round backs to the horizon was wasted on eyes vainly searching for a tree.

"Not so much as a scrub between here and the Missouri," she muttered, wistfully recalling the green foliage of Ohio.

Her gaze moved along the creek bank, hopefully studying one-by-one the dead sticks which had been cottonwood saplings the year before. *Brought all the way from the Missouri River just to please me,* she thought, *only to be killed by the same forty-below winter that killed Tom.*

The thought of Tom made her eyes mist, and instinctively she glanced at the single grave marker resting at the head of the garden.

Emma Vance was a solid woman. Not heavy—as a matter-of-fact she was slim, and in another twenty years would be gaunt—but solid in the way all frontier women who survive must be solid. At thirty-five she still possessed a healthily attractive femininity, but she also possessed back and arm muscles capable of wielding an axe stroke-for-stroke with any man, or guiding a plow twelve hours without halting.

She frowned as her eyes touched a small herd of cattle drifting toward the barbed wire edging her farm. Double-S cattle as usual, she supposed, though it was too far to make out the brands. Not satisfied with a hundred-thousand acres of free range to roam across, the cattle of the Double-S ranch had a tendency to trample crops whenever they got a chance.

Then her eyes brightened as they moved over the undulating green of her new wheat and the even rows of her cornfield. With brief satisfaction they touched the sod outbuildings, rested on the neat vegetable garden twenty feet from the door of the one-room sod hut, then darkened with momentary pain as they again passed over the grave marker of her husband.

The bucket ran over and she lifted it effortlessly to carry it to the house. Fifteen-year-old Rod, standing in the doorway surveying the land just as his mother had been, stepped back into the single big room to let her pass.

"At least it's ours, Ma," Rod said.

"What's ours?" she asked, not pausing in her trip to the wash tub, where she upended the bucket.

"Three-hundred and twenty acres, a mule, two work horses, a cow and ten chickens. Not to mention the best water in twenty miles."

But no trees. she thought. *It's all right for you, son. You were too young to remember the trees.*

She said lightly, "And a wagon, such as it is. Which you better hitch up and get rolling if you're of a mind to make Dickinson today."

Rod rubbed his neck as he watched his mother's back move up and down over the wash tub.

"Don't know that I like leaving you alone with these renegade Indians on the war-path," he said dubiously. "They burned out a place over beyond Dickinson about twenty miles, and probably would have scalped the family if anyone'd been home."

"That makes it seventy miles from here," Emma said without stopping her rhythmic motion. "It's only a dozen drunken Sioux off the reservation anyway, and with the Army after them, they'll be heading for the badlands, not this way. Besides, that lieutenant who passed here said they've got only two old single shot army muskets between them." She nodded toward a glistening new repeating rifle hanging near the door. "With that in my hands, those Indians would have more to worry about than I have."

"Maybe," Rod admitted. "But they sneak up. That gun won't help you if you suddenly find a redskin with a tomahawk between you and it. You keep a sharp eye out. Better scan the horizon all ways about every half-hour, and bolt the shutters after dusk."

Though it pained Emma to see Rod growing so fast, it gave her a comfortable feeling to have a man beginning to give orders again. "All right," she agreed. "I'm not anxious to have my hair hanging from an Indian belt."

"Be a pity, that pretty corn-yeller hair," Rod said, approaching to sink his fingers in it at the base of her neck.

She made a face at him, then momentarily stopped her scrubbing when he leaned forward to plunk a kiss on her cheek.

"Be back tomorrow night," he said briskly, turned and picked up the heavy Sharps rifle hanging next to the new repeater.

"Don't forget the kerosene," she said, resuming her scrubbing.

Rod's wagon, pulled by the two horses, was still in sight when she brought out the clothes to hang. It would remain in sight for at least two hours, for there was nothing to hide it from the farm until it reached the distant buttes. Rod's route was straight

across country and would remain so for thirty miles, for there were no roads until he got within twenty miles of Dickinson.

BY THE time her son finally disappeared Emma had not only finished the week's laundry, but completed her morning chores. Dutifully she was making the periodic survey of the horizon she had promised Rod to make when she spotted horsemen coming from a direction right-angles to the one Rod had taken.

Calmly she estimated them to be an hour's hard ride away, and since this was her day to dip candles, went ahead with that chore.

When she checked a half-hour later the riders had halved the distance and were close enough for her to make out there were four of them. They did not look like Indians. Cowhands from the Double-S, whose cattle dotted the free land surrounding the farm, she decided. Nevertheless she got the repeating rifle from the house as they drew nearer.

Where the barbed wire ran along the edge of the pasture two-hundred yards away the riders stopped. They were cowhands, she now saw, and wondered why they did not move along the fence toward the gate which offered admission to the farm.

She discovered the reason when the men leisurely dismounted and she caught the flash of wire-cutters in the sun.

Quickly Emma ran to the sod structure serving as a combination stable and barn, threw a rope halter on the mule and jumped on his bare back. The men had cut the wire in three places and remounted by the time she cantered up.

With her rifle carefully pointed at the ground Emma slid from the mule and examined the grinning men. Three were young. Mere hired hands, she decided, and dismissed them. The fourth was a lean, rangy man of middle age with shrewd eyes and a sardonic quirk to his mouth. All four wore pistols and all four horses bore the Double-S brand.

"Any particular reason you men cut my wire?" Emma asked politely.

The lean man said, "Well, Ma'am, I'll tell you—"

"Who are you?" Emma interrupted.

His grin widened as he swept off his hat. "Lem Stalcope at your service, Ma'am. Foreman of the Double-S."

Emma nodded her head rapidly three times. "I see. And why have you cut my wire, Mr. Stalcope?"

"Nothing personal, Ma'am. Your wire blocks our beef's way to water."

"The same creek runs both sides of my farm."

"Sure, Ma'am. But with this country opening up to squatters, first thing you know the whole creek will be gobbled up. We got to look ahead, Ma'am. We're declaring our right of way to all water right from the beginning."

For a moment Emma examined Lem Stalcope silently. Then she said, "We've been here three years. How'd you happen to wait till my husband died?"

When the Double-S foreman shrugged, she said, "I'll tell *you*, Mr. Stalcope. Because you knew Tom Vance could hit a hawk in the air with a rifle at five-hundred yards. But you know who taught him to shoot, Mr. Stalcope? My father out in Ohio, after he finished teaching me."

Lem Stalcope's grin faded. "Now a nice lady like you wouldn't actually go to use that rifle, Ma'am."

Instead of answering Emma suddenly tipped the barrel upward and fired four times from the hip so rapidly the shots blended into a single roar. Four Stetsons were bullet-swept from four startled heads, four horses reared and were brought back under control, and four cowmen sat staring at her with their mouths open.

With a curse Lem Stalcope slapped a palm to the butt of his pistol. Once again the rifle cracked and Lem stared down incredulously at blood welling from a hole in his bicep.

"It's only through the flesh," Emma said pleasantly. "A kerchief will hold it till you get back to the ranch. Now you gentlemen may dismount and repair my fence before you leave."

The men obeyed with a meekness which was not at all surprising under the circumstances.

After the departure of her unwelcome guests, nothing eventful happened the rest of the day. At dusk Emma barred the windows and door and began to prepare for bed. But she had hardly begun to unbutton her dress when she heard the frightened bawling of cattle.

Her first thought was that the Double-S riders had returned to cut her fence again

and were driving cattle through the gap, but when she hurriedly rebuttoned her dress, grabbed the repeating rifle and stepped outside, she realized the sound came from well beyond the barbed wire and was fading as the cattle moved away.

Puzzled, she tried to peer through the gathering gloom in an attempt to see what had stampeded the Double-S cattle, but she could make out nothing on the prairie. Instantly she discarded the thought it might be the renegade Indians, for the cattle were too used to humans to stampede at their approach.

A feeling of vague disquiet sent her restlessly toward the sod stable to check on the cow and mule. She had covered half the distance when the terrified bawling of the cow and braying of the mule sent her running the rest of the way.

At her approach a low-slung shadow backed from the stable doorway, flattened to the ground and fixed her with unblinking yellow eyes. Ten yards from the panther Emma halted abruptly, the rifle level at her hip.

Even in the thickening darkness she could see the trap-mangled and clawless front paw which had forced the big cat to seek prey incapable of flight from a crippled hunter. In spite of the danger of facing an animal she knew must be starving and half-maddened by pain in order to stray so far from the natural habitat of his hills, she could not repress a stab of pity.

Then the panther sprang.

Instinctively Emma fired at the head. Five yards from her, and in the air, the cat's front paws flung upward and his rear paws forward as the impact of the high-velocity bullet literally spun him upside down. He landed on his back, dead before he reached the ground.

Knowing the carcass would bring coyote, and fearful for her chickens, she employed the terrified mule to drag the dead panther to the corner of the house. By means of a rope and more mule power she managed to drag it up on the roof, where she left it with its front paws hanging over one corner and its hind paws hanging over the other. Then, finally, she went to bed.

THE next morning passed as busily as the previous. Up at dawn, she had the panther skinned and his pelt staked out before the sun was fully risen. Then she turned the cow and mule out to pasture, collected the eggs and ate breakfast. Churning butter and trimming the candles she had dipped the day before were the only special chores she had scheduled for that morning, but routine farm and household duties were sufficient to keep her moving about the place at a rapid pace till noon.

She had just risen from the noon meal when the Indians appeared in the distance.

While there had been some doubt in her mind as to what the previous day's visitors were until they came well into view, she recognized these as Indians instantly. Even while they were still too far away to distinguish what clothes they wore, there was something in the hunched-shouldered manner in which they rode which distinguished them from white horsemen.

Calmly she waited until they neared to within a quarter mile before going to the cabin for her rifle. And even then she took no action until she was sure of their intentions.

There were an even dozen of them, all mounted on diminutive Indian ponies. Only two wore feathers, Emma noted, the remainder being topped by civilized headgear including Stetsons, short-brimmed hats and one lone bowler. All wore trousers, but were bare to the waist and streaked with war paint.

At four hundred yards they came to a halt at the raised-arm signal of the Indian wearing the bowler. For a moment they were still, then the bowler-topped brave raised his rifle above his head in the signal to attack.

Dropping to one knee in the doorway, Emma steadied her elbow on the other and fired when the lead horseman was three hundred yards away. The horse dropped from under him and he went tumbling head over heels, his bowler rolling along ahead.

In rapid succession Emma squeezed the trigger three more times, and each time a dead horse spilled its rider. The remainder wheeled before they even reached the two-hundred yard range at which they could have employed their own obsolete muskets, and scurried back the way they had come, four of the horses now carrying double.

At four hundred yards they stopped to reconsider the situation. They were still reconsidering it when Emma dropped a fifth pony.

This time they scampered to eight hundred yards before they stopped.

Adjusting her sights, Emma took long and careful aim and squeezed the trigger for the last shot of the battle. When the sixth pony fell, the remainder, now all carrying double loads, scurried for the horizon as fast as they could move.

But they were in for still further bad luck. In the distance a long line of cavalry appeared over the horizon, banners waving in the breeze.

About fifteen hundred yards away the Sioux halted, sat indecisive for a moment, then chose the lesser of two evils.

Pacifically they rode in the direction of the approaching cavalry, their right hands raised in the symbol of peace.

The incident put Emma way behind in her work schedule, for after making prisoners of the Indians, the cavalry troop stopped by to check on her safety. By the time she had brewed sufficient coffee in a bucket to serve thirty men and officers, and they had ridden away again, the afternoon was half spent.

At four she brought the mule and cow in from pasture, milked the cow and decided not even to try to catch up.

Instead, for the first time since Tom had died, she permitted herself the luxury of a late afternoon swim in the creek. Because the water below the spring was ice-cold, she walked upstream fifty yards, undressed and slipped into the water. With strong strokes she swam upstream another fifty yards, then rose to a standing position in the shallow water near the bank and reached out a hand to pull herself from the water by a small shrub overhanging the bank.

She stopped with the hand outstretched, her eyes widening with shocked joy.

It was not a shrub. It was one of the cottonwood sprouts, standing firm and healthy and thrusting out tiny shots which some day would be thick branches dozens of feet from the ground.

* * *

When Rod rolled in tired and hungry just before dusk, Emma had supper waiting for him.

"I'll unload the wagon after I eat," he said. "Anything happen here while I was gone?"

"Anything happen!" Emma exclaimed, bubbling over. "Rod, you won't believe it! We've got a tree!"

He looked at her blankly. "A what?"

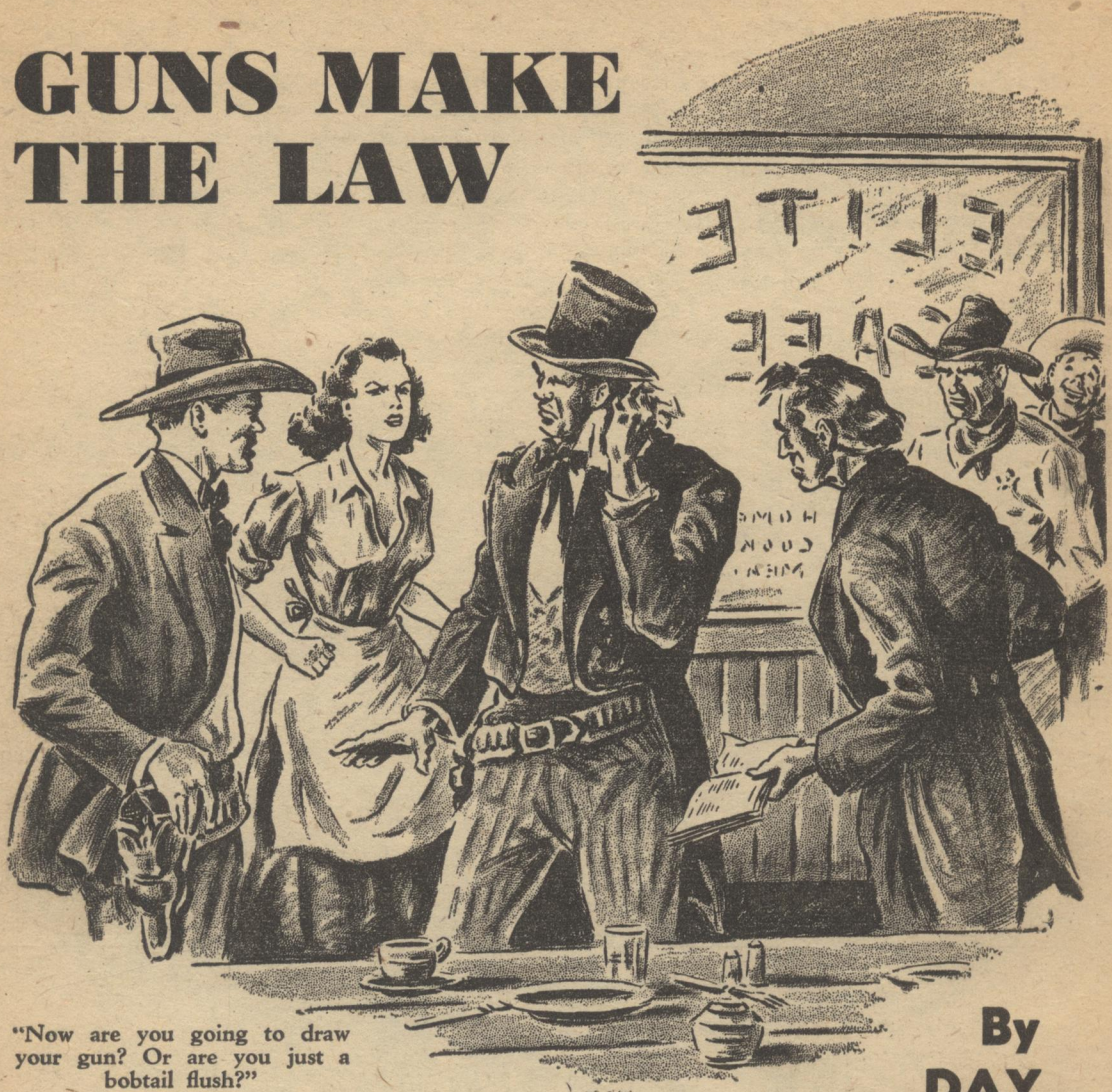
"A tree. One of the cottonwood sprouts your dad planted last year along the creek took hold."

"Oh," Rod said without interest. "I meant anything important happen?"

Deflated, Emma said, "No. Nothing worth talking about."

Only a lawyer with sand in his craw can survive, young Jim Powell found, in a town where . . .

GUNS MAKE THE LAW



"Now are you going to draw your gun? Or are you just a bobtail flush?"

By DAY KEENE

AGUST of hot wind swung the sign in front of the makeshift office over Mike Ginty's livery barn. *Squeak, squeak, squeak.*

Powell watched the sign without interest.

JAMES A. POWELL
ATTORNEY AT LAW

It was a nice sign. For all the good it did him. He'd traveled two thousand miles to find just such a town as Walker. A boom town without a lawyer. His success had seemed assured. That had been a year ago. He knew better now. There was one small stumbling block in his road to success. There was no law in Walker. And, consequently, no business for a lawyer.

True, during his first six months in town, he'd drawn a few wills and writs of reconveyance. He'd even tried a few cases in court. Such as the local court was. King Murphy had given him his business. And he had been glad to get it. Until he'd learned what Murphy's business was. Whereupon he'd punched Murphy's nose. And now the

King's displeasure was centered on him.

If the matter proceeded according to precedent the King's next move would be to order him out of town. Or stay and die. Murphy wouldn't say so in so many words. But that was what it would amount to.

Powell wondered why he didn't feel more emotion than he did. Perhaps because the summer heat had drained him. He wondered why he didn't just pack his bag and leave. Perhaps because he liked Walker, because he knew no town could live and grow and thrive outside the law. He looked across the ankle deep dust of the street to the gleaming window of the Elite Cafe. And then it could be because the youthful Widow Horton made such good cherry pie.

A slim blond youth in his late twenties with the sad brown eyes of a kicked spaniel, Powell clumped down the rickety front stairs whistling *Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy boy?* and jingling his last two gold eagles in his right hand pants pocket. Ginty, as usual, was sitting in his reinforced chair in the cool of the big open entrance to the barn. "Any business this mornin', me b'y?"

Powell built a cigarette enjoying the clean crisp smell of hay and horse flesh emanating from the stable, thrilling to the surge of life in the street as land-seekers, ranchers, riders, soldiers, windmill salesmen, and what not, pounded the high board walks with their boots. "No. Not so far," he answered.

The fat man scowled at the new one-story brick building housing King Murphy's land office. "The blaggard. The dirty blaggard. He's warned everyone off you, Jimmy. They're afraid to come to you. You ought to take him to court."

"Whose court? Judge Harmon's? And what would I charge him with? Being a hog?"

"He's that."

Powell licked his cigarette. "It takes all kinds, Ginty. It says so in the book. But if I'm going to steal for a living, I'll do it with a gun. Not by finding flaws in the title to property owned by widows and orphans and small ranchers who've sweat blood to get a little spread going."

Ginty nodded. "But watch yourself, me b'y. There's talk going the bars that Walker ain't big enough for both you and King. Not since you despoiled his features. And a beautiful punch it was. But the King can do no wrong."

Powell lighted his cigarette. "Oh, I don't know. He might. Even with a judge and a sheriff in his pocket."

Then a tight smile on his lips, he waded the dust of the street to the Elite Cafe and, sitting on a stool at the counter, admired the youthful Widow Horton. Her oval face flushed with the heat of the range, a smear of flour on the pert nose under a pair of gray eyes that set off her night-black hair, her youthful bosom straining against the bodice of her dress, she was still as pretty as Powell remembered her—from breakfast.

MARY HORTON, he decided, deserved more out of life than she'd gotten. Namely a ne'er-do-well husband who'd sunk what little money they had in a few acres of recorded rock. Under the drunken impression he'd purchased the mother-lode. And then departed for a better world, leaving his twenty-year-old widow to earn her living catering to strangers' stomachs. She deserved much more out of life. She deserved a man. Powell was willing to offer himself. The only trouble was so was every other unmarried man in Walker, up to and including King Murphy.

Powell glanced at the table against the wall where the King, flanked as usual by Judge Harmon and Sheriff Tait, was holding court. As Ginty had remarked, it had been a beautiful punch. And the King's nose looked very strange indeed. Spread all over his face. Marring his somewhat unclassical beauty.

Powell much preferred to look at Mary. Or at the menu for that matter. The venison steak with cottage fried potatoes and dandelion greens would be nice. So would the New England boiled dinner with red cabbage. But cherry pie was only a dime a quarter pie. And it behooved an attorney at law with only forty dollars and no clients to be conservative.

He looked up as the black-haired girl asked, "Yes, counselor? And what will it be this noon?"

Mary liked this man. Very much. He was quiet and soft-spoken. A gentleman at all times. If his breath was sometimes fragrant with whiskey it never affected his speech or deportment. More, he had stood up to King Murphy. Something no other man in Walker had ever dared to do. Mary patted her hair, self conscious, and got more

flour on it. Not that Lawyer Powell had ever given her reason to believe he was interested in anything more than her cherry pie. But today his manner was somehow different. She could sense it.

Powell said, "I guess the cherry pie again." He cleared his throat. "And while I'm here, Mrs. Horton—"

"Please call me Mary."

Powell smiled, pleased. "Thank you, Mary, I will. But about your deceased husband's land. Your land now. Those few acres of supposed worthless rock."

The black-haired girl caught at the word. *"Supposed?"*

Powell nodded. "Why yes. I had a letter this morning from—" Sensing someone behind him he looked over his shoulder and seeing King Murphy, shrugged. "But suppose we go into the matter when we have more privacy."

Murphy spat out the tooth pick he was chewing. "Still in town, eh, Powell?"

"Why, yes," the young lawyer admitted. "That is, I seem to be."

The man sitting next to him at the counter sniggered and the back of King Murphy's neck turned red.

"Smart little shyster, ain't you."

Powell was modest. "I have some knowledge of the law."

Judge Harmon hiccuped an undigested portion of the lunch he had just finished drinking. "Smart young lawyers grow on bushes."

A big man, not unhandsome until the accident to his nose, King Murphy settled his gun belt more snugly. "Well, forty-eight hours, shyster."

Powell turned his sad spaniel on him. "I beg your pardon? Forty-eight hours for what?"

King Murphy told him. "To get out of Walker. Or after that, carry a gun."

Powell appealed to Sheriff Tate. "You heard that statement, sheriff. And I demand you arrest this man. For threatening my life. For attempting to breach the peace."

"That," Sheriff Tate said, "is a joke, son. We make and keep our own peace out here. And if I were you and had a hankering to keep on eating cherry pie, I'd follow King's advice. I'd get out of town and stay out."

The fingers of one hand clutching her throat, the youthful Widow Horton watched the three men stride from her cafe, then looked at Powell with stricken eyes, using his given name for the first time. "They mean that, Jimmy. What are you going to do?"

Powell cocked a thumb and sighted along his first finger. "Buy a gun and a box of shells, I guess," he said cheerfully. "But about that other matter, Mary." He rolled the name on his tongue and liked it.

"Yes?"

Powell patted her plump white arm. "No matter what anyone offers you, don't sell that pile of rock. It could be very valuable. To us. We'll talk about it later."

GINTY was still holding down the chair in the door of the livery barn when Powell returned to his office an hour later. As the young lawyer started up the stairs he beckoned him to his chair and whispered, "Visitors up there, me b'ye."

"Oh," Powell said. "I see." He handed the fat man the package he was carrying. "Then mind this for me, Ginty."

King Murphy was sitting in his chair. Sheriff Tait had found his whiskey. Judge Harmon was studying his law books with approving if bleary eyes.

King Murphy began without preamble. "What was that crack you made in the Elite about Horton's *supposed* worthless rock?"

Powell closed the door and leaned against it. "Oh. Did you hear that?"

"You damn right we did," Tait said. "Start talking, shyster. Horton thought he bought a gold mine. You said you got a letter. Who was it from?"

Powell picked a letter from his dusty desk. "Why, as a matter of fact, it was from a mail order company offering to sell me some surplus army saddles."

Tait slapped the letter from his hand. "That ain't the letter you were talking about."

King Murphy ground his rowels down the front of the desk. "Go on. Hit him, Tait."

As big a man as Murphy, Tait punched Powell into a corner of the office so hard he slid down the wall to the floor, landing in a sitting position. He got to his feet again, landed one good punch, and Tait knocked him back into the corner and made certain he stayed there by kicking him while he was down.

"Now start talking," King said. "Someone's made an offer. How much?"

Powell waggled his jaw experimentally. To see if it was broken. It wasn't. "What happens if I don't talk?"

Judge Harmon replaced the volume of Blackstone he was glancing through. "Well, from where I stand, I'd say you get your face kicked in."

Powell patted his cut lip with his handkerchief to stanch the bleeding. "In that case, I'll talk." His smile was wry. "But I'm certain the eminent jurist will uphold my refusal to mention names. As a privileged communication."

Harmon groped through his whiskey fog. "Objection sustained."

King Murphy said, "To hell with names. Horton always swore that pile of rock would make his fortune. So someone's been snooping around and struck a vein. Everyone knows there's gold in the Little Rockies. A lot more than's ever been took out. How much did they offer?"

Powell inched his back against the wall as he considered the question. "Well, let's put it this way. If I were in a position to purchase what Jack Horton owned I'd gladly bid one hundred thousand dollars. And feel fairly confident of doubling my money on the bid."

Judge Harmon took another drink.

Sheriff Tate whistled softly.

King Murphy lowered his boots to the floor. "That's the way it is. A man goes along for years stealing peanuts. With real money right under his nose. Mary Horton has clear title to the land?"

"She has."

Harmon recorked the bottle. "We can take care of that."

Powell got to his feet, unsteadily. "I doubt that very much, Judge. It's one thing to swindle a nester no one gives a hoot about, by bribing the record clerk to shift a property line or by finding a flaw in the original grant. But during my year in Walker it has often occurred to me that Mary Horton is by far the most popular girl in town."

"He's got something there," Tait said, frowning uneasily.

Powell continued. "And any attempt to swindle or coerce Mrs. Horton could well be the Dagonian pillar that will bring the roof of your lawless little empire crashing down around your heads."

King Murphy looked puzzled. He was. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"Samson," Judge Harmon told him. "As I remember my Biblical history, it was at a festival in honor of Dagon, shortly after Delilah gave him a haircut, that Samson committed suicide by showing how strong he was."

King Murphy rolled and lighted a cigarette. "Yeh. I see what you mean." By depressing the butt he pointed the muzzle of his holstered gun at Powell. "All right. You were so danged smart you were going to keep it to yourself. How did you hope to cut in?"

Powell told him. "By marrying Mary Horton."

The King grinned. "I see. Kinda combinin' business and pleasure, eh? Now that ain't a bad idea." He got up and walked to the door. Then turning in the doorway, he added, "And about those forty-eight hours, counselor?"

"Yes?"

"I've cut 'em down to twelve. Be out of town by midnight."

Powell listened to the three pair of booted feet clump down his stairs. Then he followed them to the street. Ginty was still in the doorway. The fat man's eyes widened slightly as Powell claimed his package and unwrapped a new .44 and a box of shells.

"You're going to stay then, me b'ye?"

Powell nodded. "Yes." He fumbled with the gun. "But would you show me how to load this thing?"

Ginty thumbed shells into the cylinder, shaking his head dubiously. "The heroes are all dead, me b'ye. You'd better run."

Powell shook his head. "No." He weighed the gun in his hand to get the feel of it. "It's been more than a thousand years since St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland. Would you say he was dead?"

Ginty conceded the point. "N-no." The fat man sighed. "But it must be small consolation to an Irishman to look down from where ever he is and see a bunch of other Irishmen get drunk on his feast day without him bein' able to taste ary a drop."

Powell stuffed the gun in the waistband of his trousers. "I intend to be at my feast," he said grimly.

EARLY afternoon passed to late and late afternoon to early evening. Still Ginty sat in the doorway of his livery barn with Jimmy Powell just behind him on a bale of

hay. Out of sight in the cool dark interior, watching the Elite Cafe. Still thrilling to the life of Walker's crowded main street.

Shortly before nine o'clock, the last customer finished his evening meal. The front lights of the Elite dimmed and then went out. The gas lights in the kitchen were turned up as Mary Horton put on a heavier apron and attacked a mountain of dirty dishes.

With dark, the walks grew even more crowded. The tinny tinkling of pianos and raucous bursts of laughter replaced the creak of wagon wheels and crack of whips although the dust of the street was still alive with the pound of thudding hoofs as riders and ranchers rode in for an evening of fun.

Mary, I love you, Powell thought. He loved Walker, too. It was raw. It was crude. It was new. It was currently dominated by one man. But at heart it was basically sound. The pivot point of an empire. Boston must have looked a great deal like this the night of its famous tea party. New beginnings bred strenuous times.

Then in the crowd on the opposite walk Powell spotted King Murphy. And his couriers. And the King had dressed for the occasion. He was wearing a double-breasted black frock coat and a stovepipe hat in place of his dusty sombrero.

No single one of the three men were sober. The King was drunk with power. Tait and Harmon were sodden with whiskey. They stopped in front of the Elite Cafe and looked across the street at the dark windows over the still squeaking sign. King said something at which they all laughed. Then he turned and entered the Elite.

Powell got up from his bale of hay.

"I wish I were younger, me b'ye," Ginty called through the night after him. "And only half so fat."

Powell nodded absently and waded the dust of the street, the hard barrel of the .44 bruising his groin. This was something they hadn't taught him at law school. He had no precedent to go by. No authority to quote. Once he was inside the door, he would be on his own.

Then he was in the semi-darkness of the restaurant, hearing Mary protest, "You must be out of your mind, Mr. Murphy. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in Montana."

"We'll have none of that now," Tait said. "No temper, please. This is a solemn occasion. We have the license all legal. And Judge Harmon is ready to officiate."

Murphy attempted to take Mary's hand and she kicked him in the shin as Judge Harmon cleared his throat and intoned:

"Dearly beloved, we are assembled here in the presence of God, to join this man and woman in holy matrimony."

Mary's temper boiled over. "You can stop right there. Just what do you blankety-blanks think you're doing? If the men in Walker knew what you're trying to do to me, they'd lynch you."

King Murphy patted the hand he'd caught. "But they won't know, my dear. Until after we're married. And a wife can't testify against her husband. Go on, Judge."

Harmon hiccuped, continued, "King Murphy, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wife?"

"I sure will," Murphy said, "Now skip the rest of it until you come down to where you ask her." His fingers bit into the youthful widow Horton's arm. "And mind you say yes when he asks you."

Mary began to cry. "What is it you want of me?"

"A mere matter of property," Murphy said.

Powell turned on and lighted one of the big gas burners in the front of the cafe. "Your honor, I object. In fact I object most strenuously."

King Murphy dropped Mary's hand. "I told you to get out of town or get a gun!"

Powell allowed his coat to drape open, exposing the butt of the gun he'd purchased. "I have a gun." He didn't raise his voice but it somehow filled the cafe. "And while I may be inept in its use, I can promise you this much, King. Once you draw your gun, I'll draw mine. And you'd better kill me with your first shot. Because if you don't I'm going to keep on shooting until my gun is empty. And if you aren't dead by then I'm going to beat in your brains with the butt."

Sheriff Tait said, sharply, "He's bluffing. Kill him and get it over, King. Before that light attracts someone."

He spoke too late. A half dozen curious faces were already pressed to the glass. Then outside the cafe a man shouted, "Hey. Powell's tangling with the King again. Over Mary Horton this time."

Without looking away from Murphy,

Powell said coldly, "And if I were you, Sheriff Tait, I'd walk very softly from here on. According to Paragraph three of Article eight, Subdivision A of the state criminal code, 'Any one who shall attempt or assist in an attempt to coerce or force or frighten any unmarried female into an unwilling marriage shall be liable to not less than ten and not more than twenty years imprisonment."

The man who had called out before, called again. "Lord almighty, fellows. Judge Harmon and Sheriff Tait are a-trying to force Mary Horton into marrying King."

Tait swallowed hard. "Is what he said the law, Judge?"

Harmon drank from his pocket bottle. "Well, I haven't kept up with the statutes for the last few years, but—" He looked resentfully at King Murphy. "But even ten years is a long time."

Tait swore at King. "Well, damn it, draw. Kill the young rooster and get us out of this. This was your idea."

THE watching men trickled in. Grim-faced. Taking up positions along the counter and the wall. Out of the way of gunfire. Leaving the younger lawyer and King Murphy standing in the middle of a narrow line filled with agonized silence.

Murphy licked his lips. "No. It was his idea. I said to him, "All right. You're so danged smart you were going to keep it to yourself. How did you hope to cut in?' And Powell said, 'By marrying Mary Horton.' "

Powell nodded. "That's right. That's just what I said. Only I aimed to court, not force her. Now are you going to draw your gun? Or are you just a bobtail flush?"

The silence grew until it was a tangible substance, filling the cafe, making breathing difficult. Great drops of sweat beaded on King Murphy's forehead, dripped crookedly from his mashed nose. King tried to force his hand to his gun butt and his screaming muscles refused to obey. Powell meant exactly what he said. Once a gun was drawn he meant to kill or be killed. The King glanced sideways at Tait and Harmon and knew he could expect no help from them. Not with a dozen men watching.

He made one last attempt to draw his gun, and couldn't. It was almost as much of an effort for him to speak. "What do you want of me, Powell?"

"Bobtailed, egaddy," one of the watchers swore. "Well, that finishes the King in Walker. Effen I'd known he was jist a blowhard, I'd still a had my spread."

Powell answered King Murphy's question. "Let one of the boys take your gun." A half dozen eager hands reached for it. "Now you and your crooked judge and sheriff get on your horses and ride."

A rumble of approval greeted the pronouncement.

"Fair enough."

"Better'n they deserve."

"But my business," King Murphy bleated.

Powell shook his head. "You haven't any. Any land transactions will be handled legally from now on. And we'll elect a new judge and sheriff in the morning."

Tait was the first to break. "Of all the yellow-bellied cowards!" He strode toward the front door. "Well, that seems to cash in my hand."

Judge Harmon tipped his hat to Powell. "My congratulations, counselor. An able defense well presented." Then followed Sheriff Tait.

King Murphy followed Harmon, slowly. Planting one foot before he could move the other, the watching men hooting and catcalling now.

Then Mary was in Jimmy's arms. And they felt right and natural around her. "You planned it like this," she accused.

Powell mopped his own forehead. But managed somehow to grin. "That's right."

Mary protested, "But why did King want my property? Is it really worth something, Jimmy?"

"Well, no. Not exactly," he admitted. "As far as I know it's still just a pile of rock."

The black-haired girl persisted. "But then why did you tell King Murphy you hoped to cut in by marrying me? What—"

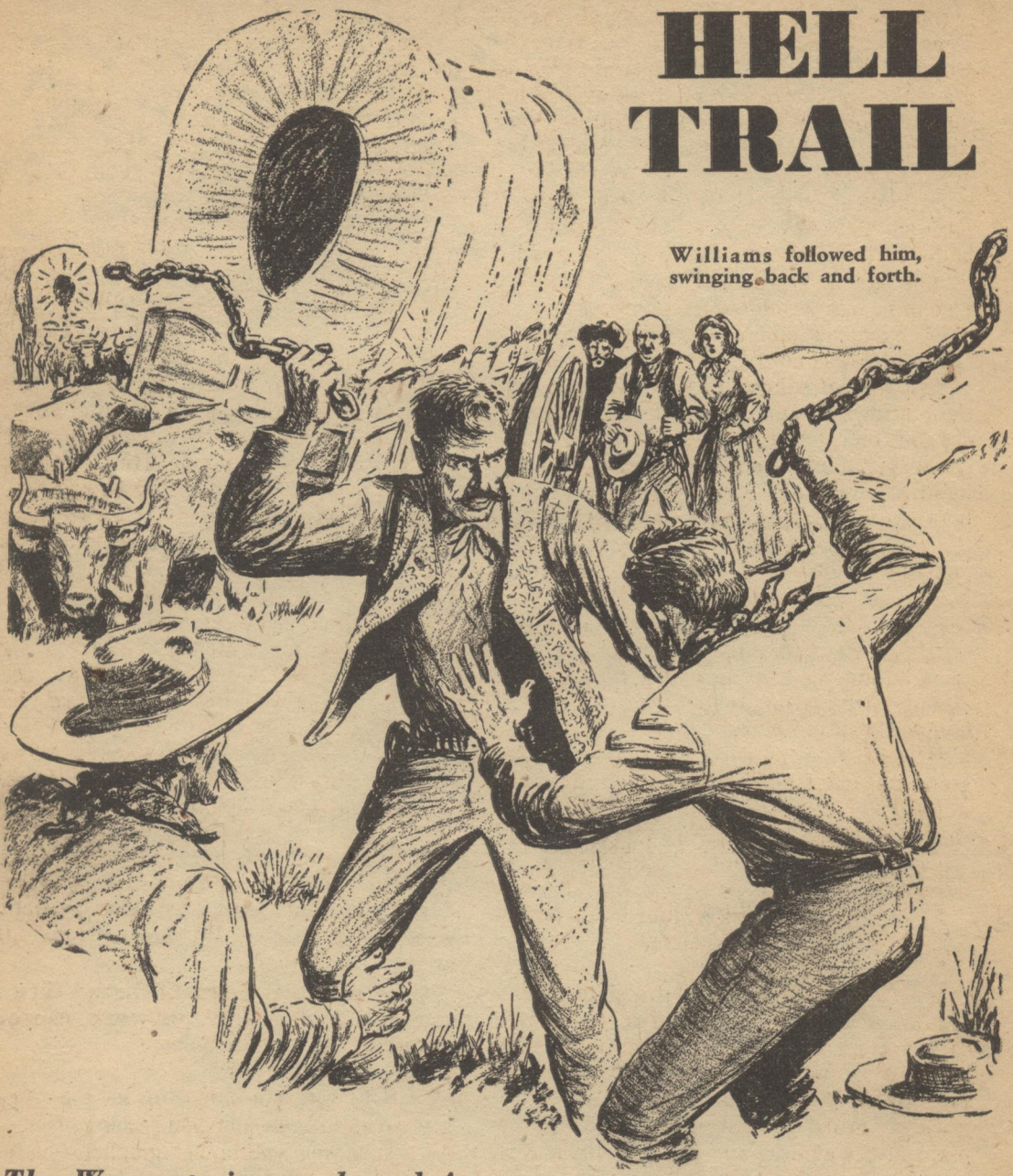
The youthful widow Horton stuck there. If her land was just a pile of rock it couldn't be her property that Attorney Powell wanted. And surely it couldn't be just her cherry pie he liked. She hoped. And suddenly found herself blushing.

Jimmy held her tighter. "What are you blushing about?"

Mary wrinkled her nose at him. "Maybe some day I'll tell you."

Then she kissed him.

BLAZERS OF THE HELL TRAIL



Williams followed him, swinging back and forth.

The Wagon train was bound for Deadwood . . . by way of hell!

By NOEL M. LOOMIS

SILENTLY and motionlessly Gene Hawkins watched the dawn break in the direction of Fort Pierre. He was bent low over his horse's withers, and the saddle-horn was hard in his stomach, but still he did not straighten up. It would be another hot day—as were most August days in Dakotah Territory.

The oxen would get heated up and quit pulling by nine o'clock, and the train would come to a halt somewhere out on the scorched red prairie. Then he would have to graze the bulls until two or three o'clock before he could get a few hours of intermittent sleep in a lurching trail-wagon behind ten yokes of oxen.

He sighed very quietly. A night-herder's job wasn't the best work in the West, but he had taken it of his own free will. He yawned soundlessly and refrained from rubbing his eyes, for that would be movement, and his only cover was a scrawny cedar tree whose twisted tip was no higher than his big hat.

The gray streak widened in the east, and the blackness began to thin out in the breaks around him. The Cheyenne River below threw back dull reflections of light. The two hundred oxen that he had aroused an hour before were spread out on the prairie across the stream to the southeast, grazing quietly, and in a shallow swale that led down to the stream on the other side were the thirty wagons of the freighter-train, arranged in a rough interlocked circle. A thin mist was rising above the canvas tops, and small dark oblongs among the wagons showed drivers still wrapped in blankets.

He looked to the left. On a little piece of ground a few feet higher than the rest, the wagon of Alice Barber was still hidden by the mist. Gene turned finally and scanned the country behind him. Then he sat up straight.

Bob Groveland, below him, breathed in audible relief. "No Indians?"

"No Indians," said Gene.

Bob had the nasal voice of a sixteen-year-old boy who had been raised in the saddle. "I don't see why you're so cautions. This is eighteen seventy-seven. The Sioux have been quiet for two years."

Gene turned his horse. "It isn't the Indians I'm watching for. It's white outlaws wearing warbonnets who cause most of the trouble."

His horse pivoted on its hind legs. It went down three steps, and Gene sat level with the boy. "Did you hear voices?" he asked.

"I thought once I did—from down there in the camp. But I haven't seen any light."

"The wind is wrong." Gene watched his horse's ears while the animal picked its way down a gulley in the red cliff.

"How did you get to know so much about Indians and stuff?" asked Bob.

"My dad was a freighter on the four-hundred-mile trail from Yale to the Cariboo gold field in British Columbia, back in eighteen sixty-one. I was only five then, but when he was home he told us all about it—how to keep watch, everything to look for, including two-legged coyotes."

"Where's your dad now?"

"He was driving a stage out of Virginia City, Montana, a couple of years ago, and ran into some hot-lead artists." Gene stopped abruptly. "Isn't that a wagon moving?"

They listened for an instant. The creak of a wagon came plainly. Gene pushed his horse on down through the cut and stopped at the edge of the river, staring at the wagons. None was moving. He frowned and glanced down at the sluggishly flowing water, trying to place the sound. Then he looked to the left, to the little spot of high ground where Alice's wagon should be. The mist had not cleared that spot yet.

The sounds came stronger.

He looked up, puzzled. "That's a light wagon and it's moving fast. That means horses—not bulls. But why should Alice be pulling out now?"

He sent his horse into the roily current. The animal walked off into deep water and swam across the middle, then got footing. They came out wet. Gene watched ahead, keen-eyed under his big hat, as he trotted the horse toward the high spot of ground.

A wagon broke out of the mist, headed for the river, pulled by four horses, with Alice at the reins.

Gene stood up in his stirrups. Then he spurred in front of the lead-team, caught a bridlering and turned them.

ALICE was standing up in the wagon when he rode alongside. Her brown eyes were snapping within her gingham sunbonnet. "Gene Hawkins, what do you mean, stopping my team like that?"

He leaned half out of the saddle and put a lean brown hand on the edge of the wagon-box. "Where are you going so early in the morning?"

"I'm getting a start, so I won't have to eat dust all day. Do you find any fault with that?"

Gene said softly. "No, I can't say I do, Alice. What I don't understand is why you

decided to do it this particular morning."

"Mr. Williams told me to."

A suave voice came from beyond the off front wheel. "I told Miss Barber," said Dude Williams, "that once we're across the Cheyenne we don't have to worry so much about the Indians, and she can pull out in front."

Dude Williams came into the open. He was a tall man with a flat-topped hat; he had heavy black whiskers, which he kept shaved; he wore a flowered vest over a red flannel shirt, tight green trousers tied under his boots, and a heavily loaded cartridge-belt with a revolver on his right thigh. Now he smiled. "You have no objection to sparing Miss Barber the dust of our train, do you?"

"No," said Gene. "I figure it should have been done twelve days ago, back at Fort Pierre."

The patronizing smile left Williams' face and was replaced by coldness. "Say your piece, Hawkins."

Alice spoke up. "Mr. Williams is only trying to help me, Gene."

Under the floppy brim of his hat, Gene Hawkins turned his eyes on her slowly. "What have you done with the corn?" he asked.

"It's in the wagon, of course."

"When it gets wet," Gene said pointedly, "it will mould—and when your horses start eating mouldy corn, you'll start walking."

"I've been crossing the Cheyenne for years," said Williams, "and it's never over two feet deep unless it rains."

Gene fixed his gaze on Williams. "Then it must have rained up in the hills last night. I've just come across it—and my horse swam."

"Obviously," said Williams, "you don't know the Cheyenne."

Bob's mutter came to Gene's ear. "He's wearin' thin."

But Gene said, "If *you* know the river, then you must know it's up. It sure doesn't run muddy like that when it's low."

Alice, watching them both, looked concerned. She turned to Williams. "He does have a right to ask. He bought this corn with the money you advanced him at Fort Pierre."

Williams glared at Gene. "You aren't married to Miss Barber?" he asked coldly.

Gene wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "No," he said, in a quiet voice.

"I don't think I ever understood why you were so interested in getting Miss Barber to Deadwood," Williams said.

"Because I'm the one who persuaded Bill Barber to go back to Deadwood, so in a way it was my fault he was ambushed this side of Yankton. He had all the money and that was taken by whoever killed him, so I figured it was up to me. Your train was the first one out and I asked you for a job. We had to have corn to get these horses to Deadwood."

"And I"—Williams addressed Alice—"saw fit to help you out because I was once a partner of your father."

"You didn't give us anything," said Gene. "I'm workin' for every dollar you promised me."

Williams eyed him levelly. "Why did you keep on to Deadwood after Barber was killed? Why didn't you go back to Winnipeg? Your horses would have brought enough for transportation."

"We aren't the goin'-back kind," said Gene ominously.

But Alice broke in. "There's no use keeping it a secret," she said. "If Mr. Williams was a partner of my father's it won't hurt for him to know."

"You better think twice before you tell this man anything," Gene warned. "He claims he was a partner of your father, but that's no proof—and it wouldn't mean anything anyway."

Alice's brown eyes flared. "First you turn my team—and now you're telling me what I can say."

Gene looked at her and swallowed. "If you've got mind to speak your piece, there's not much I can do."

She glared at him indignantly and then turned to Williams. "Just before father was called back by mother's illness last spring, he found a rich lode in the Deadwood country. He said there were so many robbers that he didn't even file a claim on it, and when he left he covered it up. Then after mother died we persuaded him to go back and open it again."

"I heard rumors of that lode," Williams said. "But do you think you can find the mine yourself?"

"He told me how," Alice answered.

Gene took a deep breath. He watched Williams' black eyes come up to his; Wil-

liams' lids were half-closed. Williams said, "Hawkins, what gave you the idea that Indians aren't bad between the Missouri and the Cheyenne? They got Miss Barber's father, didn't they?"

Gene said squarely, "I went to give her father some help with the horses that morning, and I saw the killer ride off over a hill. He wore a Sioux head-dress—but he rode his horse straight up like a white."

He was well satisfied with the change that came over Williams. The man stiffened, and his eyes turned icy cold. "Out here," he said harshly, "men have been known to die from talkin' too much—and you're just a kid."

"I know what I'm sayin' and I'm ready to back it up," said Gene.

They glared at each other for a moment. Alice looked bewildered. Then Williams said without taking his eyes from Gene's, "Bob, bring me that horse."

The younger boy rode slowly around the four-horse team. He dismounted. Williams stepped easily into the saddle and rode out to his right. He rode into the stream. The water came to the horse's knees. Williams turned to the left, then to the right, and finally across. He turned and splashed back over the same route. He rode straight up to Gene and said, "Boy, my stirrups are dry."

Gene swallowed hard. He looked at Alice. She said, "I think you'd best mind your own business after this."

Gene's jaws tightened. He wheeled his horse and rode among the freight-wagons. "Roll out," he called. "Bulls in the corral!"

THE drivers got up, two or three at a time, yawning. Gene saw Alice's wagon follow the course laid out by Williams. He turned his horse to the prairie to start the bulls toward the wagons. A moment later Bob Groveland was behind him.

"What do you think now?" asked Gene.

"Well"—Bob was doubtful—"it looks like you spoke up too fast, maybe—but I got a hunch he never intended to show her how to cross the river without getting that corn wet."

"That makes two of us with the same hunch," said Gene. "The wagon wasn't even headed in the right direction."

"Why would he want to get the corn wet, though?"

They were rounding the herd of bulls. "Hi-yup," called Gene, and waved his arms. The bulls started to drift in toward camp. "Bulls take three or four weeks to go from Deadwood to Fort Pierre," he said then, "and they do it on grass. Horses are faster but you've got to feed them corn. That's why Williams hauls corn in one of the trail-wagons for his three horses. So what if Alice's corn gets wet and mouldy? You can't feed corn like that, so he could get on Alice's good side by giving her some of his own, and maybe he could persuade her to tell him where the lode is—or maybe take him into partnership."

"Where would that leave you? Aren't you fixin' to marry Alice?"

"I don't know exactly where that does leave me. Did you see that look in his eyes when I told him I'd seen the killer run away?"

"Do you suppose he had anything to do with that?"

"That's a question I'd like to know the answer to. But the gold was taken and the wallet left. . . . You can't tell one gold piece from another."

"They made it across the river all right," Bob noted. "Dude Williams drove for her."'

"It's going to be a hot day," said Gene, looking toward Fort Pierre. "The sun is going to come up gray."

The drivers came to pick out their bulls. Gene and Bob kept pressing the herd from the rear. A man would get two bulls by the halter, lead them into place at the long log-chain that extended from the tongue of his lead-wagon, lift the yoke over their heads, and go back for another pair. The cook was making coffee in a tin bucket, and Gene watched across the river. Alice had stopped her outfit on the high ground and was making coffee over a small fire.

Gene drew a deep breath. He'd always gone back to drink her coffee as soon as they got the bulls yoked up. Maybe he just imagined it, but Alice's coffee seemed to taste better than the cook's. But from now on it would be different. She'd be pulling out ahead as soon as the first ox-team, got yoked up, for the men didn't eat breakfast until the mid-morning halt. And Gene would still be herding the last few bulls when the first team crossed the river.

Gene watched Dude Williams, on his own tall bay saddlehorse, splash across the creek and ride up to Alice's fire. They talked a

moment, and then Alice handed him a cup. Gene snorted aloud.

Preacher Zabel was hi-yupping his wheel-pair into place. The oxen all along the big chain were standing placidly. The preacher picked up a long blacksnake whip from the tailboard. He went to the near side of the wheel-team and began a long, singing, "Hi-yup! Hi-yup! Hi-yup!" His whip rolled out over the heads of the bulls and ended in a crack like a gunshot. The Preacher was an artist with the whip.

The bulls leaned against the yokes. The chain came off the ground. One bull had a hind leg on the wrong side. The Preacher put his foot on the chain and punched the bull in the flank until the bull raised his leg and got it on the right side. The whip cracked; the chain tautened. The Preacher crooned to them. He'd never talk like most of the bullwhackers. "How'd you like to wake up with somebody swearing at you?" he'd ask.

The big lead-wagon moved. The first pair of the ten-yoke team was already in the water. The smaller swing-wagon followed the lead-wagon, and the still smaller trail-wagon lurched forward as the slack was taken up. The Preacher was singing and cracking his whip over the heads of the leaders. The three wagons rolled into the water, the four-and-a-half-inch iron tires gritting on the sand. The bulls were headed partly downstream to follow the path of Alice's wagon.

Gene saw Alice climb into the seat of her wagon, with Dude Williams helping her. Gene pulled the floppy brim of his hat lower over his eyes and said, "Shorty, can't you get your bulls in front of your wagons?"

Shorty LeBlanc was a bald-headed, nervous man who couldn't talk bull-language too well. He looked up at the impatience in Gene's voice, but he saw where Gene was looking and kept still. Alice was out ahead now, and Dude Williams was riding alongside her. The Preacher was across the river and the other teams were crowding in behind him. Shorty got his last pair yoked up and unlimbered his whip.

Bob rode by the cook's fire and took the big tin cup of coffee the man held out.

"Last call," the cook said.

Gene looked at him. "I'm not hungry." He rode by.

The cook dumped the rest of the coffee, went to rinse the pot in the river.

By the time the big rear wheels of Shorty's trail-wagon rose dripping from the red water on the other side, the ten teams were scattered over the mile-wide right-of-way they had been following ever since they had left Fort Pierre, each driver trying to keep out of the others' dust.

Gene rode past them and caught up with Alice. Williams had dropped back. Riding alongside, Gene put a hand on the wagon-seat. "I hope you're not forgetting me," he said.

"I couldn't—very well," she said. "I would have saved you some coffee, but Mr. Williams suggested I'd better get out ahead before the teams got lined out."

Gene nodded. "I know how it is. . . . Maybe you'll save me some coffee at supper."

"Of course," she said. Her brown eyes were soft on him. "But I do think you owe Mr. Williams an apology."

"That," said Gene, "constitutes a difference of opinion. I'll see you at noon, maybe."

He wheeled and rode to the left. The Preacher's wagons were always on the windward side of the lane. Gene tied his horse to the tailboard of the third wagon. Bob's horse was already trailing. Gene climbed inside. Bob was sitting on a tow-sack of shelled corn, taking off his boots. The front half of the wagon was filled with hogsheads of crackers in double tiers, jammed in place by wooden crates of canned tomatoes, which in turn were lashed forward by ropes stretched between the sideboards. In the back half of the wagon was the corn for the horses and a pile of dusty sacks for the two herders to sleep on.

Bob rolled up in his blanket and burrowed down into the pile of sacks. Gene, with his back braced in a corner of the wagon, was slowly taking off his right boot when a voice came from the rear. Dude Williams' saturnine face appeared in the opening formed by the string in the canvas.

"I figger somebody better tell you," he said to Gene, "I hired you to herd my bulls—not to court Miss Barber."

Gene looked up. He began to feel tight. "You got any complaints about the way I'm taking care of your bulls?"

Williams' eyes narrowed under the flat black hat.

"Not so far."

Gene tossed his big hat onto the corn-

sacks. He turned and looked straight at Williams. "Maybe you don't like the way I look out for Miss Barber."

Williams' face reddened darkly. "That is up to Miss Barber—but when you interfere between her and me as needlessly as you did this morning, that's *my* business."

"I made it mine," Gene said over the rumble of the wagon.

Williams' eyes were black slits. "Maybe you don't aim to get to Deadwood in one piece."

Gene raised his head and listened. Then he bent over to take off his other boot. "That right front wheel is still squeaking," he said. "You better have it tightened up or this wagon won't get to Centennial Prairie."

He heard Williams' teeth click together but he didn't look up. Then the rear wheel slid off of a rock and pitched Gene head-first into Bob's stomach. When he got up, Williams was gone.

Bob said in a low voice, "I bet you'd stick your head in a Dakotah's wigwam, wouldn't you?"

"If I did," said Gene, settling into his pile of sacks, "I'd get better coffee than Williams' cook can make. . . ."

THE teams quit pulling at nine-thirty, and the cessation of movement awakened them. They were into their boots and out of the wagon in seconds. The whackers were already unyoking. Gene and Bob got the herd together and let them spread out over the prairie to graze.

"You get your breakfast first," said Gene. "I want to be good and hungry."

"*I* am already," Bob said as he wheeled toward the cookfire.

Gene sat his horse, half-dozing in the full burning heat of the August sun. Then he heard his name. Alice was coming across the prairie on foot, with the wind billowing out her long gray dress. He pressed forward to meet her. "I made some biscuits," she said, holding up a small tin kettle. "They're hot—and I put sugar in between them, the way you like them."

He slid off the horse. She pushed her sunbonnet back on her neck to look up at him. He took in her smooth face, her glossy black hair, her brown eyes. He said, "You look better to me every day."

She seemed about to melt into his arms, but she didn't. "You'll have to prove you're a man," she said, "by apologizing to Mr. Williams."

He looked at her, and a smile played about his thin lips. "Mr. Williams," he said, "will try to make me do that, himself. Don't you worry your sweet head—"

"Hawkins!" Williams came galloping up on the tall bay. "Don't let those bulls spread out to the west there."

Gene looked. "You want 'em to graze?" he asked.

"Certainly, but—"

"You've got two hundred head, and the grass is thin. You have to let 'em spread out."

He looked at Williams' glowering face. Then he swung into the saddle with the kettle in his right hand. "See you later," he said to Alice. "Put the coffee on after a while."

Nevertheless, he didn't feel good about it. Alice thought he should apologize to Dude Williams, and under the circumstances that was going to be hard. It would be easier if Williams would do something to show himself up for what he was. . . .

That evening they drove by moonlight and reached the North Fork of the Cheyenne River. Gene and Bob went on duty as usual. For the next day and a half they followed the North Fork but didn't cross it. Then the train broke away from the river and headed due west for Deadwood.

The Black Hills were like a heavy storm-cloud low in the western sky. Deadwood lay—so the Preacher said—in a deep pocket in the very middle, and they could not go straight through but would have to turn northwest and skirt the Hills to a plateau known as Centennial Prairie and a boom-town called Crook City, which was, the Preacher said, aptly named. Then they would get an early-morning start, would go up over the mountain, down into the deep canyon where Deadwood was staked out; they would unload and get back to the Prairie that same night, for it was a very narrow canyon and there just wasn't room for two hundred bulls in it overnight.

The right front wheel of the Preacher's trail-wagon squeaked louder every day as the spokes got looser in the felloes. The Preacher was worried. "He won't let me fix it," he told Gene, "because you told him about it. That Williams is a tough customer.

I wouldn't cross him if I was you, Gene."

"If he calls your number," said Gene, "I reckon you have no choice."

"He's aiming at something," said Shorty LeBlanc. "I can tell by the way he looks at you."

Gene shrugged. "He won't do anything until we get to Centennial Prairie. He needs me too much now."

"When we hit the Prairie, you better hightail it on to Deadwood."

"I don't know the way," said Gene. "I might get lost."

They ran into rain the next day—a blinding storm that swept down from the Hills. It lasted only a couple of hours, but the canvas on the Preacher's trail-wagon was old and rotten and leaked water like a collander. Gene and Bob pulled their slickers over them. The Preacher's swing wagon mired down in the mud and he tied Shorty's string of bulls onto his own to pull the wagons through. His wagon-chain broke twice before they got out—both times close to the lead-wagon—and the Preacher tossed the short ends into the trail-wagon where the herders were trying to sleep.

Then the train was up on the flat known as the Prairie, with low mountains all around them except on the north side. Williams got the wagons settled down about dark and then rode alone into Crook City.

The whackers were grumbling about Williams. "He couldn't wait till tomorrow night to do his celebratin'," said Shorty, "but he wouldn't give anybody else enough money to buy a drink."

"You can make up for it tomorrow night," said the Preacher. "It won't be long."

Gene and Bob took the bulls out to graze.

"I reckon you was wrong about Williams," said Bob. "He hasn't bothered you since we left the Cheyenne."

"If he and I both get to Deadwood together, I'll come clean," said Gene, "and admit I talked too much. But tonight may be a long night. You keep an eye on these bulls while I go keep an eye on Alice Barber."

"You're headin' for trouble. Williams figures she's his property."

"That," said Gene decisively, "is one man's opinion. I got a different one."

Alice was smiling as she made a fire in the dark. The bright red flames climbed up through the small teepee of brush and twigs. "We're almost there," she said. "One more day—just think, I'll be walking the same streets dad walked."

Gene frowned a little. "You won't find Deadwood any place for a lady. I know these gold-towns." He put a hand on her slim forearm. "Have you told Williams how to find the mine?"

She backed away from him. "I owe you a lot, Gene Hawkins, but I wish to goodness you wouldn't be so suspicious of Mr. Williams. He's been kind to me—and I still think if you're the man you should be, you'd apologize to him."

He bent down to fan the fire with his hat to avoid the disdain in her eyes. "Maybe," he said when the fire blazed up, "Mr. Williams is fixing to save me that trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. It's late. You make some biscuits and put on the coffee." He tried to re-establish the warm feeling between them with a chuckle. "I don't doubt Mr. Williams' generosity—but I'd as soon have something under my belt when he comes back from Crook City.

BUT Williams did not return that night. Gene Hawkins, watching the bulls, also kept an eye on Alice Barber's wagon. The flickering yellow lights of Crook City burned all night in the distance. The bulls lay down to sleep about midnight, but an hour before dawn, by the stars, Gene roused them to graze. And just before the first light streak in the east, he rode down into camp and sang out, "Roll out. Bulls in the corral!"

He went on though camp in the darkness to see that Alice found her horses and got them harnessed. He held up the wagon-tongue while she snapped the breaststraps into the harness-ring. "You see," she said, "you *were* wrong about Mr. Williams."

He knew then by the tight set of her mouth that it was an important point with her. He looked back at the camp. The cook's fire was burning vigorously. Williams was not to be seen. "If I'm wrong," Gene said finally, "I'll do what's right." But he added stubbornly as he rode off. "We're not in Deadwood yet."

Williams was not long in appearing. As the Preacher got his ten yoke of oxen lined out and gulped a tincup full of scalding coffee, Williams appeared, a black and somber figure out of the night. He rode

straight to Alice Barber's wagon, and Gene watched him, tense and waiting. Williams talked to her for a few moments and then rode into the freighter-camp.

The Preacher's team by that time was strung out on the road to Deadwood, and the broad iron tires of the wagons were striking sparks, for the country was filled with stones, big and little. Shorty LeBlanc was just hooking-up his wheel-bulls when Williams rode into the light of the cook's fire.

"Hawkins, put the rest of my corn in Miss Barber's wagon. We'll need it when we go to look for the mine."

Gene studied him for a moment. Williams' face was flushed and his tongue was thick, but his eyes were as hard as arrowheads. Gene was tight inside; he didn't answer, but turned away to the Preacher's trail-wagon.

Bob came up behind him. "We haven't got much corn left," he said.

Gene's voice was troubled. "That's Williams' lookout," he said absently. Then he added, "Maybe he aims to send the Preacher back to Fort Pierre with the train while he hunts gold. If he keeps the horses, it looks like you'll be herdin' bulls on foot."

"Where will you be?"

"That's a little hard to answer, right now—but I'll probably be checking up on Mr. Williams—if he's still around."

They reached the lurching trail-wagon. The right front wheel rattled steadily as the loose spokes shifted in the felloes. Gene swung from the horse onto the tailboard and climbed inside. "There's only a little over three sacks left," he noted as he steadied himself by a canvas-hoop while the wagon lurched over the rocks. "I'll hand 'em out to you and you take 'em to Miss Barber's wagon."

"Aren't you going to take them yourself?"

Gene's eyes were a little clouded as he answered. "No, I reckon I'll stay away until we get to Deadwood anyway. Alice has made her choice. There isn't much I can do." He frowned and shook his head. "There really isn't *anything* I can do," he said slowly.

The Preacher's whip was cracking up ahead. Gene braced his legs against the pitching of the wagon. He bent over and got his hands under a sack of corn. The right front wheel hit a big rock and went up in the air. It poised there for a moment. Then the bulls dug in. The wheel went over the top of the rock and came down hard. The spokes crackled as they broke.

Gene grabbed for something to maintain his balance. He came up with a broken piece of wagon chain, but by that time the Preacher had stopped the bulls. Three cases of tomatoes, piled high to make up the trail-wagon's load, had slid off the top, had gone through the rotten canvas and onto the ground, and a hogshead of crackers had followed them, had landed on one edge and split open, cascading flecks of white over the cases of canned goods.

Gene's left leg was pinned under two sacks of corn. He got it loose. Then he heard thundering hoofs. He stood up. Dude

Williams was riding down on the the trail-wagon. Gene picked up the short piece of chain and waited.

Dude Williams' face was as black as his flat-topped hat. "What are you trying to do?"

Gene's jaw tightened. "Trying to keep my feet," he said, hefting the chain.

Gene started to climb out. Williams got abruptly down from his horse and began to shovel handfuls of crackers back into the broken hogshead. Gene stared for a moment. He strode over to the hogshead and took a look. He spun the barrel away from Williams and watched it scatter crackers over the ground. He turned to Williams.

The black-hatted man had his gun on Gene, but Gene asked harshly, "Why have you got an Indian warbonnet hidden in that barrel?"

Williams glanced at the circle of bull-whackers already gathered around him. "I was keepin' it for a souvenir," he said. "Any objection?"

(Please continue on page 111)

SON of the OWLHOOT

Whitey wouldn't say where he'd been before he came to the Rafter J, but Lafe Pirie figured he could point out the hangtree the kid was heading for . . .

By DENNISON RUST

IT WAS like white-whiskered Sam Pirie, owner of the Rafter J, to spot that thin, gaunted look on the kid's face. The youngster's horse was a sweat-stained, quarter-bred Morgan; the dust covered even the blond stubble on the rider's square, defiant jaw.

"Tell cooky I said for him to iron the wrinkles outa your belly," the Old Man said. And, after the kid came back, "Say, Whitey, you ever help to take a herd up the trail?"

"Been spittin' trail-dust since I was a milker, Mr. Pirie. You got a job. . . ?"

The kid was hired.

Lafe, the Old Man's son, was six-foot three of hide, hair, muscle and general orneriness. "What in hell you want to hire that renegade for?" he asked his dad. "He's got owlhoot wrote all over him. As if we didn't have enough trouble with Pony Balch and his rustlers. Now—"

"Shut up!" bellowed old Sam. "I hired that tow-headed maverick. He'll make a hand, and we're short. I'm still runnin' this ranch."

Lafe's lips twisted. "Yo're gettin' soft in the head, Pop," he growled.

Somehow, none of the boys seemed to cotton to young Whitey. They'd rounded up the trail herd and were holding the cattle on the North bench. The kid had done his work and minded his own business. Yet, there was something about him that said, "Keep off."

And he didn't seem any more friendly after news came that U.S. Deputy Marshal Buzz Hornsby, who had cleaned up the worst rustler gang in Montana, was coming down to take care of Pony Balch and his outfit.

After that Whitey seemed more than ever to slink into the shadows. But the boys were feeling too good to notice, for they'd been promised a night in town before they started the drive.

"Ain't you goin' with us, kid?" Lafe asked Whitey.

"No," the youngster said. "I—I played poker with Pete Dunn. You detailed him to stay here to look after the stock. I lost, so I stay instead."

Lafe nodded, and went on with his shaving. There wasn't much doubt in anybody's mind but what the kid hadn't liked the sound of Marshal Hornsby's being so close. . . .

In town, Lafe had a couple of drinks, at the Occidental, then mounted his horse and hit back for camp. It was about moon-rise when he got there. From the bench he looked down to the bedded herd.

Down there a shadowed group of horsemen, the moonlight playing on the butt-plates of their saddle-guns, were talking with the kid. But by the time Lafe had ridden down, the strangers were gone and the kid was alone.

"Had some comp'ny, eh?" observed Lafe easily. "Me, I got sorta worried that Pony Balch might drop by, so I high-tailed it back."

The kid was just lighting a cigarette, and he held the match so long that it burned his fingers. "Yeah—some gents who said they'd chased Pony Balch—all the way from Idaho. They—"

The kid didn't say anything more, for Lafe was out of his saddle and reaching for a twisted piece of paper on the ground. . . .

Lafe sat up all that night, his carbine across his knees and the wrinkled bit of paper in his pocket. It was a crudely scrawled

note: *"Kid—we'll be down tomorrow night. Meet us. P."*

Lafe wanted to draw his gun and go after the kid right then. But there was something of his old man's sense of fair play in that gangling, tough cowboy. He knew that it looked like the kid was hooked up with Pony Balch's bunch. But he wasn't quite sure. And he could afford to give the youngster rope enough to hang himself. Besides, the Old Man seemed to have taken a liking to the youngster. So Lafe decided to wait. . . .

TROUBLE struck just three days later, with the Old Man riding point on the trail herd, and the Rafter J drive just drawing into Burned Cabin canyon. Suddenly lead was rattling around them from the canyon sides, and the cattle were stampeding to hell-and-gone. Lafe, his dad, Pete Dunn and the kid flopped out of their saddles and took what shelter they could behind boulders. And Lafe noticed that the kid seemed a little too loud in cussing his gun arm, which had suddenly gone stiff.

Since Pony Balch had once worked on the Rafter J, the Old Man had no trouble in recognizing him. And then, in a few moments, with Pete Dunn down and the Old Man's bullet-torn jaw raw and bleeding, they suddenly realized that Pony's idea was a complete wipe-out. A dozen fast-shooting outlaws against four cowmen. . . .

Old Sam turned to Lafe. "We're in a tight, and there's only one chance," he mumbled. "You sneak out and steal one of their ponies; ride like hell to Evergreen and get Marshal Hornsby. Tell him—"

But a bullet took Lafe alongside the head at that moment, and it wasn't any use talking to him.

The kid turned to old Sam. "I'll go, Mister Pirie," he said, "I ain't so good on the shoot with this stiff arm, but I can get to Hornsby for you."

The old man grinned. "It's bettin' on the double zero, kid, but it's our last chance. Go ahead."

Lafe, waking up, swore. "You damn old jughead," he bawled. "Don't you know that young snake tolled us into this trap, tellin' his pards we were takin' this route? We oughta—"

"The kid's all right," old Sam said grimly.

They watched the youngster zig-zag through the rocks. And then, just as he found shelter, he paused, emptied his gun—*not* toward Pony Balch's outlaws—but straight at the Rafter J outfit!

Never had old Sam Pirie's face gone so white as it did then, and it wasn't from fear of the bullets that whined their vicious tune about his head. In that one second he aged ten years.

His hand was shaking as he drew up his gun and fired at the running kid.

Lafe snarled, "You stubborn ol' pelican; I told you so!"

It was a fight that made history in the annals of Gunsight County. For old Sam and Lafe were battling with a cold, deadly fury that was like a blast from a frozen hell. Lafe could still lift his hoarse voice in the rebel yell as the charging outlaws closed in, bound for the kill. . . .

Lafe was pretty sure that he wasn't in heaven when he awoke. First place, he hadn't lived the kind of life that's supposed to get you there; second place, heaven doesn't look like the main room of the Rafter J ranch house, with old Sam in a bunk right alongside. . . . Then he saw the slender figure of Deputy Marshal Buzz Hornsby standing near.

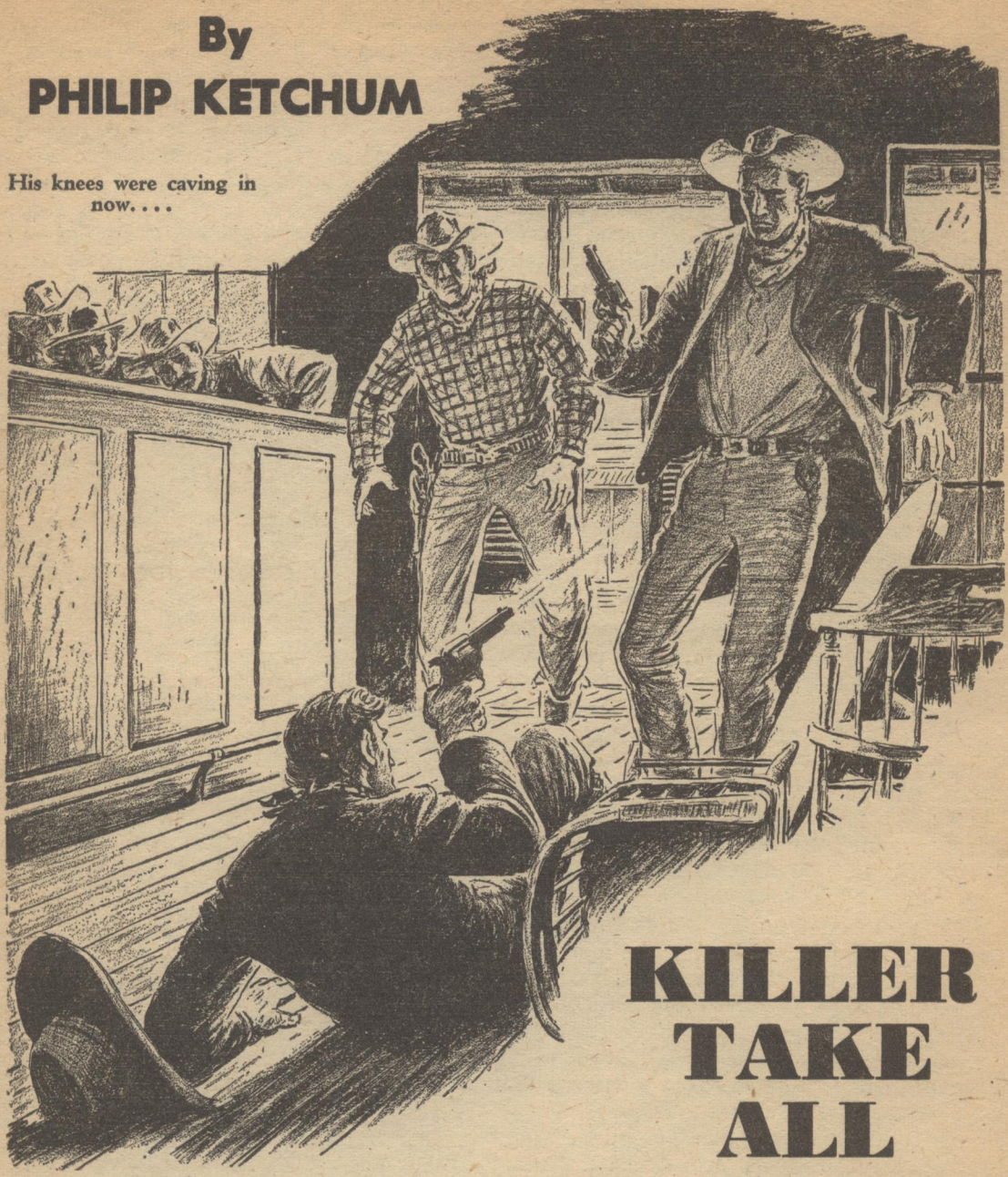
Hornsby was grinning beneath his tawny moustache. "If the outlaw I'd been chasin' from hell to breakfast hadn't just walked into my office, I reckon I never would have been able to give them Pony Balch gents to the buzzards," he drawled. "But—"

Then the kid's voice broke in, as he turned in his bunk toward old Sam. "Sorry about havin' to shoot at you an' Lafe, Boss," he said weakly. "It seemed the only way that I could tell Pony I was still with him, after throwin' that note in his face. I—I shore wanted to go straight, but they kept after me, and I knew that with my stiff arm I wouldn't have had a chance to gun 'em down. . . . So I had to play 'er cagey, even if it meant runnin' into Mr. Hornsby, here. Besides, I didn't want you to know that I had a term to serve out in the pen. . . ."

The Old Man reared up at that. "Damn you, Hornsby!" he roared. "If that kid goes to the pen, I'll—hell, you think I'd have anything happen to the one feller who proved I was right—after Lafe called me a jughead!"

By
PHILIP KETCHUM

His knees were caving in now. . . .



KILLER TAKE ALL

Rancher Alger was new to the ways of the West, but a bushwhack teaches a man fast . . . or he never learns anything else.

HE STOOD there at the bar in the Tiburon saloon. Still shaky. Still in the grip of the fear which had hit him at the dry river crossing, three miles from town. The quick drink he had taken had warmed his throat and stomach, but that was all. It hadn't steadied him. And another drink wouldn't steady him. Courage didn't come in a bottle. He was rational enough to know that.

It had been a close thing at the river crossing. The bullet, fired at him from the darkness down-stream, had grazed his forehead, raising a slight lump above one eye, leaving the skin raw. It had been as near as that. No warning shot. No accident.

Someone had tried to kill him. It was foolish to try to tell himself anything else.

"Another drink, Alger?" asked the bartender.

Bert Alger shook his head. He said, "No. No more."

In the back-bar mirror he could see the reflection of his face. A thin face, burned red by the sun to which it hadn't been accustomed. A face with shadow pockets under the eyes. An old-looking face. Older-looking than it had any right to be.

"They tell me you're selling the ranch," said the bartender.

"No," said Alger. "No. I'm not selling."

But there was no conviction in his voice. Even to his own ears the words carried no conviction.

The saloon door opened and several men came in. They crowded up to the bar and one of them called, "Hi, there, Alger. You're just the fellow I want to see."

Without turning, Alger knew who had said that. He recognized the voice. The heavy, jarring voice of Dan Wyatt. Dan Wyatt, big and broad-shouldered, and sure of himself. Dan Wyatt, who knew what he wanted, and who went after it, and got it. Dan Wyatt, who owned the ranch adjoining the one left him by his uncle, and who wanted the Alger ranch, and meant to have it.

"Now, about that ranch of yours," said Wyatt, moving in next to him at the bar. "Have you thought over the price I offered?"

"The ranch isn't for sale," Alger muttered.

"Now, Alger," said Wyatt, "you're no rancher. You don't want to try running that place your uncle left you. There are fellows around here who will steal you blind. You'll end up with nothing but a mortgage. You'd better take my offer while it's good."

There was sense in that. Good, sound sense. It was the thing to do, but the thing he couldn't do. Here was a chance, the first he had ever had, to make a go of something. Here was an opportunity he couldn't deny himself. A challenge he had to meet. For himself. To prove to himself he could do a job. But you couldn't explain a thing like that to Dan Wyatt. To Dan Wyatt, who wanted the ranch himself and who was a man who usually got what he wanted.

"Look here, Alger," Wyatt was saying. "I'm going to have that ranch if I have to take it away from you after you've ruined it. But I don't want to wait that long. I want it now. I want it while it has some value. This isn't your country. Take your money and go back to the city where you came from."

Alger pulled in a sudden, quick breath. He wondered if that shot from down-stream could have been fired by Dan Wyatt. Fired at him to frighten him, in the knowledge that a frightened man is easy to deal with. Fired almost too close. Such a thing was a possibility. A real possibility.

"Someone took a shot at me tonight," he said slowly. "It was at the river crossing."

He looked at Wyatt as he said that. Looked straight at him, but couldn't read a thing in Wyatt's, dark, narrowed eyes.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Is that so? Well, such things happen in this part of the country. Maybe you'd better sell your ranch, quick-like."

Bert Alger shook his head. He straightened, pushed himself away from the bar. He said, "No, Wyatt. I'm not selling. Ever." And with that, he turned to the door.

A cold wind had come up and was sweeping down the street. And it was dark. The lights showing through the windows of the few places still open did little to thin the shadows. Alger moved toward the hotel and its adjoining restaurant. He pushed open the restaurant door and stepped inside.

THERE were several men at the counter who glanced at him casually as he came in, but Alger hardly noticed them. His eyes had fastened immediately on the girl near the coffee urn. A tall girl, slender, dark-haired, maybe twenty or twenty-one. Her name was Carol Brock. She was an outsider, just as he. How she had happened to come here, how she happened to be working in the hotel restaurant, Alger didn't know. And didn't much care. It was enough that she had seemed to see his problem, and that she had been friendly and helpful, and hadn't treated him as someone unworthy of her notice.

Alger took a seat at the far end of the counter and Carol brought him a cup of coffee.

"What brought you to town?" she asked, smiling.

"You did," said Alger.

The girl shook her head. "I can't believe that."

It was true, however. It was the main reason he had come in tonight. Just to see her and talk to her. And after a time, after the others in the restaurant had gone, Carol hung a "Closed" sign on the door and came back and sat beside him.

They talked about the ranch for a while, Alger reporting what he had done, what he was learning. He had come to Tiburon only a month before, following his uncle's death. He had come, knowing nothing of the problems of running a cattle ranch. He thought he was learning. Fast. But as he talked he noticed that Carol didn't seem to be listening very closely, and that a frown had gathered on her face.

"What is it?" he asked finally. "What's wrong?"

"It's—just something I heard," said Carol slowly. "A girl working in a restaurant hears lots of things, of course, any maybe it wasn't important, but—"

"What was it?" Alger insisted.

"Just this," said the girl. "That Dan Wyatt means to have your place, no matter what he has to do to get it."

A sudden, cold chill raced over Alger's body. He scowled at his empty coffee cup.

"I don't want you to give up the place," said Carol. "If you want to keep it, I want you to keep it. But I don't want anything to happen, either."

"What could happen?"

"Suppose something happened to you, something that looked accidental. And suppose that afterwards, Dan Wyatt produced the papers proving you had sold him your ranch.

"He couldn't."

"Papers can be forged, Bert. And who would question them? Everyone knows he's trying to buy your ranch."

Bert Alger ran his fingers through his hair. He shook his head, but what Carol had suggested was possible, he knew. And there was that shot at him tonight. It had come terribly close.

The pleasure he had felt in seeing Carol was suddenly gone, smothered by his increasing anxieties. Another shot at him might not miss. The smart thing to do, was sell. Sell and get out and take Carol with him. Back to civilization. Back to a place where a man had a chance.

Where a man had a chance. But that was all he was asking here. A chance to run the ranch. To prove to himself he could do it. That he had the strength and stubbornness and determination to make a place for himself. To prove his value. A chance was all he was asking, but a man eager for more land stood in his way.

Bert Alger had left his horse at the livery stable and he moved that way now, heading slowly up the street. A tall man, thin, stoop-shouldered. Twenty-five years old, but feeling much older. Feeling as old as he had looked in the saloon's back-bar mirror.

At the head of the main street he turned in toward the livery stable which was set far back to provide a saddling and work area in front of the doors. Here, it was quite dark, but as Alger moved forward he sensed a movement in the shadows close to the building. A shifting movement which brought him to a rigid halt. And which quickened his breathing and made him aware of the sharp hammering of his heart.

His eye caught that sense of movement again and as he waited, breathless, a man stepped forward. And then another. And another. Three men grouped close together. Three bulky, indistinct figures. One taller than the other two, and covering him with a gun.

"You reckon he's armed, Hondo?" asked a voice.

"Naw," came the answer. "But I'll make sure."

Alger still didn't move He seemed to be glued to the spot where he was standing. A feeling, closely akin to panic swept upward through his body, numbing his mind, making it impossible to think He saw one of the men step toward him, then move around behind him.

"Don't move a muscle," the man growled. "If you're packin' a gun I aim to get it."

The man stepped closer to him. His arm whipped up and down and Alger caught the shadow of that motion and instinctively ducked. But not in time. Pain exploded in his head, and his knees caved in and he pitched forward, sprawling in the dusty, stable dirt.

They were all three around him before he could get up. He could tell that from the indistinct sound of their voices above him. A foot lashed out and caught him in the side of the face, and another in the ribs. He

tried to roll away, tried to get up, but couldn't make it. Again, some man's boot caught him in the face. And again that boot lashed at him, half-lifting him off the ground.

He screamed at the men, or at least he thought he did. He got to his knees, and clawing at some man's trousers, pulled himself almost erect, but once more, a smashing gun blow on the head, dropped him. And lying now on the ground, motionless, he heard voices.

"That's enough for him now, Red," said one of the men. "Enough to start with."

"He's not half hurt," came the answer. "I've got plenty more to give him."

"Then save it a while."

Lying face down in the dirt, Alger fought off the shadows which seemed to be trying to close in on him. The voices of the men standing above him, faded, then came back, then faded again. And finally broke through once more.

"Alger," one of the men was saying. "Alger, can you hear me."

Bert Alger made no answer. He tried to roll over, but couldn't.

"I reckon you can hear," said the voice. "So get this and get it straight. Sell your place and clear out of the country. Do it before another week has passed. If you don't, next time we won't be so easy on you."

There was more talk, but in the same vein. And then there was silence, and darkness, and the whisper of the wind overhead and the smell of the stable. And pain. A stabbing, grinding pain which wouldn't let up.

WHERE the man came from, Bert Alger didn't know. He didn't hear him approach, but suddenly someone was at his side and had rolled him over and helped him sit up and was holding a bottle under his nose.

"Here," said a voice. "Take a swig of this. It's powerful stuff."

The raw whiskey burned its way down Alger's throat and it's warmth was soothing to his stomach. He gulped in deep breaths of air. He took another drink.

"That's better," said the man who was standing over him. "Do you think you can hold yourself on a horse?"

"I think so," Alger muttered.

The man moved away, then came back after a time, leading two saddled horses. He was a short man, thin, and Alger had the confused impression that he was both young and old. He couldn't see the man's face clearly enough to know which idea was right.

"We'll ride a ways, if you can make it," said the man helping him on his horse. "Then maybe we'll talk."

"Who are you, anyhow?" asked Alger.

"You can call me Steve," said the man. "Steve Oldfield. But don't try to make anything of the name. You won't."

There was a twangy note in the man's voice, almost a harsh note. And the name was strange. Alger didn't think he had ever heard it before. But he had heard the names, Hondo and Red. Two men who worked for Dan Wyatt were called Hondo and Red.

The man who had brought Alger's horse led the way out of town, cutting across country from the road, but in the general direction of Alger's ranch. And Alger followed him without much thought other than to get away. The cold and chilly wind, driving at him, cleared the dizziness from his head and made it possible to think again. But what had happened required little analysis. Dan Wyatt, through three of his hired men, had hit at him again. Just as at the river crossing. Wyatt meant to have the Alger ranch, and this was his way of going about it. Through the use of fear.

"Here's a good place to stop," said Oldfield suddenly.

They had come to Four Mile creek, and in the shadows of the trees bordering it, Oldfield had reined up.

"Stop?" said Alger. "Why?"

"To have our talk," said Oldfield. "You're in trouble, guy, whether you know it or not. And when a man's in trouble, it's a good plan to do something about it. I've got an idea."

Alger scowled, but as Oldfield dismounted, he swung to the ground and tied his horse, and then joined Oldfield in a clearing along the creek.

Oldfield rolled a cigaret and lit it, and in the flame of the match, Alger had his first good look at the man's face. A thin face, sharp-featured, and neither young or old. A hard face, dark-eyed, and showing the dirty bristle of a day old beard.

"I've been around town several days,

now," said Oldfield. "Long enough to get the hang of things. A man named Wyatt is after your ranch. What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," said Alger, slowly.

"Have you got any money?"

"Some. Why?"

"How much? A thousand dollars?"

"No."

"Five hundred?"

"Why?"

Oldfield shrugged. "Maybe you can buy yourself out of your trouble. I've made a business of handling men like Dan Wyatt."

"Handling them, how?" asked Alger, and there was a sharp edge to his voice.

"Handling them the only way they can be handled. With a gun."

Alger stiffened, caught his breath.

"Nothing crude," said Oldfield dryly. "There would be a fight. That's all. You'd be surprised at how easy it is to start a fight."

"You mean you'd pick a fight with Wyatt?"

"What did his men do to you? And what are they going to do to you if you don't sell your place? Hell man. Folks play rough in this part of the contry."

That was true all right, but Alger didn't like it. He shook his head. He stood looking at Oldfield, scowling.

"Your funeral or Wyatt's," said Oldfield. "Take your choice. Or suppose we put it like this. I don't like Wyatt. Get it. I don't like him. I'm going to have a run in with the man. It's bound to come. And I'm betting you five hundred dollars that after we tangle, Dan Wyatt won't bother anyone anymore. Ever."

"You mean—"

Oldfield took a drag on his cigarette, then dropped it and stepped on it. He said, "Well, how about it? How about a friendly wager?"

"How do you know I'd pay up?" Alger muttered.

"You'd pay up, all right," said Oldfield grimly. "I'd take care of that. And you've got the money. Your uncle left you a thousand besides the ranch. You can't have spent much of it. I told you I had checked up on things."

Alger's throat was dry. His head still pained him and every muscle in his body seemed to have its individual ache. He recalled the shot which had just missed him, the three men he had faced in front of the livery stable. Three to one, and a shot in the dark. Dan Wyatt had given him no chance. None at all.

"It's your funeral or Wyatt's," said Oldfield again. "So how about it? Do we make the wager? What's gonna happen is gonna happen anyhow."

Alger tried to swallow through the dryness of his throat. He nodded his head. "We make the wager."

And Oldfield laughed. It was an ugly, scornful sound, and there was nothing funny in it. He turned to his horse, mounted, and then looked down. He said, "Get your money ready and be in town tomorrow night. I probably won't want to stick around after the fireworks."

IN THE clear light of another day, Alger stared at himself in the mirror. There was nothing in his face to show what he had been through the night before. His body was stiff and sore, but that would pass, and what happened in front of the livery stable wouldn't happen again. Wyatt was going to have trouble with a man named Oldfield. Dan Wyatt was going to die.

Bert Alger moistened his lips. They were fever dry. He scowled at the man looking at him in the mirror, at his own reflection. He told himself again what he had told himself fifty times before. *It's going to happen anyhow. Oldfield said he didn't like Wyatt, that he was going to have trouble with Wyatt. Our bet is a side issue.*

But that wasn't true, and in his heart, he knew it. Oldfield had said that to make it easier on him, to make it possible for him to lie to himself. The truth of the matter, the real truth of the matter, was this. He was going to pay five hundred dollars to have Dan Wyatt killed. In all its ugliness, there it was.

But Wyatt had set three men on him the night before, three men who had just stopped short of beating him to death. And someone, probably Wyatt, has fired at him in the darkness. In those two facts, lay a justification for what he had done. He was fighting back. That was all. Fighting back in the same manner as Dan Wyatt.

Alger left the ranch house and stepped out into the yard. Out into the warmth of the morning sun. He had found two men

here when he had come to take over the ranch, two men who had worked for his uncle. He had kept them on, riding with them, learning from what they did. Earlier this morning they had pulled out for the north meadow, where he had said he would join them. But of course he couldn't. He had business in town. A wager to pay off. Tonight.

He started toward the corral, then stopped, and after a moment, turned back to the house. In the dresser drawer in the bedroom was his uncle's gun. A heavy, single action, Colt .45. Alger lifted it, held it in his hand for a moment, examined its loading, and then dropped it into his coat pocket. It sagged there, heavily, betraying its presence, but it was still in his pocket when he headed for town.

In the early afternoon, Bert Alger had dinner in the hotel restaurant, and as he loitered over a second cup of coffee, Carol leaned on the counter, facing him.

"And what brought you to town today?" she demanded.

"I just rode in," said Alger vaguely, managing a grin.

"With a gun in your pocket?" said Carol.

"It shows, doesn't it?"

"Of course it shows. Any man seeing you will know it's there. But why?"

Alger shrugged his shoulders. "Most men around here carry guns."

"Most men who do, know how to use them," said Carol.

Alger could feel a flush of color in his face. He scowled, to hide it.

"I'm sorry, Bert," said Carol swiftly. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I just—why are you carrying a gun?"

The words were soft but the strain of worry was in them. And for some reason or other, Bert Alger felt suddenly very much better.

"Don't worry, Carol," he said, chuckling. "Don't worry."

He left the restaurant and sat on the hotel porch for a while, watching the casual movement along Tiburon's main street. There wasn't much activity. Few men from the range had come to town this early. Later, toward evening and tonight, a good many might ride in. But Steve Oldfield was in town, and spotted him, and came drifting toward the hotel.

In the clear light of day, Steve Oldfield was thin, and slight, and insignificant in appearance. A slightly stooped man with a deeply tanned, ageless face, and sharp, dark eyes. A gun sagged in his holster.

Oldfield passed behind him on the porch and outwardly ignored him, but the man's whispered words reached his ears.

"Stop in at the bank, Alger. I'll be collecting tonight."

And there it was. The thing he had been ducking. The truth he had admitted to himself, but had tried to ignore. He hadn't made a wager with Oldfield even though they had given it that fancy name. What he had done was hire a killer. He had hired a man to do a job he should do himself. Which he should do, or fail in. There was the crux of everything which bothered him. He wanted to keep the ranch to prove to himself he was man enough for the job, but at the first tough problem he was buying a way out.

Oldfield angled across the street, came to the Tiburon saloon, pushed open the door, and stepped inside. And on the hotel porch, Bert Alger came suddenly to his feet. He touched the bulk of the gun sagging in his coat pocket, and he nodded his head, knowing what he had to do.

"Bert," said a voice behind him. "Bert, I want to talk to you."

He recognized Carol's voice. She had finished her midday work in the restaurant and come out on the hotel porch. And it would be nice to spend the afternoon with her, but there was something else he had to do first.

"Later, Carol," he called over his shoulder. "Later. I'll be back."

But he wasn't sure of that. He wasn't sure how well Steve Oldfield would take what he was going to tell him.

OLDFIELD was at one of the tables in the back of the saloon. He had found a pack of cards and had started a game of solitaire. A cigarette drooped from his lips. There were others in the saloon, too. Maybe a dozen others, but Alger hardly noticed them. From inside the door, he moved directly toward Oldfield's table, and Oldfield knew he was coming though the man hardly more than glanced up from his game.

"You'd better not be seen talking to me," said Oldfield, as Alger reached the table.

The words were low, whispered. Oldfield

still didn't look up. He seemed to be studying the cards

"Why not?" said Alger. "The wager's off. That's what I've come to tell you. If you have trouble with Wyatt, it's on your own. Count me completely out."

Oldfield's eyes slid past Alger to the door. A tight and ugly look came into the man's face. He pushed back his chair and stood up.

"You're too late to back out," he said again, the words whispered. "Wyatt's here, now. I've a horse at the back door of the saloon. I'll be by your place tonight. Have the money."

He started around the table. Bert Alger took a quick look over his shoulder. He caught a glimpse of Wyatt moving toward the bar. Wyatt, alone, and scowling about something. And he thought, *Oldfield's going through with it, in spite of what I said.*

What Bert Alger did then, he did without conscious thought or planning. Oldfield was brushing past him, heading toward Wyatt, and Alger's hand lifted and caught him by the shoulder. Caught him and tightened on his coat and jerked him back.

He heard a burst of profanity from Oldfield's lips and saw the man clutch at his gun, saw him lifting it, lifting it toward Wyatt. And he thought, *The man does hate Wyatt. He wasn't lying. He meant all along to kill Wyatt.*

This realization had its confusing angles, but there was no time then to try to figure them out. Alger shouted a warning to Dan Wyatt. His hand slammed down at Oldfield's gun arm and at the same time he lunged forward, driving Oldfield sideways and off balance.

The gun Oldfield had been lifting, exploded, it's bullet ripping into the wall as Oldfield fell against a table and slid from there to the floor. Twisting as he went down. Twisting to face Alger. And now the gun in his hand was lifting again, lifting toward Alger, and there was no one to turn it aside.

Alger clawed at his pocket, clawed out his uncle's gun, knowing he could never fire it in time, knowing that this was the end of everything for him. He felt a solid blow against his shoulder, a blow which drove him back. A stabbing pain went with it and in his ears was the echo of a second shot. His arm jerked, but he didn't know why. It jerked again and he saw the gun he was holding, pointed at Oldfield. Saw it kick up in its stiff recoil.

His knees were caving in now, and he was swaying and through the sudden fog gathering in front of his eyes he saw Oldfield pushing himself up from the floor, raising his gun once more. He fired again, but didn't know it. He fired again and Oldfield sank back, but he didn't know that either. The room had gone dark.

* * *

"This man Oldfield," said Dan Wyatt, "used to work for me, long ago. We had trouble. He left here, swearing that someday he'd come back and get me. If he's been hanging around town several days, he's kept out of my sight. And you tell me he tried to collect from you for wiping me out?"

"That was the general idea," said Alger.

He was lying in bed in the doctor's home, his shoulder bandaged. He felt pretty weak.

"But why did you jump him? The man was a killer."

"I just—jumped him, I guess. That's all."

Wyatt scowled. He rubbed his jaw. He said, "Damn it, I don't suppose I'll ever get to buy that ranch of yours. Maybe I had you figured wrong. Maybe you've got the guts to run it. Another thing. I understand you had some trouble with three men who work for me. It was their idea, not mine. They were trying to chase you off because of the impression you seem to have made on Carol Brock. It was one of those fellows who took a shot at you the other night, too. Well, they'll not bother you any more. I'll see to that."

Bert Alger was beginning to feel much better. He managed a grin.

"The Doc says you'll be up in a few days," Wyatt continued. "If you need any help around that place of yours, just yell."

Alger stared at the man standing near the bed. Wyatt was scowling, but his scowl wasn't mean. His voice was rough, but that was probably just the man's nature.

"I'll probably be yelling for help," he admitted.

"Do it," said Wyatt, and put out his hand.

In the next room a voice, a girl's voice, Carol's voice asked, "Can I go in, now?"

"Maybe I'd better get out," said Wyatt, grinning.

And Bert Alger nodded, and turned his eyes toward the door.

RUN, SHEEPMAN, RUN!

By R. S. LERCH

A rifle bullet found a crack . . . and rock fell with a crash.

The Holbrights and the Truxlows carried on their cattle war— till the day their land was taken over by sheep.

ANN HOLBRIGHT stepped out of the cabin and faced westward where rugged peaks saw-toothed the horizon. To her right towered the Rim, sinister with the menace that lurked on the broad mesa behind it; to her left, far below, the Basin lay pleasant and peaceful in the sunlight. But that appearance of peace, Ann knew, was a delusion. The cattlemen in the Basin were taut as bow strings, awaiting the start of an invasion that would bathe their ranges in blood.

Ann was troubled and restless, restless almost to the point of rebellion. But the cause was not the impending danger from the Rim that had led her and her father that morning to drive their small herd into a grass-floored box canyon for safety. For five years, since the death of her mother, when Ann was thirteen, she and her father had lived alone on

their little ranch under the frowning Rim, and scarcely once in that time had she seen another of her own age.

Down in the Basin were large ranches and a village where there were dances and parties, and the ranchers and their families occasionally gathered for barbecues and celebrations, and never had she been invited, nor, she knew, would her father have allowed her to go if she had been asked.

And she understood the reason for that, too. Jeb Truxlow and his men had driven Brad Holbright and his wife and little Ann off the fine grass in the Basin when their covered wagon had first arrived eight years ago. The Basin, Jeb had sworn, had been claimed by his own clan and they were already Arizona-bound to settle on their new homesteads. That was when Brad had found this smaller range at the foot of the Rim, swearing that no Holbright would ever again set foot on the Basin, and that if any of the Truxlows came to his little Flying H they would be welcomed with lead.

Two cantankerous old die-hards, stubborn and unforgiving, were robbing Ann of her youth. For a second the rebellion flared. Then she realized the uselessness of it.

She sighed and moved along the stream toward the spring a quarter mile away, where the wild strawberries were ripe and sweet in the rich soil of the small glade. Her father had remained with the cattle to fence in the canyon mouth, and the little pail she carried, filled with strawberries, would furnish more than enough for a shortcake that he would appreciate on his return. Despite his stubborn pride, he had been good to her.

Then she remembered the shots she had heard an hour before. They had came from somewhere near the break that was the trail down from the towering escarpment. She wondered if the threatened war had already started. Though there had been no further sound of gunfire, she became increasingly cautious, moving quietly and keeping to cover. There had been strange, hard-faced men riding the trails lately, gun-hung men with rifles in their saddle-boots.

She had almost reached the spring when a slight movement in the open glade ahead centered her attention and she saw the horse. It was standing a few yards from the pool formed by a bubbling spring that drained into the stream. Its saddle was empty and the reins were trailing, and it seemed to be intently regarding something on the ground just ahead of it and outside the girl's field of vision.

Ann halted, crouching a little, excitement and a touch of cold fear running through her. Finally she eased ahead, careful to make no sound or move the tops of the bushes. She halted again, abruptly, and gave an involuntary gasp.

He was lying face down some ten feet from the horse and his arms were stretched out beyond his head, as if he were reaching for the spring, another ten feet away. Her gaze shot back to the horse, its attention still on its master, and the sunlight revealed a dark smear on the stirrup leather. Then there was movement. The man's fingers contracted, clutching the grass, and one leg drew up, the boot toe digging into the sod as he forced himself forward a yard.

Ann Holbright hurried ahead, fear forgotten. As she passed the horse her suspicions were verified. The dark smear on the stirrup leather was blood. She reached the man and discovered that the right leg of his levis was soaked with fresh blood. He raised his head as she knelt beside him and she saw that his eyes were a startling blue, though now they were pain-ridden and dilated in amazement. Those eyes seemed somehow vaguely familiar, though she knew she had never seen the man before. He started to move again.

"Lie quiet," she ordered quickly, and hurried to the spring.

SHE filled the little pail with the clear, cold water, then raised her skirt of coarse linsey-woolsey. There was a ripping sound and when she hurried back to her patient she carried a length of white linen in addition to the water. She raised his head and held the pail to his lips and he drank deeply.

"Have you a knife?" she asked then.

He reached into one of his pockets and handed her a clasp knife. A moment later she had cut away the cloth, and his thigh, with its two blue-lipped holes still seeping blood, was exposed. She worked swiftly, her fingers light and dextrous, cleansing the wounds, pressing pads over the holes, and binding them in place.

The man had raised himself on an elbow and was watching her intently. When she had finished he spoke with quiet sincerity.

"You're a good nurse and you maybe

saved my life—for a little while. But you'd better get out of here now. My partner got away, but they'll be trailing me, and they might be close. It'll help if you'll get me my long gun from the saddle. Then I can maybe make them pay a little before they get me."

Ann straightened with a jerk, looking quickly around, head tilted as she listened. She heard nothing above the normal sounds of the woods. She looked down at the man.

"You're one of Kuper Claney's outfit?" she asked.

He muttered something that sounded like an oath, then spoke almost harshly.

"Do I smell like sheep?"

Ann shook her head, watching him closely. "No," she answered, "but you might be one of the hired gun-fighter's he's brought in."

He was studying her now, also, and suddenly he said, "You must be the Holbright girl, Ann Holbright?"

She nodded. "Of course. Is there any other girl up here under the Rim?"

Then her features hardened a little. "If you're not one of Claney's gang from the mesa, then you must be one of the Truxlow outfit from the Basin, and I don't know which is worse."

"I'm Lee Truxlow," he affirmed quietly.

Suddenly Ann knew where she had seen those eyes. As a little girl, the flashing blue eyes of the head of the Truxlow clan when he ordered her father and mother out of the Basin had frightened her more than the harsh words or the menacing attitudes of the men at Truxlow's back.

"You're a son of Jeb Truxlow," she challenged.

A twisted smile that somehow wrenched the girl's heart, and he said softly, "I'm Jeb's youngest son, and your sworn enemy. Now that you know, maybe you better leave me. You don't even have to get the rifle. I'll make it myself in a little while."

Ann, thinking swiftly, said, "Don't be foolish," almost without realizing she spoke. She was staring at the little stream into which the spring flowed. She arrived at a decision that would have been startling, if not incomprehensible, to her an hour ago.

"Can you get up and into the saddle, if I help?" she asked urgently.

He stared at here, trying to understand.

"Quick," she rapped. "You said we haven't much time and you're weak from loss of blood. I know a place not far from where you can hide, if you can make it up there."

His answer came immediately. "I sure can try."

"Lie still then," she said, and jumping up, she hurried to the horse.

He was not a light man, but with one good leg, he managed to help himself somewhat, and finally was standing with one hand on the saddlehorn, the other on Ann Holbright's shoulder.

"One more try," she encouraged, and bent, gripping his unwounded leg and lifting with all her young strength.

He made it, leaning far forward and gripping the horn with both hands. Ann immediately took the reins and led the horse into the water, turning upstream and threading her way between the close growing brush on each bank.

"Good girl—hide trail—damned good—girl," Lee Truxlow murmured, but she did not hear him.

Within two hundred yards the stream turned northward toward the Rim and a little later was flowing through a crack in the cliffs that towered a thousand feet on each side. There was no brush here and no path except the center of the creek. Within another hundred yards, however, the passage widened and they entered a small pocket. Ann left the stream where it swung to the east. She headed straight for the head of the pocket. The way here was dotted with huge chunks of rock, boulders, and angular blocks that had fallen from the Rim, some of them as large as a small cottage.

As they neared the back of the pocket Lee Truxlow raised his head and found he was staring up a section of rough talus straight into the mouth of a little cave. If he had not been looking directly at it he would have missed it, for it looked like no more than a dark spot in the varicolored cliff. Ann stopped the horse at the foot of the fan of debris that reached to the cave.

"I'll help you down and you rest a bit while I take your horse into cover beyond those cottonwoods. There's a side pocket there, and a pool where the stream comes out of a crack in the cliff. Grass, too. Your horse will stay there. When I get back we'll try to get up to that cave."

She reached up to help him dismount.

He lay and watched her lead the horse away, then turned his head to examine the slope in front. Then he began to move, an

inch, then a foot, at a time. When Ann Holbright, returned, carrying his rifle and the extra cartridges she had found in a saddle pocket, he was nowhere in sight.

Startled, she looked around. From above came a voice with almost a note of laughter in it.

"Up here, nurse. Crawling wasn't so bad."

Ann picked her way up the talus and found him stretched out on the floor of the cave, head almost hidden by the steep downward slope from the lip to the back of what was, in reality, merely a wide crack in the cliff that had been filled by falling debris and sand to its present level.

"I have to be getting back," Ann said hurriedly when she caught his steady gaze on her as she laid the rifle and cartridges at his side. "Father will be worried."

"You'll return?" he asked quickly.

"Of course, as soon as the danger is over. Anyway, I'll be back this evening with some food," and she turned to leave the opening.

"Wait!"

She halted and looked back. Lee Truxlow had turned and had propped himself up on one elbow and there was anxiety in his eyes as he continued quickly.

"Before you go back there I better put you in touch with what's happened. Me and Slim, one of our boys, were up on the break in the Rim, pretty well hidden we thought, watching to see if Kuper Claney and his gang were getting ready to move. They were. Their woolies were being worked toward the head of the trail. Slim slipped away to warn the ranchers in the Basin and I stayed to watch. That's when one of their dogs got my scent and barked. I nicked Xant Yance, one of Claney's gunmen, but another caught me in the leg as I forked my horse. So the war has started, though, we ain't heard any more shooting. Maybe your range will be by-passed—what Claney wants is the wider range in the Basin. But you and your dad might be caught right in the middle if the Truxlows come to meet the invasion. Tell your dad the dance's started, and he'll know what to do. And—and—take care of yourself, girl."

He had reached out with his free hand and caught one of hers. She stood still, looking down at him.

"You forget, Lee Truxlow—that we're enemies. My father never forgets, or forgives, and I'm his daughter," she said quietly.

Though she spoke without emotion, she could not control the pounding of her heart. The high color in her cheeks might have been anger. She hoped young Truxlow would take it for that. The twisted smile came to his lips and he released her hand.

"Okay, little lady. I never had an ememy for a sweetheart, but I sure got one now. And you can't do anything about that, even if I never see you again."

ANN stepped out of the cave and began to slide down the talus. At the bottom she looked back, and caught sight of a stetson held high and waved in parting. She hurried to the narrow canyon and when she had waded through it she left the water and cut into the timber of the slope between the stream and the cliffs. Here she broke into a run. Coming to an open glade she glanced up to the break in the Rim that was the start of the trail down into the Basin, and abruptly halted, staring.

That break seemed to have changed color. It was now a dirty, light gray and it seemed to be moving, flowing like a river breaking over a cliff. She understood immediately. The whole pass floor was covered by a band of moving sheep, and Kuper Claney's strategy was revealed. It would take the balance of the afternoon and most of the night for that slow moving carpet to reach the Basin, but when the cattlemen awoke the sod-cutting little hooves of thousands of sheep would be working over their grazing grounds.

Involuntarily she glanced southward toward the Basin. Her keen, young eyes detected feverish activity down there. From a half dozen different directions she caught sight of swiftly moving dots, horsemen all headed for the gray squares and rectangles that marked the headquarters buildings of old Jeb Truxlow. And she saw more, closer to the upward rise of ground toward the base of the Rim. A close riding group of men were racing up the trail. Somewhere between the Basin and the Rim they would meet the sheep and their guardians and the bitter fight would tear this wilderness paradise into bloody tatters.

Then she remembered her immediate problems, and again broke into a run. As she reached the clearing she saw smoke coming from the chimney and knew that her father had returned and was preparing the meal she

should have had ready and waiting for him.

When she appeared in the doorway the lean, gray-haired man at the stove turned keen eyes on her, then slowly straightened.

"What happened, kitten? You look's though you'd had a couple of drinks. You get into any of the results of that shootin' I heard near the Rim a couple of hours back?"

There was the faintest trace of a snap in his voice. Ann hurried to him and immediately poured out her story, withholding only the name of the wounded man, and ending with what she had seen from the open spot on her return.

"One of Claney's gang?" he asked.

She shook her head. "A young fellow from the Basin, almost caught by the Claneys," she replied.

"A little better, but not much. At least he's a cattleman. Learn his name?"

Ann drew a sharp breath, but before she could reply her father whipped toward the door and snatched his belt and sixgun from its wall peg. As he buckled them on Ann, too, caught the sound of rapidly approaching horses.

From his stand in the doorway her father looked back over his shoulder and snapped, "Keep out of sight. It's the Claney outfit."

Ann backed slowly toward the door of her own room, her gaze riveted on the front window. A compact body of seven riders had come out of the timber and entered the ranch yard. The man in the center of the leading three was a heavy-bodied, coarse-and greasy-featured man, his face black-stubbled, and his mouth and eyes hard. There was an arrogant tilt to the black stetson he wore, and an overbearing attitude in the way he reined in his big black a half dozen yards from the front of the cabin. This would be Kuper Claney, Ann knew.

On one side of Claney rode a little man with features almost as dark as a Mexican's, with vicious lines from nose to mouth corners. He wore a bandage around his upper left arm. Remembering young Lee Truxlow stating he'd nicked Xant Yance, one of Claney's gunmen, Ann identified the little man. That meant that the tall, shovel-jawed, slate-eyed man on the other side of Claney was Clink Rossen, the second of two gun-fighters Claney was said to have constantly at his side.

Behind these three were four other riders, and every man in the bunch wore sixguns on his thighs and rifles in his saddle-boots.

As he reined in Claney demanded, "Seen anything of a wounded spy we trailed nearly to your clearin', old man?"

"I've seen no man for three days," Holbright answered curtly.

Claney gave a gutteral sound that was half snort, half derisive laugh.

"Don't guess we'll take your word for that. Besides, I heard you got a good lookin' gal and I'd kind of like to make her acquaintance. So, I reckon we'll just search your cabin."

For a split-second Bradley Holbright reverted to his youth in his timing and flashing action. Before Kuper Claney had even stirred in his saddle he found himself looking down into the bore of a peacemaker. Caught flat-footed, neither Yance nor Rossen on either side of the sheepman had started to draw.

"You will do nothing of the damned kind," Holbright said evenly. "You and your mob will turn around and ride out of here, and if any of you makes a move for a gun your boss dies."

During the ultimatum by her father Ann slipped back into her own room, snatched her light rifle from the deer antlers on the wall, and took a box of shells from the shelf below them. When, shoving cartridges into the loading gate, she was once more in a position to look out of the window she saw something the others had not yet discovered.

From the bank of the stream a man was hurrying on foot toward the cabin. He wore a rag over his head to hold his long hair back, and his dark features and black, straight hair indicated that he was an Indian. He paid no attention to Brad Holbright, but went immediately to stand beside Claney. He spoke in his own tongue, but his gestures to the stream, and a pointing finger toward the west, revealed the content of his report.

A snag-toothed grin spread over Kuper Claney's course features.

"Don't reckon we'll have to search your shack, at that, Holbright. My tracker tells me he picked up the trail again. Tell your girl I'll call on her some other time. Let's go," he then snapped at his men, and swung his horse.

Holbright still held the sixgun in his hand as he watched the group ride westward out of the clearing. Ann Holbright caught her breath, her thoughts whirling. One hand was

pressed against her breast as if to still a wildly beating heart. The next second she had spun around, raced to the rear cabin door, and slipped out.

SHE cut past the corrals, heading again into the concealing timber between the ranch and the Rim. Once in the timber, she headed west and, running with the lightness of a deer and the speed of a lobo closing in for the kill, she paralleled the course of the sheepmen. When she entered the stream where it came out of the narrow canyon she could hear the splashing of their horses not far behind.

She caught the pale blob that was Lee Truxlow's face against the black background of the cave mouth the moment she entered the pocket. He reached out a hand to help her up the final two feet and she sank down beside him, breathless. He took one searching look at her, then shifted his attention, and his rifle muzzle, toward the open pocket below.

"They've come, huh?" he asked, his gaze fastened on the crack in the cliffs through which the stream vanished.

"An Apache tracker worked out the trail. Your horse is shod. It probably left scratches on the stones in the stream," she panted.

"How many?" was his next question.

"Eight, including the Apache."

"That all?" he replied lightly, though there was nothing but dead seriousness and worry in the eyes the girl could not see. He was looking at the big boulders scattered over the floor of the pocket, perfect cover for the sheepmen.

"That'll be—plenty," she said almost tartly. "Kuper Claney and his two gun-slicks, Clink Rossen and Xant Yance are with them. And you did hit Yance, in the arm, but not too bad or he wouldn't be riding."

"Uh-huh, and now they're about to introduce themselves," he replied calmly, nestling his cheek against the comb of the rifle stock.

"Stay back," he added sharply as he felt the girl crawl up beside him.

She paid no attention, but narrowly watched the horsemen filing up the stream and entering the pocket. Claney rode in the lead, with the Indian tracker beside him. Behind them rode Rossen and Yance, and they were followed by the lesser gunmen. Soon all had entered the pocket.

The Indian had checked his mount and was pointing directly at the cave mouth and talking to Claney when Lee Truxlow fired. The tracker bent forward over his mount's neck, then slowly slid to the ground. The shot galvanized the others. Claney dove off his horse with remarkable agility for so big a man, yelling, "Cover!" as he leaped for the nearest boulder large enough for shelter.

Truxlow fired three times before the targets disappeared, and Ann Holbright, despite a breathlessness that precluded accuracy, got in one shot. At the crack of her rifle Rossen let out a yell as he disappeared behind a block of granite. On Truxlow's last shot, Xant Yance buckled at the knees as his left leg became useless. He managed, by scrambling frantically downward, to reach cover.

"Quick! Back down, Ann," Truxlow ordered, and the next instant a swarm of murderous leaden bees winged into the cave mouth.

Ann, sliding backward, felt her foot touch something that moved a little. She looked around and saw a foot-square chunk of rock that had fallen from the seamed and cracked walls of the cave. There were others near it. She laid her rifle aside and went to work. Within a few minutes she had shoved two of them up to the lip of the cave, one on each side, and each rock close to opposite walls.

Young Truxlow said, "Good girl," as he shifted a little so that he could thrust his rifle muzzle through the narrow opening between the wall and the rock.

On the opposite side Ann settled down behind her shelter. A black stetson crown appeared above one of the boulders down in the pocket. Lee Truxlow's rifle cracked and the hat jerked and disappeared. At almost the same moment a dark spot, a shoulder and part of an arm, with a rifle barrel preceding them, appeared at the side of the boulder close to the ground. Ann fired instantly and the gun was dropped, the shoulder and arm withdrawn. She levered in a fresh cartridge as she swung her gun muzzle immediately to another rock and snapped a shot at a hand from which a sixgun had begun to blast. That shot was followed by a yell of rage and pain.

"Good Lord! Where'd you learn to shoot?

(Please continue on page 112)

BUSHWHACK TRAIL

EVER think, gents, of the trouble a man can get into sometimes, just by minding his own business? Take Tom Wyatt, for example. He'd ridden into the town of San Marcos one rainy night, looking for a spread that could use a tophand. According to a stranger Tom met in an eating-place, the DUN spread might be able to use Tom. . . .

The man was a townsman, but friendly toward jobless cowhands. He sat two stools away, eating a big steak. He was well dressed, and he had the air of a man with money in his pocket. He was a little older than Wyatt, in his middle thirties, stockily built and darkly handsome.

He said, "You can reach the DUN by taking the south road. Or by taking the Coffin Creek trail. The last route will save you about five miles. And on a night like this. . . ."

The townsman smiled, showing strong white teeth.

A man couldn't help liking him. Tom Wyatt liked him.

Wyatt said, "You think I should go out there tonight?"

The man shrugged. "Up to you," he said. "But if I were after a job, I wouldn't waste any time. In the morning, there's apt to be a dozen riders showing up for jobs at DUN."

That was reasonable, and Wyatt nodded. He lighted his cigarette, and asked, "Mind telling me how to reach this Coffin Creek trail? I'm a stranger in these parts."

He listened obediently as the townsman gave him directions, then said, "Obliged to you," and got down from his stool.

The man said, "Luck," and smiled again.

Wyatt crossed to the door, took his slicker from the clothes-tree. He was pulling the slicker on when the door opened and a man ducked in out of the rain. He was a swarthy man of medium height, clean-shaven, about forty years old, a Mexican. He removed his hat, shook the water from it, and hung it up. He said, "A nice night for ducks, Mr. Munson," looking at the man having supper at the counter.

"That's right, Morales," Mr. Munson said, looking around and smiling.

Morales too was wearing a slicker tonight. When he peeled it off, Tom Wyatt saw a law badge pinned to his shirt. Morales hung his slicker on the tree, giving Wyatt a brief but interested once-over, and Wyatt knew the lawman was seeing if his face—a lean, bronzed, passably good-looking face—fitted any of the pictures or descriptions on the man-wanted dodgers in the local sheriff's office. Evidently it didn't, for Morales nodded pleasantly.

"Passing through?"

"Yeah."

"Bad night for traveling."

"Bad enough," said Wyatt, opening the door.

As he stepped out into the downpour, it occurred to him that there was a sharp one. He wouldn't want Deputy Sheriff Morales man-hunting him.

Wyatt mounted and rode out, leaving little San Marcos behind.

The rain sluiced down; the wind swept it along in dousing sheets. The night was inky black. Tom Wyatt rode slowly, making sure of his direction and seeking out the landmarks he'd been told to observe.

After an hour of riding, Wyatt located the cut in the low rock hills southwest of the town. Emerging from the pass, Wyatt now had only to keep to the trail. It twisted and climbed, sloped away and twisted some more.

Finally, Wyatt saw just ahead a stream brimful of flood water and a narrow bridge spanning it. As he approached the bridge, he saw the dark shape of a line cabin beyond.

The cabin seemed unoccupied, so Tom Wyatt was taken by surprise when the man with the gun in his hand appeared.

He was startled when the man yelled savagely, "I warned you, you no-good! Now grab for your gun!"

His gun swung up, leveled at Wyatt. The revolver spurted powder-flame, and Wyatt heard the shriek of the slug . . .

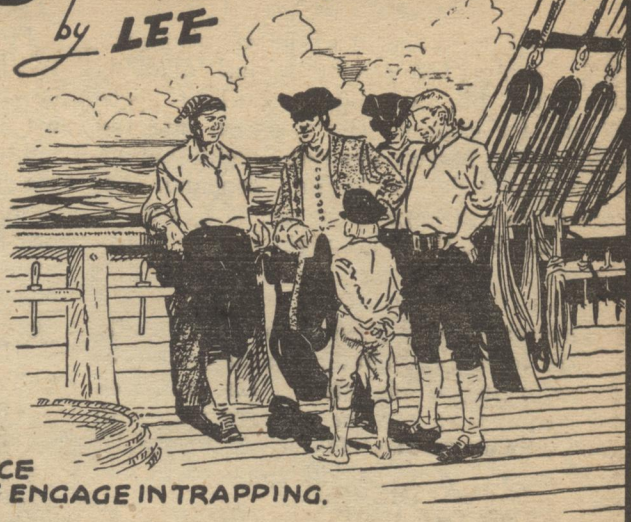
Author Joseph Chadwick tells the rest of Wyatt's story in "Treachery at Coffin Creek," in the next issue, published November 2nd.

THE EDITOR

TALES of the

by LEE

Jedediah Smith *and the* Mountain Men



AN AD IN THE *ST. LOUIS REPUBLICAN* EARLY IN 1822 TOUCHED OFF ONE OF THE OLD WEST'S GREATEST ODYSSEYS. ADDRESSED "TO ENTERPRISING YOUNG MEN," IT STATED THAT GEN. WM. ASHLEY WISHED TO EMPLOY 100 TO ASCEND TO THE SOURCE OF THE MISSOURI AND THERE ENGAGE IN TRAPPING.

THUS JEDEDIAH SMITH JOINED THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FUR CO. BORN IN 1798 AT BAINBRIDGE, N.Y., SMITH HAD BEGUN HIS WESTWARD SEARCH FOR FORTUNE AND ADVENTURE AT 13 BY SIGNING AS CLERK ON A LAKE ERIE FREIGHTER.

ASHLEY'S "MONTAIN MEN" POLED LABORIOUSLY UPRIVER INTO THE WILDERNESS. A PARTY RETURNING WITH THE WINTER'S CATCH WAS ATTACKED BY ARICKAREES. TWELVE PERISHED AND SMITH PERFORMED THE "FIRST RECORDED ACT OF WORSHIP IN SOUTH DAKOTA." WHEN HE READ A PRAYER OVER ONE'S GRAVE.

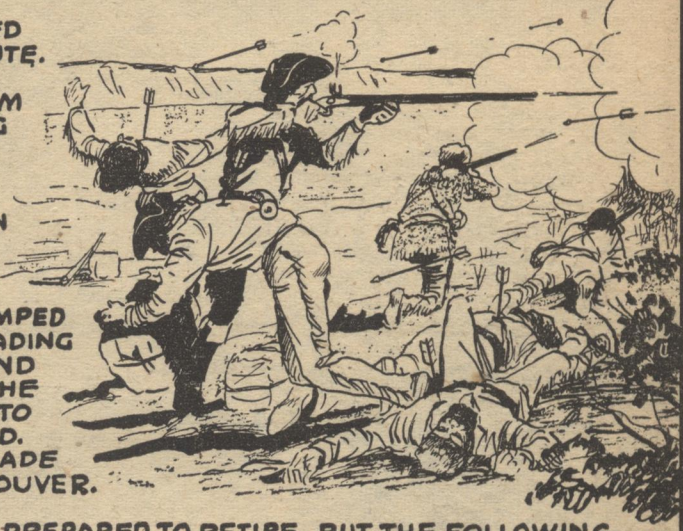
A GRIZZLY BADLY MANGLED HIS HEAD AND FACE BUT COMPANIONS SEWED HIM TOGETHER AND HE SURVIVED.

IN 1826, SMITH SET OUT FROM GREAT SALT LAKE WITH 17 MEN TO EXPLORE UNTRAPPED TERRITORY TO THE SOUTHWEST, AND CROSSED THE MOJAVE DESERT INTO CALIFORNIA. THE SPANISH GOVERNOR HELD THEM AS SPIES BUT FINALLY LET THE MOUNTAIN MEN DEPART NORTHWARD.

"OLD" WEST

AFTER AN UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT TO CROSS THE SIERRAS, SMITH LEFT HIS PARTY ENCAMPED ON THE AMERICAN RIVER AND WITH TWO COMPANIONS MADE THE PASSAGE AND PROCEEDED ON THROUGH THE GREAT BASIN TO SALT LAKE, THEREBY BECOMING THE FIRST AMERICAN TO ENTER CALIFORNIA FROM THE EAST, LEAVE FROM THE WEST, AND EXPLORE THE GREAT BASIN.

WITH 18 MEN HE RETRACED HIS SOUTHWESTWARD ROUTE. CROSSING THE COLORADO, MOJAVES AMBUSHED THEM AND KILLED 10. DROPPING THEIR EQUIPMENT TO DISTRACT PURSUIT, THE REST ESCAPED, JOINED THOSE ON THE AMERICAN AND HEADED FOR THE OREGON COUNTRY.



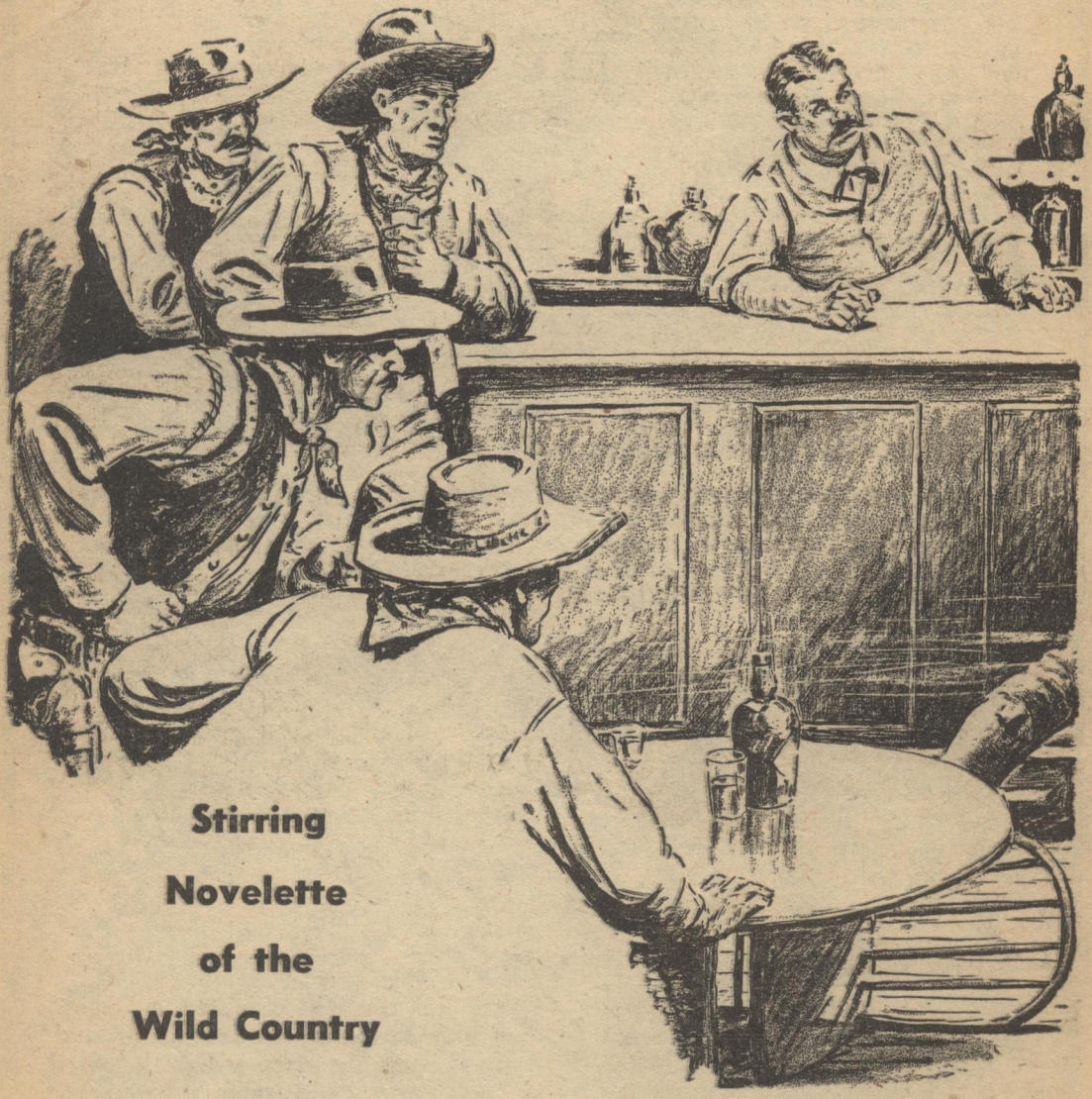
LEAVING THE PARTY CAMPED NEAR THE UMPQUA TRADING WITH INDIANS, SMITH AND TWO MEN EXPLORED THE RIVER AND RETURNED TO FIND THEM MASSACRED. SOMEHOW THE THREE MADE THEIR WAY TO FT. VANCOUVER.

IN 1830, JEDEDIAH SMITH PREPARED TO RETIRE. BUT THE FOLLOWING SPRING FOUND HIM WITH A 23-WAGON TRAIN BOUND FOR SANTA FE. NEARING THE CIMARRON, THEIR WATER SUPPLY ALMOST GONE, HE SCOUTED AHEAD ALONE AND A BAND OF COMANCHES JUMPED HIM AT A WATER HOLE.

NOBODY KNOWS JUST HOW THE GREAT EXPLORER DIED OR HOW MANY HE TOOK WITH HIM WHEN HE DID, FOR NONE OF THEIR BODIES WAS FOUND.

A HORSE ON RUSTY

By T. C. McCLARY



Stirring Novelette of the Wild Country

For Karen's love, Rusty was willing to tie down his itching foot and take on the gentling of a four-legged killer.

He was beaten and pommeled and things inside of him were busted wide.

CHAPTER ONE

Cattle Kingdom

RUSTY YOKUM came wandering down the Rockies and found himself in West Texas simply because nothing had stopped him for very long on the way. He had a good horse and a good saddle and a good gun. That was just about all he had to his name.

At high sun he came out upon the bluff. Beneath him, the sea of heat rolled over the desolate plain and off into shimmering, white-lead haze. The town of Sandtank floated on the dancing glare. The reason for its name was clear. It consisted of a single line of buildings along one side of the trail.

Even through the glaze of light it looked about as poor and miserable a hole as he ever hoped to see. Burning suns had blistered every plank, blizzards had scraped them raw and gray. Occasional stampedes, sand storms and cloudbursts had not helped to beautify the place.

Rusty sat studying it with cynical humor. He had a good deal in common with the town. There was no particular reason for

it being there, and it would not matter much to anyone if it blew away.

His broad lips quirked with the thought, and then he put his blue roan down grade. He crossed the rocky ford and mounted the zinc-yellow clay grade and swung into the town's single street. He drew rein outside Loeger's smithy, building a cigarette while he looked over the place.

It looked worse now that he was in it. It looked like the kind of place where the ring of a ten-dollar gold piece would bring the boys out in nightshirts from fifty miles around. It looked like the last place in the world that a man might find a job. Or would want it, if he did.

Sitting there, he was being inspected by the town. Suspicion and hostility for strangers drifted out of the shadows like strong smells. They knew he was from Montana by the fashion of his hat, and that was a long trail to come. Narrow and arrogant, yet shrewd of judgment, they formed their opinion of him on that. Only two kinds of men came that far—men riding the owl-hoot and those too fiddle-footed to put down roots. And from the easy humor of his face, it was clear Rusty was not the kind to live by his gun.

Across the background of his thoughts, he was conscious of the sounds of a buckboard bouncing across the ford behind. Then the dust-softened drum of running horses reached down trail. A calico team followed the sounds shortly, coming around the corner full tilt and missing him by only the dexterity of the driver's hand.

For an instant, he caught a girl's vivid golden face grinning through the boil of dust. Her eyes held deviltry. Her hair was like a field of waving wheat.

She sang out, "Here's dust in your eye, cowboy!" Her laughter was low. It rippled back as she whipped the horses on.

He thought, *Danged if she didn't mean that!* and the broad even line of his lips curved as he wiped out his eyes.

The quality of her voice lingered in him long after the sounds had really gone. His mind put together a picture from the simple fact of her speech. She was wild and high-blooded, or she would not have called out that way. But it was the self-assured exuberance of a girl so certain of respect she did not have to bother with ordinary conventions. That meant she would be a daughter of the big, cattle-owning class. Probably, the range king himself.

Cowboys were loafing down street on the stoop, whittling down sticks to pass the time of day. They touched their hats respectfully. One of them with the looks of a boss about him dropped off the stoop onto the walk, hitching his belts and arching out his chest. He had special privilege and it was in his cocky grin as he started to the street to help her.

She beat him to that by jumping lightly from the wheel. She was dressed in a buff riding skirt that fitted her lean hips snugly as a sheath. A tight beige waist showed her broad shoulders and the fluid lines of her torso. She was young and vital.

Rusty sat at the end of the street, soaking these things in without looking directly at her. There had been a few nice girls along his trail, but never one nice enough to hold him put. This girl could hold a man standing on his head.

He thought that and then remembered the sharp caste divisions of the feudal cattle country. They liked to say a man stood upon his own in Texas. But he had to own an awful lot of it! He gave a wry grin and felt a man's sharp regrets. That put her out of his footloose world completely.

She ducked under the hitchrack and doing so she swung a woman's curious gaze along her shoulder. He heard her ask the cocky cowboy, "Who's the pilgrim, Slate?"

Her question washed the high riding humor off the big fellow's face. He was muscular and barrel-chested and dark and square of face. He pivoted and laid his glance on Rusty and it was black with jealous anger. He answered, intentionally loud, "Some no-'count saddlebum by the looks. Mebbe we'll find out."

THE girl laughed. "One of these days you are right liable to find out the wrong hombre, Slate!" She shot him a mocking glance and moved with a swirl of skirts across the walk into the thick dusty shadows of the awning.

Slate put his attention back upon Rusty. His lids narrowed and the light struck brilliantly from the glossy surface of his black eyes. After a space, he got his reata from his saddle. He put a loop twirling just above the thick dust of the street. He leaned back against the hitchrack dawdling, his hand

keeping the twirling loop in easy motion.

Like a dog, Rusty thought sourly. *Got to bark and nip at stranger's heels as he goes through!*

He snubbed his cigarette and dropped it to the dust. He pulled down his hat and drifted on to meet his hazing. He passed Slate at a slow amble, feeling the grinning anticipation of the boys, and conscious of the bright lights of devilment in Slate's eyes.

The loop of the reata moved out into the trail and ran alongside his horse's ambling hoofs. Suddenly, it surrounded the horse's legs. The loop ran with him, not touching the horse, but spinning around it smoothly. Rusty had to admit the boy knew how to use a rope.

He considered that he was in one hell of a spot. A man didn't make gun trouble over a little horseplay. At least, not Rusty's kind of man. He might grin this off, but if Slate didn't take the grinning, he was going to land up in the dust and get hazed on right through town.

That left building up a fight. Rusty didn't mind a fight, but this was strange country, and Slate was about forty pounds heavier with a vindictive look of just waiting to show off for the girl.

Slate said now, "Why doggone if here I ain't tangled up this stranger's hoss, and I'm danged if I know how to shet my rope loose of him!"

He was running the loop up and down the animal's legs, trying to flurry it into a buck so that it would throw itself. A grin of wicked humor was on his hard lips.

"Then it kinda looks like I better help you," Rusty drawled. He touched his horse and spoke a word. The horse stopped in its tracks. It dropped and made a complete roll out of the loop. Rusty stepped out of the saddle as it dropped and back into a stirrup as it came up. He said amiably, "Always glad to help out a green rope hand."

The boys let out a hilarious howl. A man who could turn the joke back like that was worth a break. The girl stood against the dark oblong shadow of the door and smiled. She liked the way he had handled that and she let things personal drift behind the humor of her face.

Then she turned her gaze on Slate. He was used to coming out on top and this was something that had hit him like a slap. His face was red beneath his desert burn, his eyes angry and his blood rankling. The girl stepped into that forming mayhem right off. She called, "Looks like I was wrong, Slate. Wasn't the wrong hombre you found—it was the wrong hoss!"

He glowered, but this gave him his decent out. It put the smartness on the animal and not the stranger. He coiled in his rope, putting the best face on things he could. He growled grudgingly, "Sure looks that way, Karen."

The girl's gaze came back and lingered upon Rusty for an instant. He thought she was just about the prettiest thing he had ever seen. A man could drift along a hundred trails and never meet her match again. But it was something deeper than that alone which stirred him. Something that made a man kind of ashamed of his itchy feet, and made him wish that he had roots.

She surprised some of those thoughts on his face. A woman's bright pleasure sparked in her eyes. He darkened and dropped his head abruptly. Hitting dust, he gave attention to the hitching of his horse. He avoided her presence elaborately while he looked for the place that said *"Eats."*

HE FOUND a hole in the wall squeezed between Russle's General Merchandise and the Apache Saloon. An ancient was asleep upon the counter. He had enormous mustaches showing beneath the ten-gallon hat upon his face, and wore a soiled apron and bedroom slippers. Rusty nudged him into stirring and said, "Coffee and chili, friend."

The ancient cocked open one cantankerous bright eye. *"Cash?"*

Rusty nodded.

The ancient hit the floor like a full stampede. He growled above the crash of pans, "That's a downright miracle word in these parts!"

"Hard times?" Rusty asked.

"All the time! Good country, too, back of them dry hills yonder. Plenty of grass and fat beef, but no place to sell it."

"Looked like good hoss country," Rusty noted.

The ancient snorted. "Think you could get any of these lazy, shiftless cowprods to do that much work? Ain't but one hoss market in this country, the buyer for the Butterfields, and Butterfield don't take any-

thing but the best. Boys hereabouts ain't got the time to gentle 'em that way. It would interfere with their danged whittling and hell-raising too much."

Rusty took his time eating, easing saddle stiff muscles from the long trail. He learned most of what he wanted to know about the country. The girl was Karen Driscoll and her father was lord of the range. Slate's last handle was Monahan. He was rated a tough customer in anything he touched. He was a coming young rancher, but without the patience to work stock. He made his money out of hides and tallow.

There was not much else to find out. There hadn't been extra work around there for nine years.

Rusty considered his remaining eight dollars and twenty cents and thought of the girl. She made a man feel he'd kind of like to hang around a spell. He stood in the door, searching the strips of glare and shadow along the street, but saw no further sign of her, nor of her team.

Well, it had been nice just hearing her voice and seeing that interest in her laughing eyes. It was something to think about along the trail. He spur-dragged out and tightened his horse's cinch. Then with a sour irritation in him, he rode out the other end of town.

The trail dropped into chopped and eroded country. All day long the parched earth had soaked up the burning heat. Now the turn of day had come and it was giving the heat off in shimmering waves. Rusty mopped his brow.

He smelled fresh dust upon the air and ambled his horse on vaguely conscious that somebody was ahead. The sharpness of his thoughts was on the girl. The sound of her voice still rippled in him. His veins were filled with the soft laughter of her sparkling eyes.

It was the first time in his life he had ever figured just how poor and miserable a drifter was, and now it hit him like a cyclone. So darned poor he couldn't even find a way to meet a girl who had smiled at him! That was pretty bad.

He came over a long rise in this mood and down into a trough and abruptly upon a deep gullied drybed. The girl was standing in the middle. She looked up and said without any explanations, "I sure have got me in a fix!"

CHAPTER TWO

Tough Fight Ahead!

HE STEPPED out of his saddle and looked at her wagon and decided the word was mild. She had locked off her wheel between two boulders and it was going to stay that way until it was lifted out. She had snapped the rim and bent the tire, and he said with consideration, "Why ma'am, that is a downright tough thing to do!"

"You're telling me!" she said laconically. Her face was frowning, but her blue eyes were dancing behind masks. "Well, what are we going to do?"

Rusty scratched his head. "Dunno. Mebbe we could shoot it."

She grinned. She vaulted onto the wagon bed and sat with her elbows on her knees. She said, "Never mind worrying. I'll send some of the boys." She studied him against the harshness of the land. "You were riding along?"

"Well," he told her, "it don't seem like there's too much to do hereabouts."

She cocked her pert head a little to one side as if listening to something in his tones. She said, "You're no grub-line drifter and you're not riding the long trail. What did you expect to find down this way?"

He pulled out the makings and built a smoke. "Dunno. Man just gets itchy feet and rambles."

He had an easy drawl, soothing and full of gentle humor, but with a thread of bitterness in it too. She asked speculatively, "Where will that trail ever lead you?"

He pulled in a deep lungful of smoke. His eyes narrowed upon the country as he slowly let it out. Then he made a gesture. "Why, right here, I reckon."

"*Here?*" she repeated unbelievingly. "You mean to aim to settle down in this starvation sand tank?"

He said gravely without looking at her, "Miss Karen, there are things purtier in this country than anywhere I ever dreamed."

She stared and then she flushed and looked away. She found her breath suddenly coming fast. "My, it's hot down here! Let's get up where there's some air!"

Then she remembered the ranch was waiting for supplies. He fixed that by making pack upon one horse and letting her ride

his own, while he rode the other bareback. He could see her feeling his pony out, and the slow admiration for it that came over her. She said once, "Say, this horse isn't bad broke a-tall!"

He grinned at the compliment. Gentling a horse was one place where a man did stand upon his own.

They rode out trail a piece and then cut in a long circle toward the hills. It occurred to him that she would have saved a heap of trouble driving to her ranch the other way. Then he got the idea that maybe she had driven out ahead of him just to catch him on trail and his heart put on a stampede.

The sweat was sloshing in his hat. Pushing it back, he felt the rivulets dump across his dust-covered face. The girl looked at him and laughed. "See what I mean about this country? There is nothing here but dust and heat!"

"Well," he said speculatively, "there is that." He nodded along the trail ahead.

The shadows were washing out long and solid purple through the thinning haze. The hills were flushing up into myriad plums and heathers and maroons. The sun was a scarlet circle dropping out of the molten brassy cauldron up above. Now the desert was turning a hazy blue-gray, shot with soft yellows and reds and dusty pastel hues.

She turned and looked at him curiously. Things feminine and contemplative formed in her eyes. She started to speak, and then thought better of it and turned away with a woman's secret smile upon her face. After a spell she said, "We'll be at the ranch by sundown."

He said quickly, "Oh, ma'am, I'd best be leaving you here, then!"

"Why?" she asked with surprise.

He made a gesture. "Well, your pa might not like you riding around the country with just a common drifter."

SHE pinned her gaze upon the pommel and struggled inwardly with those arrogant prejudices and distinctions of the cattle-owning caste. She murmured with a tight, uncertain edge to her voice, "You're not just a common drifter—with a horse like this!"

"Oh, the world's full of hosses," he muttered. "If a man just takes the time to train 'em."

She wheeled her head and her eyes were hopefully bright. "Yore a hoss wrangler?"

"Well, middlin'," he said.

"Why, there is no man better than a hoss wrangler!" she said. "I've heard pa himself say that!"

He gave her a doubtful look but stuck along. They came abruptly onto a bench of purple sage and thick grass. At sundown, they dropped into a cool, watered coulee and came upon the ranch.

A rugged, white-maned giant was standing in front of the house watching their approach. His face was hewn of granite, with the bright searching eyes of a hawk. Without moving or uttering a sound he managed to convey his harsh contempt for drifters.

The girl called, "Pa, I've brought a stranger!"

"You're always bringing something," he allowed. "Orphan colts, prairie dogs—danged if once you didn't bring a pizen spider!" He considered Rusty without warmth. "You didn't figure to find work in this country?"

"Why—uh—no," Rusty swallowed, thinking quickly that no cowprod ever sat at the same table or went riding with a cattle-owner's daughter. "I was—uh—kind of lookin' around for some wild mustangs."

"Hoss hunter?" the old man asked with surprise. "You look mighty slight and easy-going for that suicide life, mister!" He looked over Rusty's horse with a speculative eye. The horse seemed to meet his approval more than its owner. "Nice critter," he allowed. "Well, stranger, light for supper. . . ."

A month later, Rusty had dropped his rope back in the wild horse canyons without knowing how or why himself. He had a wickiup built and two good corrals on Sunset Ledge. He had broken four horses and was gentling them down. For the first time in his life he experienced the urge to put down roots and get something done.

He drifted over to Driscoll's Saturday evening. Coming up from the corral, he caught a private conversation.

Karen was demanding hotly of her father, "What's wrong with Rusty, pa? He's a darned good wrangler!"

"Yup, I will hand him that," Driscoll agreed. "He is more than a wrangler, he is a horse trainer, and that cuts a lot with me. But this is a rough, tough country, Karen."

"Well, hasn't he shown he's tough?"

"Not yet. Mebbe he will. But that it is not what I'm thinking. What I'm thinking is that he is too gentle to take the licking the country gives."

"Why don't you give him a chance?" she demanded.

Her father was silent a long moment. Then he said, "He'll get his chance to prove up and on his own ground. Slate has gone into wild hoss breaking."

After a space, the girl came out upon the porch. She saw Rusty and knew he must have heard. She darkened, and dropped her head and moved over against the porch railing.

She was dressed in something white with a polka-dot design. The broad yoke showed the slim roundness of her shoulders and the smooth fullness of her throat. He stood, awkward and embarrassed, thirsty for her as a man thirsts for water, and yet conscious he had nothing to offer.

He said thickly, "Karen, if I am making trouble, I could move along."

"And have them think you couldn't lick the range after all?" she demanded.

He looked down at the dust between his feet. "I was thinking of you."

Her hand came out to his impulsively. "I know, Rusty! You're sweet. But don't let them see that in you. Ride them down and drag them—it's all this range understands."

He said miserably, "Slate was here and you know about him. But I'm new. You don't know, and mebbe I would not make the grade."

She tugged his hand against the hollow beneath her chin. "You'll make it, Rusty! Give yourself a chance! Don't you think enough of me to stay and try?"

"Oh," he muttered. "Don't think I'd go running out. If you want it that way, I'd stay and fight the devil!"

KAREN gave a woman's tender smile and held his hand passionately against her neck. She stood like that, lost in contemplation. She murmured almost to herself, "I wish I knew right now. I wish the thing would happen that would make me know. I want to be honest, but I don't know for sure how I feel!"

"I do," he told her with gentle understanding. "Like your pa, Karen. It's something in you, you can't help."

He stood close beside her, but he did not crowd. He just stood there letting her lean her weight against him. The soft sundown light slanted in and put its pulsing light into their mood. After a time, she gave his lean, rope-hardened hand a squeeze of fondness and turned and looked at him.

Disturbed, she asked, "You don't think I'm harsh not to know yet for sure?"

"Why Karen," he said. "You're the gentlest thing there is!"

Her eyes filled with dark depths, and then the mood passed and her thoughts turned to other things. "I hear there are two mankillers out in the canyons. You aim to try for one?"

He sat down on the steps and rolled a cigarette. "I am trying for the silver one. She's not mean, but she's scared. It'll be a job."

She said, "The Butterfield buyer will be through here in three months. Every man in this country tries to have a horse for Butterfield."

"I'll be ready," he told her. "And they'll buy most of my stock."

Conceit was a new thing in Rusty and she looked at him quickly. But then she saw there was no boastfulness in his statement. It was simply something he had thought out and considered as a fact. She wondered if he knew the things Butterfield demanded in a horse, and that darned few horses had them.

Then she smiled and gave his hair a rumple and looked out at the trail. A plume of mulberry tinted dust was lengthening down from the rim. She murmured, "Slate," and they waited while he rode up. He came in fast and drew up showy, hard and cruel upon the horse's mouth.

He swung down and came in cockily and grinned. "Well, if this ain't the top wrangler of them all! Yokum, how you doing with those wild hosses out yore way?"

"Middling," Rusty granted. "I've got four in line."

"Me," Slate allowed with a swagger, "I've already got eighteen in the corrals! You can see buckskin and dust fly for a mile!" He had an arrogant pleasure with himself. "Roped in that coal-black killer today, too." He watched the spark of excitement light in Karen's eyes. He chuckled and leaned against the post. There was a rough and brutal vitality to him that affected the girl. Rusty could see it act upon her, almost feel-

ing the rising tempo of her pulse. Slate felt it and it helped put him in an arrogant, good humor.

He built a smoke and regarded her through the drifting bluish veil. Then he remarked, "Rusty, you are going to have a tough crawl out of this country!" and stared through narrowed eyes.

Rusty met his gaze quietly. "What makes you think so?"

Slate snapped his match off into the dust. He said flatly, "Because I aim to make it tough. The Butterfields are only buying thirty hosses. The first one they are going to buy will be my killer. That gives me first show, and I am going to sell them their whole string!" He gave a smoldering laugh. "Brother, this sure is going to show you up!"

The girl caught her lower lip between her teeth. She gave Rusty a pleading look. Yet behind it, he caught her wonder of which was the better man; the almost unconscious thought of which would put up the toughest fight.

He said, "Well, we'll see. Three months is a long spell off, Slate."

"Not the way *you* break a hoss!" Slate chuckled. "Why boy, you'll still be trying to nurse 'em into the halter stage! Those are tough mustangs in this country. They need treating rough."

"Mebbe," Rusty grunted. He felt the sting of the words. He could ride about anything short of greased lightning, but he had never had it in him to really rough break a horse. He used the slower and gentler ways, and they were not as spectacular.

He could feel the conflict in the girl, the tenderness she felt for him fighting with the excitement Slate put into her. Slate had smashed his way up on this range just the way he broke a horse. A horse gave to his will, and quick, or he beat it down into the dust.

He stood up and the girl did not urge him to stay, and after an awkward moment, he made his departure.

Rusty rode slowly back to his camp feeling gritty inside himself. His certainty of himself was shaky, and he was acutely conscious of being a drifter. Maybe, he thought, the girl did not really care for him at all.

Maybe she was just being kind.

CHAPTER THREE

Horse Killer

RUSTY moped around camp but he got to fiddling with his horses. Shortly, his mind was taken up with that sweet labor of taming the scare out of them, and gentling them to a pride in their harness job. A man didn't need to half kill a horse to break it. All he had to do was give it a chance to understand; a chance to be sure of itself under harness and to develop a new pride. It was like the settling of a footloose kid—some freedom lost, but something of much deeper satisfaction won.

He had no help, he put in gruelling work all that month. He caught about sixty horses, and out of these he kept six. He broke them and gentled them and tamed them down. He was training them, teaching them gaits, when Karen rode by with her father.

Old man Driscoll watched him work the horses all that afternoon. He said nothing, sitting upon the top bar of the corral, tough and shrewd and contained. When they went to leave, he fixed Rusty with a penetrating eye. He said, "Young fella, there ain't too much size to you, but what there is, knows hosses. Any of these Butterfield don't buy, I will take off your hands at your price."

A warm gladness flushed over Karen's face. When her father offered anything, it was a compliment that had meaning. She said softly, "Pa, you could have waited and told him that some time at supper."

"I ain't asked him to supper!" her father barked. "This is a hoss deal. It don't mean I want him to move into my home!"

Rusty grinned at the old man's bilious humor and watched them ride off into the purpling haze. Driscoll was withholding judgment. But the drifter was making headway. He had his supper in a cheerful mood and then rode out through the hills. He had luck this evening. He dropped his rope upon the silver killer.

He spent three solid weeks on that animal. Not beating it, the way he was sometimes minded, but simply showing it who was boss. He would let it buck itself around the high corral and shake him like a field of reeds. He was stiff and sore all over and had a couple of sprains and snapped bones.

But he had not given the horse a real

taste of bit or whip or spurs. He would simply ride it until they reached a defiant headlock of sheer exhaustion. Then he would give it some water and sweet bark, and leave it to itself in the corral. After it had a space to stew out of its bile, he would come out and sit against a post and strum to it on a banjo.

Rusty had to divide the last month, brushing his whole cavvy into harness trim. He had the killer broken, but not tamed. It was still frightened by the harness, still rebellious. It was in the taut quivering of its muscles as soon as it heard of the slap of harness. The feel of harness would bring that deep and unyielding outrage flaring in its eyes.

He was sitting on the corral considering its character when Karen and her father rode up again. The strain of the weeks had been harsh on Rusty. His face was thin and gaunted and he was stripped of flesh and wire lean. His vittles had not been too good, and all of these things had depressed his mood.

He saw the quick concern flood through her eyes as he helped her down. There was an instant when the weight of her body rested full against him.

He had the sharp knowledge of what it would mean to a man to be able to look into the years ahead and know he could always hold her in his arms.

Karen felt his mood and whispered to him, "Mebbe things will clear if you come out tops with Butterfield, Rusty. Gee, it would make such a great difference with pa!"

He set her down and held her waist for a brief space. "And you?"

Her glance shied, and then she met his with her honest, level look. "I think with me too. It would be some kind of a sign. I can't explain, but it would settle something in me."

He made no answer, but turned and walked her over to her father.

Old man Driscoll leaned on the corral considering the silver killer. He said at length, "Rusty, you have about got that critter busted proper."

Rusty licked his lips and his jaw set. He said, 'I aim to put her back loose on the range."

"By damn!" Driscoll rumbled. "Why?"

Rusty made a gesture at the horse's eyes. The strain and unhappiness of circumstance was in them. There was a fierce love of freedom in this animal and the weeks of restriction had brought this near to breaking. Rusty said slowly, "I could rough break her in an hour. But it would bust her pride and spirit. And she won't gentle otherwise."

Driscoll gave him a sharp, probing look. "If you don't match Slate's killer it may cost you the whole hoss deal."

"I'll have to chance it," Rusty said. "I couldn't stand breaking the spirit of a beautiful hoss like that."

He moved inside the corral to get away from things in the girl's eyes which she would never say. Maybe a lot of things were in her mind. If not, Slate would put them there for thinking. Such as that he had failed to lick the killer horse and was quitting. Or if not that, then that he was soft.

Well, he reckoned he was, and the bitterness of it ran through him like acid. But it was something he could not help. He let the corral gate swing open, and gave the killer a whack on the rump, and they watched her suspiciously edge out.

Once free and sure of it, she gave a wild, trumpet call of freedom, and bucked, and then struck out for the hills. The three watched it go, held silent in the tenseness of their thoughts.

Rusty caught the wash of tears across the girl's star-blue eyes, and the whiteness of her face. If nothing worse, he was throwing the whole horse deal into Slate's lap. No matter what else that meant, it would have weight with her father. It was a range where a man had to be hard and tough to survive. Harsher, sometimes, than his private inclinations.

THE thoughts of the three came down on them like winter wind. It made them stiff and unnatural. There was nothing any of them could say. Rusty brought out a couple of teams and paced them off half-heartedly. It meant nothing, he had no room for pride within him.

Driscoll stayed to see them out of sheer decency, that deep-dyed code of the range to give a man his chance right up to the end. But it was a mere formality. In a short while, he signaled his daughter to ride along.

Rusty came out of the corral to help her to her saddle. For a moment, their hands

touched and locked as she was seated, and she looked down on him with a softness in her eyes as if she were stroking his wearied, fevered head. But beyond the softness was her own hard knowledge of what they would mean. She took her reins in hand and jerked away her gaze and they rode away. . . .

Rusty had a boy come out from town to help drive in the cavvy on the appointed day. Far back in their dust, the silver killer trailed along. It did not come near, but it drifted back and forth across their trail, as if conscious that in some way it could not understand it had let Rusty down.

The whole country had turned out for this contest. This was the big show of the year, bigger than the rodeo. Butterfield paid up to three hundred dollars for a horse. Some of the smaller ranchers had brought sale horses in, but few had bothered. There wasn't much use with Slate Monahan bringing in sixty-three headed by the killer.

The Butterfield buyer had set up to review the runs from the hotel porch. He was a jovial, affable man with a ready laugh. But on the score of horses, he had no humor whatsoever.

Custom was the leading sellers to take turns until one had put forth a really unusual horse. Broken properly, a killer was usually that sort. Thereafter, the owner had the opportunity of showing his entire string. Often, this closed other sellers out until the next year.

The sellers drew lots for first out and Rusty won. He took his first team up to the head of the run and hitched them with a well-schooled stage team and brought them in review. He had to pass five times at different gaits. The Butterfield man was impressed. They were good horses. He bought the pair at top price.

Slate took his team up next run. There was an arrogant swaggering cockiness to him. He let the world know that what they had just seen was scrub. What they were going to see was real horseflesh as broken by Slade Monahan!

He brought the horses down course, hard on the bit, not giving them any chance to flurry. The Butterfield man leaned forward, his eyes glued upon the coal black killer. On the second run, he got up and moved down onto the bottom step. His eyes were keen and his excitement up. The horse was a beauty. It had been gaunted in the breaking, but a few weeks feed would take care of that.

Slate took the stage back and came down on his fourth trial. This was the full-out gallop with the fast brake stop. He laid on the whip and came down course lifting his deep chested yell clean up to the skies. He made the run spectacular and cut a picture.

Glancing at the girl, Rusty saw the bright excitement in her eyes.

Slate jammed on the brake and leaned back on the ribbons cruelly. The horses came back on their haunches and a wicked gleam of victory was in Slate's eyes. He gave the ribbons an extra saw.

That extra saw snapped the killer's nerves wide. All of its wild and savage hatred of captivity and this man came unleashed. With a spine-chilling cry of mayhem, the horse went wild. It took the bit immovably in its teeth, and tore slack into the lines, and in nothing flat had kicked the other horses thrashing.

They got the horses away, one by one. But Slate had not moved from the box. He sat up there, his foot frozen on the brake, his hands glued upon the drooping reins. His face was flat gray.

The Butterfield man called out, "Monahan, don't ever try to pass a green killer on me again! All right there, Rusty, let's see more hosses that won't put a passenger stage over the first cliff!"

SLATE came suddenly out of his freeze. He vaulted to the ground and ripped out a nasty curse at Rusty, and went lunging off to the corrals. As Rusty started a team back into fresh traces, the bark of a pistol smashed out between two buildings. There was that terrible thing, a horse's scream. Then another shot and silence.

A cowboy came out of the alley and spoke in a low voice to Driscoll and Rusty saw his eyes blaze and his rough-hewn face fill with anger. Then he heard some waddy say to another, "Slate shot the critter dead."

They were rough, tough men and the code of the country was harsh and for a man to mind his own business. But they were horsemen, and lovers of horseflesh at heart, and this act of Slate's was worse than a killing—it was murder in their eyes. It would take him a long spell to live this down.

Rusty felt the waves of angry contempt that filled the town, but he was too depressed in his own thoughts to give much attention. His next team failed for purchase, and before he could show his string, the number was bought up. The Butterfield man paid him off for his one team and gave him a friendly look. He said, "Give me a prize lead-team to carry your string next year, Rusty."

"Sure," Rusty nodded, but he didn't feel too good. If he had sold eight or nine horses he might have had enough money to start a small spread. He had made profit, but not enough, and even though they were grinning about it, the boys were riding him hard over letting his chance of the killer go. If his killer had behaved, he would likely have sold ten horses. He could sell them to Driscoll, but the local top price was fifty dollars.

He knew now that he had been counting on that sale more than he would admit to himself. He had counted on it for the money, but for something more as well. A man who cut a good swath at that sale would get respect upon that range.

Rusty had these thoughts and they were dark, and he moved into the Apache Saloon for a drink. Driscoll was in there talking with a group of older men. . . . Slate was drinking in black bile by himself. He came down bar abruptly and reached out a big thick hand and wheeled Rusty around. He ground out thickly, "Drifter, you wuz the cause of this!" and without more palaver, let his other fist drive in.

Rusty smashed against the bar and felt his senses reel. And then he came out fighting mad. Maybe it was that madness that undid him, that made him clamber up from the floor to walk into Slate's massacre long after he was whipped half dead. He was beaten and pommeled and things inside of him were busted wide. He knew it, but he couldn't stop. He came back for more even after he could no longer see, or breathe or think.

HE CAME to in the Driscoll house. It was bright day, and through one pulsing eye, he saw the girl. She was smiling. He moved and took the dipper of water she put to his lips. He was plumb beaten up, and badly. He felt like one throbbing sore.

He asked through thick battered lips, "I take the whole licking?"

"I hear you did all right," she said.

Her eyes were very soft and he had the idea she might stoop and kiss him. It brought a hot, hard lump into his throat. But then her pa came up behind her and grunted. "So you come to finally?"

Rusty said with embarrassment, "It was mighty nice of you to bring me out here, Mr. Driscoll. I'll be riding just as soon as I'm able."

The old man snorted. "That lickin' scare you off the range?"

"Oh, it ain't that!" Rusty told him. "It's just—well, I ain't proved out so well and I wouldn't embarrass you and Karen." He felt a hot sting in his one good eye. "I reckon I was soft letting that hoss go."

"Yup. You're a mite soft on such things," Driscoll nodded. He looked out the window with contemplation. "Don't reckon you'd hanker to stick around and start a hoss spread on shares with me, with Slate after your hide, eh?"

A sudden puzzled but wild surge of feeling came up through Rusty. He looked at the girl, and saw she wanted him to stay, and he said so violently he almost tore off his sore jaw, "Why, I'd take Slate on every time I got well!"

"Yes sirree, soft as the devil!" Driscoll snorted. "Just likes one lickin' after another!" He turned from the window with a grin, and then scowled and left them alone.

Rusty said dazedly, "That's kinda funny way for your pa to act, seeing Slate come out on top. Even if Slate killed that hoss."

"Well, Slate didn't exactly come out that way," she murmured through warm tears in her throat. "He got kind of licked down by the boys. He couldn't take the way they stood off and wouldn't drink with him, and he lit out after the fight. See, it wasn't the lickings he could give, it was the ones he couldn't take that set pa's mind."

The old man's stream of cussing came through the window. He yelled, "Karen, kiss that coyote and rout him out here! I can't get that danged killer of his to stay clear of my corrals. It's raising hell!"

But Karen was already attending to that. And in her lips was the sweet message of contriteness that she had not known a drifting softie might come out on top.

THE END

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 45)

1. Anti-godlin means moving diagonally or in a roundabout fashion.

2. The ranch boss is sometimes referred to as the "big auger."

3. True. A box canyon is a canyon having only one opening.

4. True. The cowpoke uses the term, "comin' grass" in reference to the approach of spring.

5. If the ranch boss sent you for the "cookie pusher," you should return with a waitress from a restaurant.

6. True. A horse is said to be "coon-footed" when he has long, very low pasterns.

7. In the old days, "corn freight" was a term used in reference to freight shipped by mule team. On such a freighting trip, corn was carried for the mules.

8. Yes. If one cowpoke refused to give another the makings for a cigarette after being asked to do so, this would be considered a direct insult by rangeland standards.

9. The cowpoke slang term, "mining for lead," means probing for a bullet.

10. The Spanish word *mochila* means knapsack.

11. A palomilla horse is a white or cream-colored animal having a white mane and tail.

12. If the ranch boss sent you to the "ram pasture," you should head for the bunkhouse.

13. If a cowpoke referred to the rear cinch as the "rear girth," chances are he would be from Texas. At least, the term seemed to be used most predominantly in that state in the old days.

14. The expression, "riding with an extra cinch-ring," is generally used in reference to rustlers or persons suspected of being rustlers.

15. The term, "rustle" means to steal cattle or to wrangle horses.

16. True. A "shoulder draw" is a draw made from a shoulder holster under the armpit.

17. If your cowpoke acquaintance referred to a "swivel dude," he would be talking about a gaudily-dressed individual.

18. In the slanguage of the cowpoke, "swimming water" is water that is too deep to cross without swimming.

19. False. The term, "wedgers in," was used to refer to people who came uninvited.

20. True. The "wreck pan" is the receptacle in which dirty dishes are placed after a meal in the cow camp.

(Continued from page 36)

That night in the Paradise, the uncanny horse and the excitement it had caused were the main topics for conversation. The stunned silence of the afternoon had turned to anger at "being cheated," and then to a philosophical acceptance of the fact that they had been taken by a better man. Always quick to anger and ready for a fight, the cowtown was also quick to cool off and ready to enjoy a joke, even one that was on itself.

As Johnny Malone, one of the luckless riders of the afternoon put it, with a chuckle, "I guess we was sheared like the woolly lambs, boys. That Indian used a cold deck right in front of us, and we didn't even notice. Looks to me like that horse had quite a bit of A-rab in him, like the racehorses back East."

Another of the ranch hands commented, "Remember how mad the Colonel was? He gave that speech about how he was 'righteously indignant,' and was all set to ride out after the Indian kid, to get the money back."

"Fat chance we'd have o' catchin' him, on the mangy streak o' lightnin'. What I admire is the way that Ute had 'im trained. That horse acted so sick I thought I could outrun him myself. I reckon it was worth the money we lost just to see a shark like that in action."

Mr. John Rockhill sauntered up from his gaming tables in the rear to get a drink for himself.

"Here he is, boys," said Malone, pointing at the gambler as one would point admiringly at a successful businessman, "here's the gent what's got all the money we bet on Saunders."

Rockhill took his drink and shook his head sadly. "Not quite all, boys. I had to pay off, at heavy odds, one bet that won." He twirled the glass between his long, supple fingers. "One man in this town knew the Indian would win."

The crowd leaned forward, anxious to learn who the phenomenal wise man in their midst was.

Rockhill tossed off his drink and set the glass on the bar. "Colonel Claybottom had five hundred dollars on Cannonball."

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"Yeah. I object on two counts. First, any white man knows better than to be caught with a warbonnet in Dakotah country. Second, why did you hide it in a barrel of crackers? Was that so you could use it to rob people on the trail and lay it on to the Indians?"

The trigger of the gun clicked back, but the Preacher's whip coiled around the barrel and jerked the gun from his hand. Somebody tossed Williams the other piece of chain.

"Fight fair," said Shorty LeBlanc. They faced each other. Gene crouched.

Williams swung. The chain whistled. Gene tried to step back but stumbled on a case of tomatoes. The last three links of the chain ploughed through his ribs. He got to his feet and swung. Williams backed away. His flat black hat dropped to the ground, upside down. The men around were silent, watching. Shorty LeBlanc chewed nervously. Alice Barber came running back from the front. Her face was white in the dawn.

Williams moved in. He began to swing with short, chopping blows, so the chain didn't get out of control. He slammed it against Gene's thigh like a hundred hammers. Gene's leg was numb. He backed slowly. Williams followed, swinging back and forth. Then Gene got the range. He caught Williams coming in and wrapped the end of his chain around Williams' neck. He jerked with both hands. He heard the bones crack as they split under the pressure.

Williams crumpled up in a pile and then fell to his knees, his head hanging lifeless. His body opened up like a jack-knife and he went over on his face. Gene left the chain as it lay.

The Preacher was saying, "A couple of you get him buried. I'll need four men to help me put on a spare wheel.'

Gene limped toward his horse. But Alice Barber's hand was on his forearm. Her touch was light and warm. Her soft brown eyes looked up at him. "I'll have coffee in a few minutes, Gene. Will you come—after all I've said?'

He looked down at her and smiled. "There isn't much left of the trail to Deadwood," he said, "but it's the best part."

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That's expert work, Ann," Truxlow said, almost in awe.

"It's been my hobby—and my only entertainment and amusement—from the time we first came here eight years ago," she replied quietly.

She felt Lee Truxlow's startled glance, but did not look toward him. His words barely reached her.

"And that'll be corrected—if we ever get out of here."

Down below someone was issuing orders. The pair in the cave caught the words, "Walls and roof," but could not understand the gist of the command. A moment later the firing began again, this time from such angles as to expose almost no part of the attackers. Nor did the bullets strike the rocks in front of them, or even come close, but they did enter the cave mouth, spanging against the roof and walls, spraying lead silvers and rock dust into the bank of the cave.

Truxlow laughed a little harshly. "That's one way to waste ammunition. When they run dry it'll be our turn."

"Lee!"

Something in the girl's breathlessness as she uttered his name caused the young Basin cowboy to look at her quickly. She was staring upward at the walls on either side, converging to no more than a thin crack high above.

"Look—we are in danger now, and nothing we can do about it. Those rocks above. Some have already fallen, like the ones I moved up for our cover. Others are ready to fall. The impact of those bullets will soon bring them down—right on top of us," and as she finished a rifle bullet found a crack behind one of the sections of rock near the rear of the cave and it fell with a crash not ten feet from the girl's feet.

Lee Truxlow cursed, and a volley of lead smashing against a wall on his side loosened a second rock. It fell between him and the girl. Immediately he twisted around, his hands going down to his right leg. For a moment Ann could not see what he was doing. Then she stared. He had untied and unwound the bandage over his wounds. Before she could guess the reason he was fastening the white cloth, stained with blood, to the barrel of his rifle.

"No! No!" she cried in horror. "Surrender and they'll kill you, Lee!"

"But they'll let you go free—that'll be the condition of surrender," he replied grimly as he tied the last knot and started to shove the rifle barrel ahead of him into the open.

ANN threw herself across at him, gripping his gun arm and depressing the rifle. His other hand caught her on the shoulder and hurled her back. And in that instant yells and gunshots sounded from below. Strangely, no more lead was coming into the cave.

"Lee—look, look—my dad. We're saved—oh, thank heaven," she cried, and then settled behind her boulder, shoving her rifle through the aperture.

Down below, a half dozen mounted men had entered the pocket. They instantly piled out of their saddles and advanced with guns spouting at the unprotected sheepmen. In their lead was the wiry little Brad Holbright and just behind him came a tall man with sweeping gray mustaches. Both were firing their sixguns with slow and deadly deliberation.

Those of the Claney gang who could move had scuttled around their rock shelters to get cover from the withering fire. Lee Truxlow opened up at these with his rifle. Ann shot to cripple, since so far as she knew she had not yet killed a man. Her uncannily swift and accurate rifle fire ended the fight within seconds. Those of the enemy who could, dropped their guns and stood up, hands high. Those who could not stand threw away their weapons. Only four of the eight who had entered the pocket were alive. Kuper Claney was not one of them.

The leader of the sheepmen lay with his back to the rock, facing the crack through which the rescuers had come, and there were two holes in his breast scarcely an inch apart. Both Holbright and the tall man with the gray mustache stood beside each other and looked down at Claney. Holbright leaned forward pointing to one of the holes, then moving his finger to the second.

"Mine," he said, and at the second, "yours."

The tall man nodded. "And either would have done the trick," he added.

Up in the cave Ann Holbright was sput-

tering at her partner while she replaced the bandage he had ripped off in his attempt at surrender. Lee Truxlow was not replying vocally, but there was a pleased light in his blue eyes and his crooked grin was suggestive of a secret triumph.

"You need somebody to look after you, to make you behave," Ann scolded, knotting the split ends of the bandage.

"Swell! I was hopin' you'd realize that. But there's only one person in the world can do it. I'm hopin' she'll take on the job," he replied, his last two sentences entirely devoid of levity.

Ann settled back, looking into his face, and the flush again mounted to her cheeks. She looked away. "Maybe she would—if we weren't . . . enemies," she whispered.

His hand reached out suddenly and caught hers in a tight grip and she made no effort to withdraw it.

There was the sound of scraping and rattling pebbles and the climbing of men. The cave mouth was darkened by the forms of little, wiry Brad Holbright and the tall, lean, mustached man who had fought beside him at the mouth of the pocket. The pair in the cave seemed scarely conscious of the intrusion.

They were looking at each other.

The tall man turned to his companion. "Holbright, I reckon it's lucky when we rode up to your place looking for Lee that we ran into you taking the trail of your daughter. And the way things seem to be shaping up looks like you and me've been two stubborn, old diehards for some eight years."

There was a distinct softening of Holbright's hard features when he replied.

"I'm beginnin' to believe I've been one, Jeb Truxlow. Now that your other gang have probably driven the sheep and the Claney clan back onto the mesa where they belong, I suggest us cattlemen sort of bury the hatchet. Never thought I'd make that offer to a Truxlow, but my girl and your boy seem to 've got clearer heads than us old codgers."

Ann's fingers were painfully pressed together in the tightening grip of Lee Truxlow, but neither realized it. They were looking up in amazement at the two old men. Suddenly all four broke into grins that melted the last trace of enmity.

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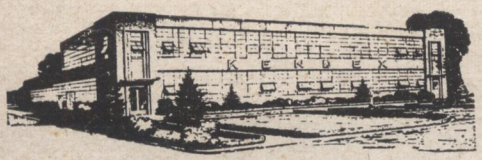

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