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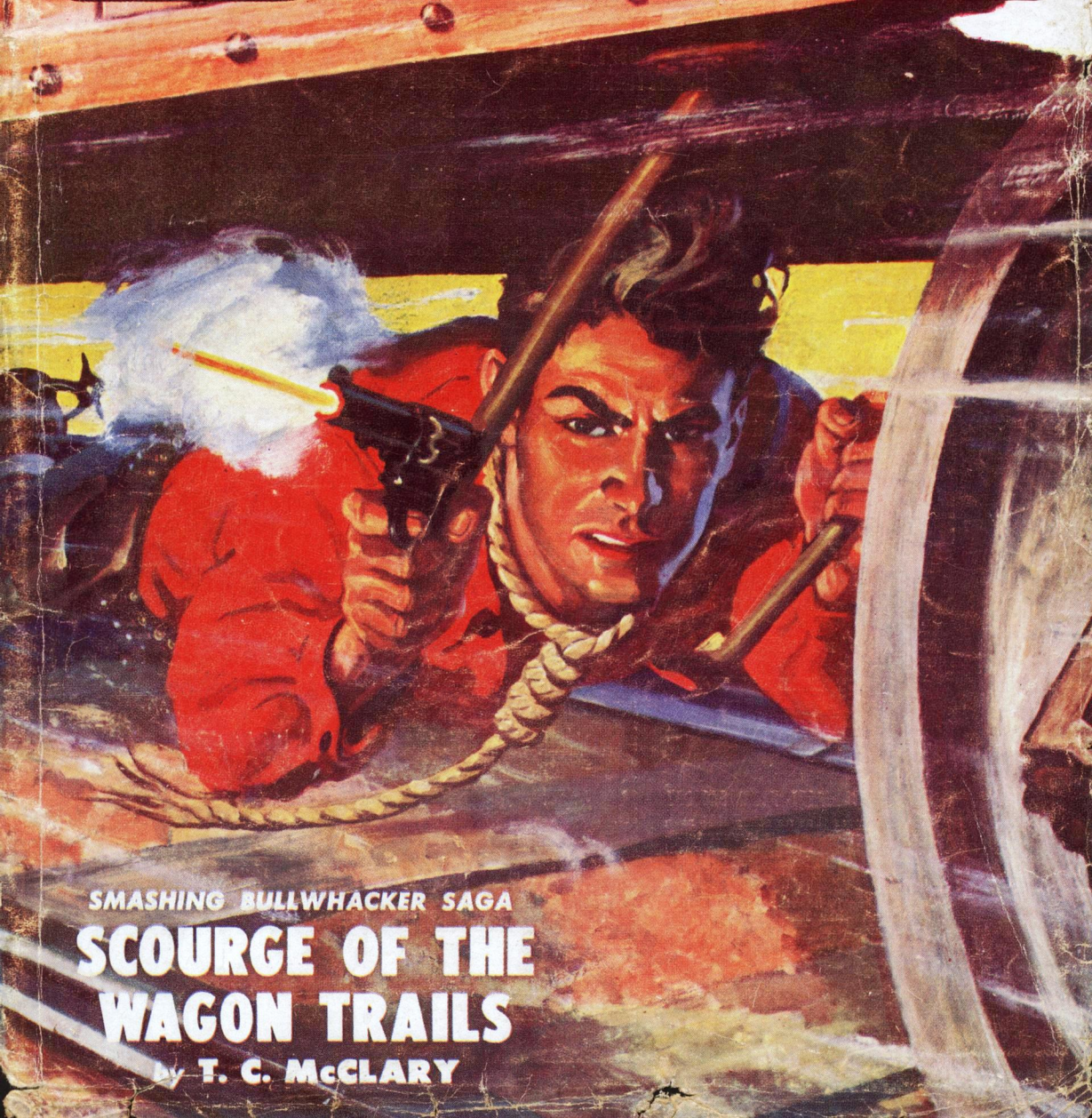


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TALES

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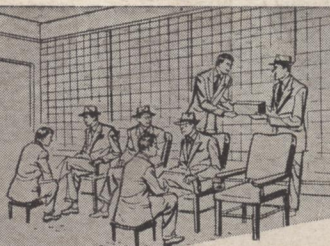
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SCOURGE OF THE WAGON TRAILS

by **T. C. McCLARY**

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 25, No. 2



MARCH, 1952

Three Big Novelettes

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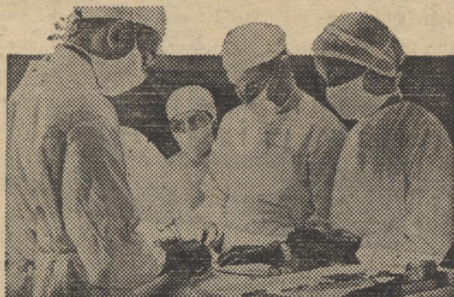
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LYNCH THE JUDGE!

*He's setting a murderer
free. . . .*

By LEW JAMES

THE little courtroom was hot and stuffy, but that wasn't the reason why the lined old face of Judge Davis turned a shade whiter when the best friend he had on that range, Squaw Creek Fogarty, as a last desperate gesture on the part of the defense, was called to the witness stand.

"We admit," said the young, red-faced defense attorney, "that the prisoner, Fogarty, shot down the rancher known as Idaho Neely the night of June tenth, in the Bravo saloon. We admit he gave the deceased Neely little chance to go for his gun. But we aim to show that there was good and sufficient reason for that act on the part of the defendant. . . ."

The pudgy figure of Squaw Creek Fogarty sat on the edge of the battered witness chair, his big fingers locked. His mouth opened a little, then closed. "I got nothin' to say," he muttered.

The buzz in the courtroom was quickly silenced by the pound of Judge Davis' six-shooter butt on the desk. After the sweating jurors had brought in their verdict, and after Judge Davis' cracked voice had delivered the sentence . . . "To be hanged by the neck until you are dead, said execution to take place here in Adobe Wells, not later than three months from the present date . . ." old Center-Fire Davis staggered from the courtroom like a broken man. . . .

By various ways, news of the verdict found its way up to the Snake River country in Idaho, where Neely had come from. Strangers, hard-faced, whisky-loving gents, started to drift in. "A hell of a law you have down here," said one, "to leave a saddle-galled, stove-up ol' pelican like that jedge give out any sentence. Three months between killin' a man in cold blood an' the time he'd due to hang! A lot can happen in that time to cheat the rope. An' Idaho Neely was a damn good friend of ours!"

Then trouble hit elsewhere in the county.

(Please continue on page 8)

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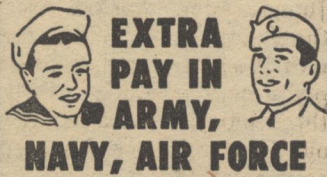
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Tested Way to Better Pay

(Continued from page 6)

There was a stage stick-up and killing on the Twin Rocks road, and some prime yearling beeves started to disappear from the local ranches. Old Sheriff Bunce had all he and his posse could do, chasing from one end of the county to the other.

IT WAS one of those times when the sheriff was away that a bunch of masked men gathered before the little jailhouse where Squaw Creek Fogarty was imprisoned. Center-Fire Davis heard the unmistakable, menacing rumble of them as he sat on his vine-covered porch. Quickly, he slipped inside, came out with his twin-barreled scattergun and started down the shadowed street, around to the rear of the jail.

Center-Fire Davis didn't say a word as he shouldered inside. He grabbed another shotgun from the gunrack and thrust it into the quavering jailor's hands. "You take the back, Hip-Shot. An' gimme the keys."

He stepped quickly down the corridor, called out for Squaw Creek Fogarty and unlocked his cell. He gave the prisoner a gun. "Looks like one of the old-time stand-offs, partner," Center-Fire said. "We'll show 'em somethin' about Adobe Wells justice. Come on!"

A battering ram made of a stout board crashed against the door as each man took his post by the windows and began to open fire. But there were too many of the mob. This time the door crashed open.

Center-Fire whirled his friend, gave him a shove. "Out the back, feller. Pick up any bronc you see. You know what to do then."

Squaw Creek's big hand closed on the Judge's. "You're a real partner, Center-Fire," the prisoner said. "You're damn tootin', I know what to do!" And then he was gone.

Center-Fire barricaded himself behind the big door that stood between the sheriff's office and the jail, resolved to stand them off as long as he could to let Squaw Creek, convicted of murder, make his getaway.

It wasn't long before the sound of fresh firing broke out, there in the night. The self-appointed vigilantes, caught between two fires, realized they were in a death-trap. Shadowed forms ran for horses, and soon the pound of hoof-beats faded into the night.

Old Center-Fire Davis, bloodstained and powder-blackened, stepped weakly from the

wrecked doorway of the sheriff's office. "Bunce, it looks like I owe you a new door—an' a prisoner!" he called into the darkness.

"Bunce—hell!" came the answer. "You said I knew what to do, an' I done it. Like we always done, partner."

Old Center-Fire Davis slumped back in amazement. "Squaw Creek, you damn flopped jackass!" he swore. "Here I go an' give you a free trip to the border, an' you're stayin' to hang—you damn fool!" He shook his leonine white head. "Do I have to throw down on you with a buckshot-gun to save your life? An' if it ain't invitin' too much confidence," the Judge said, "just what the hell was the idea of shootin' that jasper in the Bravo Bar—that Idaho Neeley?"

Squaw Creek Fogarty turned astonished eyes on his old-time partner as they walked together up the silent street and into the judge's cottage. "You mean to tell me, that you didn't know what that skunk was doin'? Why, hell, Center-Fire, all that Idaho Neeley was doin' was spreadin' the damndest bunch of lies about you I ever heard. He up an' told me that you're the worst renegade unhung. That you kilt an' robbed an' stole up around Idaho an' Montana, back in the 'Sixties, an' that you was still wanted, under the name of the Teton Kid."

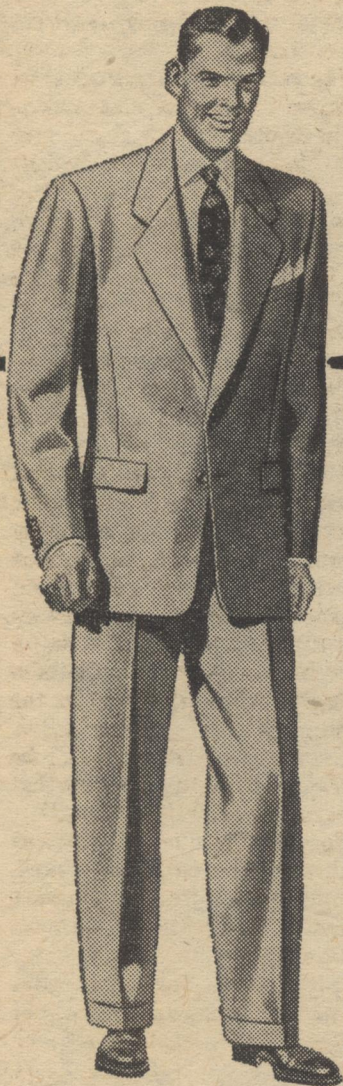
Center-Fire Davis nodded. "I see," he said. "An' you thought it was true? Is that it? Is that why you've come back now?"

"Hell, no!" Fogarty exploded. "I knowed it wasn't no such thing as true. Only—well, I don't know much about the law, and I thought that maybe you might be fired from your job or have to resign."

Old Center-Fire Davis got up slowly, went to his desk, and for a few minutes all Fogarty heard was the scratching of pen on paper.

Then the Judge turned. "Put your mark on this, you ignorant worthless ol' varmint," he said in a strangely choked voice. "This is my resignation. We'll have time to saddle up and load some stuff on a pack horse an' be knee-deep in Sonora before Bunce gits back. There's goin' to be no hangropes—legal or otherwise—around your neck, Squaw Creek. Because this Neeley gent—whatever he was—was by no means a liar. Maybe, someday, we'll be able to come back again. But hell—any range is good if you've got a real saddle partner you can count on in a tight. Come on, feller, before I tear up my last legal document. . . ."

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THE LOST COWMAN



Years had passed since Buff Walker ran out on that gunfight, but now it was time to go back—and finish it.

By DENNISON RUST

THAT hot July afternoon the entire male population of Lost Cabin huddled in saloon doorways, their eyes glued down the sandy, rutted street. They were watching for Buff Walker, sandy-haired little cowman and gunslinger, to stalk stiffly to the center of town. There, according to previous arrangement, he would meet his partner, Al Foresman. Each rancher would have a gun in his hand. At a certain place in the road they would start shooting, and keep on shooting until one or the other died.

The betting favored Buff Walker, ten to one. Few men on that range were his equal with a six-shooter; none his superior. Besides, Foresman would make a mighty big target. Buff couldn't miss.

So they waited, until Al Foresman showed up. Al cat-walked on his high-heeled boots, his big body coiled and tense, the sunlight glittering on the naked gun in his hand. . . . For an hour then he waited. . . .

Buff Walker, at that time, was throwing the last of his possibles into his war-sack, back at the run-down little WF Connected, which three days ago the bank had taken over. He didn't stop to think what men would say about him on the Lost Cabin range; he didn't much care. All he knew was that he and Al had had a hell of a fight. He'd tried to argue Al out of that fool notion of staging the gun-duel, but Al had been pig-headed about it—almost as pig-headed as he'd been in his blind determination to run sheep on their range, and give in to what the bank had wanted. Another man, Buff Walker would have killed and thought no more about it. But, somehow, he couldn't do that to Al Foresman.

When you've shared your last handful of

coffee with a man, your last cartridge, too, for that matter; when you've laughed and cursed over the same tricks of fate, and fought drought and whipping northers together, for some fifteen years, it's damn hard to kill that man. At least, little Buff Walker thought so—even though that gent had gone loco and had ambitions to run sheep in a country that God had made for grazing cattle.

Buff knew he was through, there on the Lost Cabin range. But he never realized just how "through" he was until he started riding around, doing a little grubline riding and hitting up some of the outfits for a job. He found, suddenly, that by saving Al Foresman's life, he'd gained himself a reputation for being yellow. And, in a country where a man's ability and nerve to stand up before a flaming gun is the best test of courage, Buff Walker found he just wasn't wanted.

At first he paid no attention to the sneers and the half-hidden jibes. For what could any of those men know of the bitterness and tragedy of trying to kill a man's partner? He tried laughing them off, but that didn't work. Then he tried getting sore, and that didn't work, either.

Jobs—any jobs, that year—were hard to find. He rode long and far. Yet, whenever he stopped the news of his rabbiting in that gun-duel back at Lost Cabin caught up with him, like the relentless ghost of a dark and evil fate. He couldn't seem to lose it. And, after a year or so, Buff Walker figured maybe there was something in it. Maybe he really was yellow, for a damn double-crossing partner like Al Foresman, who turned traitor for the sake of sheep, had deserved to die.

(Please continue on page 12)



6

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(Continued from page 10)

BUFF WALKER looked ten years older when finally he settled in an abandoned line shack on a range which had long since given up the ghost of hope. His eyes were bitter and haunted. His shoulders sagged. From being a friendly, good-natured cowman, he had become suspicious, mistrustful, with the temper usually attributed to a sidewinder in the sun. That temper flared up at white heat when word drifted to him that Al Foresman was doing well with his sheep.

There came the day, at least, when Buff Walker sat on the edge of his broken-down cot and stared grimly at the past—and the future. He'd let a man live who had no business to live. He should have killed him just like he'd kill a snake. For he knew that it was Al Foresman's life—which Buff had given him—that had wrecked and killed the man who had been Buff Walker.

But before he died, Buff Walker had a job to do—a job that he'd missed that hot July day back in Lost Cabin.

Buff Walker went out and slung his patched old saddle over the back of his jug-headed crowbait horse. Once more he cleaned and oiled his gun, and packed his few belongings. He'd start at dawn, next day.

He hadn't gotten more than half a day's ride across that deserted range when he saw something that made him boil. Far ahead, the range was alive with gray, blatting sheep! And into the hate-crazed brain of Buff Walker came the certainty that those were Al Foresman's sheep, driven there to plague him.

He waited until darkness, then rode cautiously toward the sheep wagon. Inside he heard voices, and could have sworn that one of the voices was Al Foresman's. Buff's gun was in his hand when he went up and opened the door of the wagon. . . .

There wasn't much time to see, for he was blinded by the glow of the lamp, and the ugly, swarthy faces of the sheepers. And all they saw was a red-eyed, stubby, ragged gent with war in his eye and a gun in his fist. The dove for their weapons, and the silence was broken by the thunder of crashing six-shooters. . . .

Buff Walker felt the stab of red-hot pain as a bullet slashed into him. He heard the cries from the sheepers, as more of their guns roared in the night. Eyes blinded by blood, it seemed to him that he caught the

dim form of Al Foresman bulking before him. Then he was swirling down an ink-black vortex into nothingness. . . .

Buff Walker came to, and knew he must be dead. He knew that, because, standing over him and grinning, was Al Foresman. But Foresman didn't look like any sheep-king. His clothes were patched and tattered; his face was thin; his cheeks gaunted. Al Foresman looked down at Buff Walker, and adjusted Buff's bloodstained bandages.

"A hell of a cattle-baron you turned out to be," he said. "Some damn' fool told me that you was doin' great shakes on this range, and I rode over here to see if maybe you could give me a rider's job, or a job as bull-cook. I wasn't particular. And now, maybe you really can.

"These damn sheepers that you threwed down on last night—single-handed against half a dozen of 'em—was fast on their way across the border, with the biggest herd of stolen woollies that has ever hit this country. There's a reward in half a dozen counties out for these gents, too. We killed us a few blatters, as well as a couple of the sheep-rustlers, but most of the graybacks will go back to their owners."

"It's like you to run sheep—an' then laugh about killin' 'em off," said Buff Walker. "It fits in with your double-crossin' ways very nice. I'm only sorry I didn't. . . ."

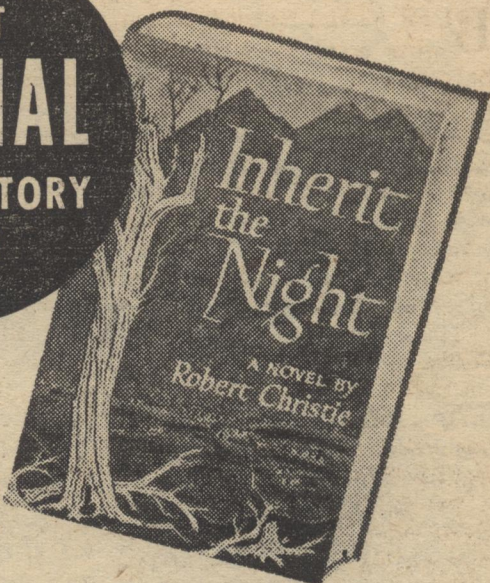
"Forget it," grinned Al Foresman. "After you didn't show up—an' I'm mighty grateful that you didn't, that day in Lost Cabin—I got to figurin'. Maybe I was too hasty about likin' the smell of blatters. Anyhow, I just couldn't turn sheeper. I tried to find you after you'd left, but I didn't get started soon enough. I got myself good and drunk in town for a week. Sure, the bank busted us—took over the spread. But, partner, we can start a little cow spread with what we'll get for stoppin' these sheep-stealin' sons. That is—if you'll want to go in with a gent who was almost a sheeper."

Buff Walker's little eyes got suspiciously bright. He didn't say anything for a long time, and then he looked up at Al Foresman. "Say, Al, you remember the time when we took turns at carryin' each other through that damn blizzard, an' finally got back to the ranch to find we had just one handful of coffee left for grub? You mind the time when—?"

And he started to laugh.



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SCOURGE OF THE

By
T. C. McCLARY

When King Flanagan and his brawling bullwhacker crew pounded into town, the only gun that stood against them was in the slender fingers of a woman who, so they said, was long on looks and courage, but all-fired short on judgment!

CHAPTER ONE

Devil's Drovers

THERE were forty ten-ton freighters and seven chuck and tote wagons in the train, all screaming and slamming and groaning with dryness and two weeks out of grease. Each wagon had a heat-tempered, dust choked drover and tender cursing at eight yoke of rumbling oxen, shaking their chains and yokes at the flies that clotted them, and rumbling with complaint at ten days of short water, and two days of none at all.

King Flanagan's full-chested roar to halt for camp smashed through the tumult like a cannonade. He stopped them dead across the cattle trail into shotgun and a half mile from the willow-lined creek, green to their eyes and sweet to their noses even at this distance.

He chose his halt with malicious consideration, challenging, at this one stroke, any cattlemen who didn't like it, and any of his own thirstier and more pugnacious bullies. He sat in the slung leather seat of the "watch tower" of his luxurious, open-sided trail wagon, looking back into the chrome-yellow sheet of dust that would boil and sift for a good quarter of an hour, blue eyes



The horse drove purposely down on Flanagan, who let out a bellowing blast and lurched back. . . .

WAGON TRAILS



Blazing Bullwhacker
Novelette

sparkling with satisfaction at his choice.

He chuckled to the tongueless serving boy below him, "Listen sharp for an echo, Midnight!" and filled his bellows lungs for another thunderclap of command, "Hold your oxen toggled 'till they cool, and God help the man who leaves his cattle for a drink!"

A sensible order but a harsh one, and meant that way, as every scorched, wire-throated, burning man-jack of them knew. With gaunted thirst-crazed cattle to handle, drovers had lumbered in the trail's thick choking dust beside their oxen, and their tongues were swelling black and filling throats that closed as with rawhide thongs around them.

They glared forward through the drifting sheets of choking dust with red-rimmed eyes. Resentment and anger gathered and rolled forward in a solid wave, but broke against King Flanagan in a flume of abject silence. These were the toughest, most insensate, brutal drovers on the trail, but there was no man with the guts to breast King Flanagan in that whole train.

He listened intently; he sensed and relished the silence as another man would a sweet cool smell. He chuckled and gripped an iron bar and let down his enormous, beefy weight. He swigged a drink from a hanging, sweat-cooled earthen jar and gargled loud enough for his nearer, thirsty men to hear, and, spewing the precious water with a mocking grin, sank down in a slung leather hammock.

"Wake me," he yawned at Midnight, "when the light turns from white to lemon. That will give the boys something to feel rough about, and give the oxen time to cool!"

The tongueless man gave a hideous shrill of laughter and hunkered down to fan King Flanagan, strangely loyal to this human beast who had broken him with brute cruelty and cut his tongue with his own hand. If he had that tongue, he could have told some wicked stories of how Flanagan held his iron discipline over his lawless band, but that was the very reason Flanagan had made him speechless.

Midnight turned his head at a passing sound and his white-rimmed eyes glowed with savage humor. The young white boy they had picked up after an Indian massacre rode his woebegone, spotted jenny by,

toting a canvas waterbag. In that whole train of insensate cattle and brute-minded men, those two were the only touch of gentleness—and hated for it.

THE berserk bellow of the big blue bull ox broke like a trumpet call to stampede through the wagon camp. It brought listless cattle snorting to their feet, and big bodied men running full tilt, fatigue and thirst forgotten. The returning boy's face lost some of its somber misery and he put his jenny into a jog toward the sound of trouble.

This was a young bull, a bad one as stolid oxen went for temper, and thirst and heat and bad handling had fretted it past endurance; it was out of hand now, its eyes white and rolling, pawing and jostling and trying to thrash its mate and the heavy yoke and everything holding it back from water. The purple-faced, raw-voiced, cursing drover was almost as berserk with temper, and was driving his steel tipped goad with wicked cruelty, leaving black holes that gushed crimson, and raising the bull's violent frenzy.

The boy sat on the outskirts, eyes big as saucers, watching this animal conflict with a sick fascination. Men were yelling, and he remembered that these were men so calloused to brutality they could see a mate spreadeagled under a wagon's screeching axle without emotion, and joke at the accusation of killing brothers and fathers, and in one case, cannibalism. But they were excited now, and the smell of violence and of blood was like raw liquor to them.

Then his body tautened like a bowstring. It was a small sound, maybe a bare sensing, a rhythmic pulsing of the parched, hard earth. His tight, furtive gaze was drawn forward as if by a magnet. He watched King Flanagan form out of the still-thick drift of fine powdered ochre dust. A giant of a man half as wide and thick as he was tall; three hundred pounds of sheer brute muscle and pride and vicious cruelty, striding forward with hell's own fury on his bearded face at this interruption of his siesta.

He came up with a roar and grabbed the half-crazed drover's goad, and splintered it across the man's barrel chest. He turned, without waiting for him to hit dirt strangling and clawing at his heart, moving in to glare at the berserk bull. He cursed it, and it threw frothed flume all over him, and

his eyes turned from blue to angry ruby.

His left arm rammed out, jamming two thick fingers into the beast's flaring nostrils. The bull bellowed in pain and its massive head jerked around. With an obscene curse, Flanagan's other fist struck it like a cannon ball behind the ear and dropped it.

He kicked its jaw and stood wiping his knuckles, still breathing hard. "Try to bust up my train, will you?" he demanded. "I'll teach you the beast or man don't live can make a fool of King Flanagan!"

He turned, head jutted forward, dissatisfaction with the victory forming glowing pinpoints deep in his eyes.

"By Heaven, I'll teach him manners!" he rasped gratingly.

His gaze swept onward to the gasping, clawing drover on the ground. "Mebbe," he grunted, "we ought to teach him sense at the same time!"

The hurt drover's face was gray around the edges, but now it went solid white beneath his burn. He could remember that in Oregon they still told of how King Flanagan had marooned a man atop a three hundred foot pine just out of humor; and now Flanagan was leering down at him with a vicious chuckle in his throat.

His ruffians chortled their appreciation and put in their rough humor. They fawned, they paid him homage, they groveled for his pride. A man with sixteen notches on his boot-knife stooped and picked up the King's coiled gut whip, and handed it back as if it were a privilege.

THE King felt better; his fury washed into strutting satisfaction. His arrogant gaze went over the heads of the crowd and centered on the boy. "Well, let's ask young reading and writing his opinion," he grunted. "What did you think of the show, boy?"

The boy was quivering in every muscle, but he saw his jenny's ears twist back with deep hatred at the King's voice. She gave him heart and he set his jaws and held the King's gaze stubbornly. "I think you showed bigger than the bull," he answered.

The King's jovial expression hardened. It was an answer that might be taken several ways. He said with abrupt sharpness, "You been for water after my orders to the train, you sneaking whelp?"

The boy paled. "I ain't touched none myself yet, sir!" he quavered. "This is for the

tender, Oneye, who's down with fever bad!"

"So bad he gets a crawling brat to breast me!" the King rasped. He filled his lungs and roared the single word, "Oneye!"

At a far wagon, there was a sudden flurry of the canvas and a fever-gaunted man climbed out shakily. He called back weakly, "Coming, boss!" and started to scramble down the wheel. He was so weak he couldn't hold his weight and fell off.

King Flanagan stood with his fists on his hips, watching the man's lurching approach. He said to the boy, "Give me the water."

The boy hesitated and the King's eyes flicked him like a whip. "Mebbe," he allowed with cruel softness in his voice, "this will be a day of teaching manners!"

The boy put his jenny forward and held the bucket down with scalding wetness on his eyes. The King reached the bucket and hung it swinging on one finger. When the tender arrived, he asked softly, "You needed water real bad, the boy says, Oneye?"

Oneye filled with nervousness. "I was too fevered to get down for the last two rations, King," he croaked rustily.

The King held up the near full bucket. The scent of sweet cool water was a smell that caused the fevered man to strain. He looked grateful as a dog expecting a licking and getting a gentle pat instead. "You're going to give it to me, King?"

"Yes, you're needing it," the King nodded. "All of it, Oneye!" he blazed abruptly, and sluiced the whole bucket into the man's twitching face.

"When you've lugged your share of ox shackles to the creek," he stated, "then mebbe you can figure time out for a drink!" He swung his brutal attention to the boy, slowly, fondly, carressing the loaded tip of his gut whip. "You'd make," he considered, "a nice two foot lash for this. But you'll be worth cash money in Oregon. I'll have to figure something gentle that won't kill you."

He turned on his heel and strode along the wagon line.

The boy watched his massive back, small jaws clenched tight against the fear and bitterness crowding through him. More than anything he had ever wished, more even than the wish that the Indians who massacred his father had caught and killed him at the same time, he wished that he could see King Flanagan made to crawl with the shame he put on others.

He turned suddenly to Oneye, muttering hotly, "I'll tote your hobbles for you, don't you worry!"

But Oneye looked at him with no thankfulness. "Getting caught like the damned wuthless, witless orphan that ya are!" he hissed. "And blaming it on me on top of it! I ought to peel your back with a hobble chain . . . Boy don't come near me after this!"

He swung away, coughing and shaking and half dead, but eyes blazing with the narrow-minded vindictive hatred of his breed, holding the boy responsible for this. Only fear of ridicule and sheer rough handling held the boy from breaking out with blind frenzy. In all this train, no man had a decent word for him, not even the man he had befriended. In three months, life had turned to a hideous nightmare filled with fear and hate and cruelty.

He was so miserable he would have run away right then and there, but he did not dare. King Flanagan would come after him; it would be his pride to catch and torture him if it took a year. He was trapped in this fiendish circle as surely as the tongueless Midnight, and there was no pity for his plight, but only harsh contempt for the decency that was in him.

CHAPTER TWO

The Range Lord's Wife

FLANAGAN had not bothered with a bath, but his servant had spent two hours combing and cropping and oiling his flaming hair and beard. He wore a blazing red shirt rolled half way up hairy forearms, with his whip coiled in his stanchion hand and looped upon his wrist. He wore a seventy-dollar pie-crowned black hat pushed back upon his bullet head, and except for quality and the whip, every one of his drovers aped him. He would not tolerate a man totting a whip who could not best him with it, he claimed, and no man on either the Oregon or the Overland had ever approached King Flanagan's control of that dead twenty-foot snake.

He moved now through evening's amber light at the head of his bunch of sweating, jostling, boasting, cursing ruffians.

His savage roar shook windows along the street; his steps exploded the main drag's

zinc-powdered dust like muffled drum beats. Guns slapped upon these drovers heavy, muscular thighs, but their guns were the least part of them, as the cowboys knew from harsh experience.

Flanagan himself had once stood a full night's drinking in this very town, undisturbed by a four inch belly gash he had stuffed with burlap soaked in whiskey.

He marched up the street with his blue eyes questing for fun or trouble, his fierce oiled beard gleaming like red bronze in the sun; three hundred pounds of beef and cruelty marching with a challenge and an arrogance, and a corroding need to make his power felt.

He turned in first at the Mesa saloon, dragging the batwings off their stout hinges as effortlessly as tearing paper. Five men from Barrel and three from Frying Pan clustered at the bar, and two nest ranchers stood at the end. That was quite a crew figured in fast bullets, but not a one of them looked sidewise; not a one even raised his attention to the mirror.

Flanagan stopped dead, catching his vision from the outside glare, and expelled a long gritty breath.

"Brave as jackrabbits, these damned spindly cow jaspers!" he boomed. His face suddenly hardened. "Shuck off so real men can drink without that stinking hoss smell!" he cracked out.

They turned with glum, flat looks and moved out in stiff silence. Flanagan cleared their glasses from the bar with a sweep of his big hand. "We don't drink after that scum!" he declared. "Set up fresh ones—and a bottle to every man!"

It was early and it was not Saturday and the train had not been expected in, but Amber strutted in from her back alley. Her face showed a lusty grin of white teeth and she called throatily, "Make way, you half starved, namby boys! I could wilt the bunch of you with a look, including you, King Flanagan!"

The drovers lifted a roar of approval that set the rafters and mirrors shaking. She talked their rough, raw language; she could handle these half-savage men. She downed a tumbler of whiskey as if it were water and commanded imperiously, "Boys, fetch me my piano. It's too damned hot to move way down this bar!"

Two of the drovers grinned and picked up

the piano and set it across the end of the bar. A third one lifted a loaded half barrel of beer like a pie crate for her to sit on, and Flanagan himself hoisted her up.

The men guzzled from their bottles without bothering with glasses. They were men with a month's dust and thirst and monotony pressured up in them, and they did not wait upon opportunity. Within the hour, the bar was a shambles and they were spilling out onto the street, eager to find fresh possibilities.

IN DANGER'S DRYGOODS, bald-headed Danger said to Mrs. Dick Waring, "If you want to leave your order for the other stores too, I will take care of it and drive the things out later."

She gave him an appreciative smile which changed suddenly to a frown. "Because of that rabble?" she demanded. "Danger, we came here when this valley was a warring Indian torture ground and survived five successive massacres. We fought the French trappers off, and the land hungry Spanish dons, and the armed empire snatchers from the East, and the Mormons and the sheepmen too. Dick is of Virginian stock and I'm a downeast Yankee."

He looked at her with grave respect for a moment, her words still in him, but knowing the cruelest, the bitterest thing to the Warings, was something she had not mentioned—the fact that their only child had been born dead, and there had never been another. It would have been a boy to be proud of, too; she was still an uncommonly handsome woman, and no man had ever seen Dick Waring downed for want of wits or courage.

She picked up her package and gave him another smile. "Don't worry about those hoodlums," she told him.

"I'm more worried for them, if they run up against your mettle!" he chuckled. But he came around and escorted her to the door where he had cached a loaded shotgun, watching her buoyant, still limber walk until she sank into the shadow of the St. Louis Emporium & Notions.

Ordinarily, parchment-faced and creaking Eben Whiffletree would have made the courteous gesture of coming from his counter to help her load purchases. But he had helped the widow Baines only a short time since, and two of Flanagan's toughs had used him

roughly as a target for some bottle and rock throwing.

Her purchases made quite an ungainly pile, but they were light, and murmuring that she could manage, she stacked them in her arms and moved toward the door. A brawling fight had started between two of Flanagan's drovers in a nearby alley, and the blast of lurid obscenity smashed like a bad smell through the clean bright sunlight, bringing her jaw grim. For an instant she paused upon the stoop thankful that Dick was not in town to hear this and make trouble, then setting her shoulders, she started down the shallow steps.

Midway down, a pup, excited by the violence in the harsh, deep-chested voices, banged headlong into her, throwing her off balance, and sending the topmost of her bundles flying. She gave a peeved breath of irritation, aware of the rough humor that would greet her efforts to gather them. There was something wrong with the bustles of her dress anyway, and when she stooped they lifted like a guinea hen stretching her tail plumes.

She was standing there, unable to make a decision, when a strange, gawky youth of maybe twelve darted into her view. He gathered her bundles with an energy that was almost a hunger to be useful, coming erect with a blush upon his pinched, gentle face. He made an awkward movement toward his worn, hand-me-down hat, and darted her a frightened glance. When he saw her interested smile, something turned over in him and slammed so that he was sure she must have heard it. His eyes turned glossy and his throat suddenly burned.

"Why, boy!" she murmured, then, sensing his deep inward misery, "Why that was very nice of you, young man!" she corrected. She made a gesture and led the way toward her rig, giving him this space to get himself in hand.

His mother has died recently, of course, she told herself. But what was a good woman ever doing with any man in Flanagan's outfit?

His mother must have been good to produce a boy like this, she thought as he capably stowed her bundles for her. She noticed the small things about him that only a woman would note . . . the way he had scrubbed at his neck but forgotten to wash behind the ears . . . the sprung veins on the

inside of his wrists from work that was too heavy for him . . . the fresh rawness of blisters on hands not used to whatever he was doing with them. He hadn't been raised with the freight train, then; that one sign told her a lot.

She reached into her reticule and held out her shiniest silver dollar. His eyes bugged at it, but he turned beet red and shook his head. "Thank you ma'am, but I couldn't be taking money for your favor," he muttered.

"It's earned," she said. "And I have some more packages."

He darted a furtive glance across the street, then said with a tightness he could not fully control, "If you wouldn't mind driving to the back alley, ma'am, I'll be pleased to load 'em. But not for the money."

She studied him with probing curiosity. "Are you afraid to take it?"

For an instant, pride froze him, but then with a wave of abject misery, he nodded. "Yes'm. I reckon I'd get beat, or worse, for it and he'd take it away from me anyway, jist like he took my fourteen dollars and my jackknife!"

He meant Flanagan, she knew, and her eyes filled with molten fire. "Your folks, your pa, isn't with the train?" she asked. "Is Flanagan taking you through to other relatives?"

"I don't know where he's taking me," the boy mumbled, fighting desperately against the surge of tears. "All my kinfolk were killed in the massacre before he found me. He said he'd take me through to Oregon and apprentice me out there."

"Apprentice you, indeed!" she breathed with grim outrage. She knew a little of those Oregon settlement apprenticeships—a slave in the south had been treated better. She lifted his chin with an impulsive gesture. "How would you like it if I could manage for you to stay here?"

She saw the flood of eagerness break on his face, before the fear came up through him like a whirlwind. He shook his head violently and suddenly she had lost that close intimate contact with him. He was now a frightened animal, balky and ornery and wildly shaking his head.

"Don't ask him, ma'am!" he pleaded, then turned to a boy's hard-edged swagger to cover a corroding hurt inside of him. "Anyway, this town don't look so all-fired hot, and it's set to look worse by the time

my outfit gets through playing with it!"

Flanagan's blunt bark broke upon them from across the street and the boy cringed as if the freight master had cracked his whip across him.

"You there, you shiftless, sneaking, whining orphan, why in hell ain't you back tending stock like your supposed to be?" He didn't wait for an explanation. "Come over here, pronto!" he commanded.

The boy darted her one last furtive glance of thanks, and scuttled across the wide street. The woman watched him with a catch of resentment against life's harshness, but seeing no way that she could help. Flanagan would have some tall story cooked up if questioned, and life was too harsh and grim out here for men to worry on other's troubles, and this was almost lawless territory . . .

She saw the boy stop dead, quivering on the clap-walk below the man. He gave the wrong answer to Flanagan, or maybe—from fear—he gave none at all, for Flanagan's brutal face suddenly flamed with anger. He stooped and grabbed the boy up to his level by the neck, and shook him like a wet rag until the boy's face turned solid purple.

This was while standing on the edge of the stoop, shaming and cursing and disciplining the boy before all the rough grinning drovers of the train. Out of wind and profanity, Flanagan then tossed him like a stick of firewood out into the street's fine-powdered dust.

The boy bounced and she heard the hollow expulsion and suck of tortured breath. He was too out of wind to cry; he was almost wild with inability to breathe, and panic.

Mrs. Waring's gentle eyes suddenly splintered icy lights. Then she stooped and lifted her skirts. The drovers started to lift a wild, raw whoop that broke suddenly in mid note as they stared at the implacable outrage in the face of the woman who crossed directly toward Flanagan, holding a derringer .44.

CHAPTER THREE

Flanagan's Curse

SHE mounted the steps and stopped a careful five feet from him, and this precaution tightened the wild grin on his face. If she knew that much, she likely knew

how to use that piece of snub-nosed artillery, and there was a feel to her that she would use it if she had to.

"Why you aren't a man—you aren't even fit to be called a pig!" she told him scathingly. "Punishing a little boy like that for wanting to see the town!"

His eyes hardened and his breath came at her, already strong and sour with red whiskey. "Ma'am," he warned, but without courtesy, "you'd best keep to your own side of the street or get treated the way you should for coming over among my hungry bullies!"

"The first hungry bully who makes a move my way had best be hungry for a forty-four slug in the head!" she answered. "I'll keep nowhere I don't feel like—but *you will!* You and your filthy lot of two-legged beasts are taking your stench from this town, pronto!"

"Now jist a minute," Flanagan bit out harshly. "Not even a woman talks that way to the King!"

"This one does!" she said, and from the tail of her eye saw someone moving behind her stealthily. Her hand turned sidewise and lashed up and back, and her derringer was back beaded upon Flanagan as a black-bearded giant clutched dazedly for his head before he staggered from the stoop and crashed through the clapwalk.

Flanagan licked suddenly dry lips and his eyes tightened with wary cunning. A man was riding in hell for leather, meaning some trouble, and the woman's actions had shamed the townsmen into action, and they were converging out of doors and shadows, grim of eye and stiff and truculent of movement, and needing only a spark now to touch them off.

This was a wholesale lot of trouble he had not bargained for and did not know that he wanted, but he was still King Flanagan and it was not in him to back down before God or man, and no more would he back down before a woman.

"If you aren't started," she told him stridently, "by my count of ten, I'm shooting!"

He grunted, "She ain't kidding, boys, and that shot starts the fireworks. Get ready."

She began to count and imperceptibly his big body began to lean forward. She had accounted for the length and reach of his arm, but not for the whip coil, and she had moved almost a foot nearer in striking back at the black-bearded giant. His eyes bore

dead and mockingly into her; his expression held the threat and promise of what it meant to breast King Flanagan.

"Ma'am," he grunted, "we'll burn this town down to its last doorstep and use the fire to toast your men. But as for you girls—"

The fast rider reached the end of the main drag, taking the picture in without a question or a break of pace. He came on at a headlong gallop, scattering men forming into a solid, running wave behind him, but his bleached gray eyes were burning with white-hot hatred upon Flanagan, and he gave the town no heed.

He yelled "Abby!" and jumped his horse across the hitchrack, and still at full gallop, came up the steps. The horse brushed her and drove purposely down upon Flanagan, who let out a bellowing blast and lurched back, losing balance and crashing off the stoop. He rolled and dragged frantically at his gun in rising, but in that instant the horse was down beside him and had knocked him sprawling, and then the animal was stomping his big beefy body as it would trample the life from an enormous rattlesnake.

The woman leaned against the post where the pony had brushed her, suddenly spent with the shock of realizing how near she had come to murder and filled with thanks that somehow her husband had learned the freight outfit was in the valley and ridden in hell for leather to protect her.

Then through this thankfulness rose numbed surprise at the violence she had never seen in Dick. His face seemed cast of iron, and of all this callous cruelty that Flanagan flaunted at the world, she thought that right then, Dick Waring could have matched it if Flanagan had as much as touched her.

He must have caught her feelings, for he threw her a glance and a mask dropped instantly upon his lean, sun-blackened features, and he wheeled his horse from its ugly work, snatching her from the stoop as he went by.

For one short moment his wife felt the warm, fierce protection of his arm, and then he had deposited her across the street and circled back, sixgun in hand.

He reined in over the gray-tinged, gasping freight master, his eyes drilled Flanagan like silver bullets.

FLANAGAN tried to shove his great body to a sitting posture and fell back with a hollow bellow of pain. He met Waring's gaze with fear and hatred mixing in his eyes, but above everything, with shame. "My back's broke. I can't fight," he rumbled, near to sobbing.

Waring's gaze drifted over the sobered drovers one by one. They looked at Flanagan, they looked at Waring, they muttered and dropped their heads.

Waring ripped out a blast of contempt. "Like your oxen, a damned bunch of stupid, beefy cattle!" he snapped at them. "Can't move without a master, won't work without a goad! In the whole pack of you there isn't enough honest guts to make a bowstring!" He spit savagely and jerked his head at Flanagan. "Get moving and tote that fat snake with you! And don't let sunup catch your outfit inside this valley!"

Flanagan grated at Waring, "I won't forget this, mister!" but it was a licked man's boast until his men raised him aloft on one of the doors he had ripped down, and over their heads, he saw the boy. Then some of his vicious savagery came back to him. "Or you!" he barked venomously at the boy.

Waring looked around at the youngster. "If you're with the train, get moving too!" he commanded.

From across the street, his wife called, "Dick! Don't send him back to that rolling hellhole! He's an orphan they found and took along—he owes nothing to them!"

Waring scowled. But he said, "All right, boy, if she asks it!"

The boy's whole face filled with thanks and worship. The woman ran to him, dropping to one knee in the dust of that cattle trail, and pillowing his breaking sobs against her breast.

Flanagan looked at Waring as he passed. He grinned suddenly. "You're a range lord, Waring," he grated spitefully, "and wanted something with your own guts for a son. You'll see what you've got before your through—that boy will be out sobbing in the pasture or quilting with the women folk!"

For all of his pain, he gave a gleeful chuckle. "You busted my back," he growled at the rancher, "but I'll lick you for it! I'm leaving you the thing that will lick you worse than even I could ever think of!"

Waring's lips compressed and the tight-

ness of fine wire pulled inside his eyes. He said nothing, but now he knew most of the story. So that was the score, the reason his wife had been ready to shoot Flanagan like a mad dog. The boy. A boy they knew absolutely nothing about. A stray orphan who had touched some chord of maternalism in his wife, and filled the shimmering image of their sad loss that they had never been able to fill or banish.

She lifted her face to him with silent, pleading query. He was studying the boy but his inexpression was inscrutable. The boy had been treated too soft, he had been too much on his mother's apron strings, but that could be toughened out of a body if they had a real man's guts under that softness. He had a good mouth, honest eyes, and beneath the self-conscious fear of how this grim iron man would take him, there was a golden worship for the man who had beaten Flanagan with his own brutality.

"Dick," the woman asked softly, "we can take him with us, can't we?"

His jaws hardened. Once that boy crossed their threshold he would be there permanently, pan out however he might, and Flanagan's last mocking words had burned deep as acid in him. He did not look at his wife. He said dryly, "If you have decided, that is the end of it."

"Dick, he's a good boy! Give him a chance," she pleaded.

He nodded briefly. "He will get his chance and a fair one, Abby." He swung his attention to the boy. "But a hard standard to come up to, boy. If our son had lived, he would be about your age, but under the same circumstances, he would not be standing for a woman's gentling—he would be off alone dousing his hurts under the pump."

All of the golden, eager brightness faded out of the boy's face. He dropped his head, and edged out of the woman's touch, and muttered, "Yes sir."

"Dick. . . ."

He turned to her with a bleak look. "Let's not have this come between us, Abby," he warned. "It was your doing and I had no warning and no choice. But now it is done and it is something between man and man. He is a boy and he will be a man, and if it is in him, he'll turn out half a son. But if it is not in him, I'm the one will squirm and pay with shame before the whole range—across two thousand miles of trail they'll jeer and

laugh about Waring's victory over Flanagan!"

He pulled at his reins. He said, "If you're ready, I'll ride you home now. I don't hanker for the gossip and powwow this town is set for."

She bit her lip and reached for the boy's hand, but he turned sidewise. He said with a shrill, cold courtesy, "I have to get my jenny, ma'am."

"Jenny?" the range lord repeated. "He's riding a mule?"

With a woman's way in time of crisis, she could still spark with humor. She did now, waiting for the indignation that would fill his lean, weatherbeaten face. "And a spotted one, Dick!" she said.

"Gawdamighty!" her husband muttered.

THEY had a quick fried steak supper, the boy eating with his head ducked and his gaze unmoving over his plate. He had washed clean and had good manners, the woman noted. Her husband noted that he was spindly and did not have a proper appetite.

Once during supper, the woman looked at her husband and asked, troubled, "Dick, there will be no chance of a brute like Flanagan coming back to bushwhack you?"

He snorted contemptuously. "When that breed is licked, they are licked for good!"

"He'll come back," the boy blurted unthinkingly. "Not to bushwhack you or fight you, but he'll come back Mr. Waring, and you'd best count on it!"

The rancher scowled at him for the interruption, but asked with a tinge of scornful curiosity, "To fetch you?"

The boy lifted his head and his eyes were molten with bitter hurt. "I reckon you'd forgive him that," he said. "But don't you worry on me none, sir!"

Waring snapped down his napkin and left the table before dessert, conscious of his own harshness and hating himself for it, but unable to feel any other way. He had always been a fair man, and he had always deeply loved his wife. But, make it formal or not, a boy living with them would be looked on as good as his son, and he could not forget Flanagan's mocking gibe.

He went out and saddled a fresh horse and rode the range clean through the night, sitting up on a mesa rim an hour before sunup to watch the freight outfit's thick boil of

dust mushing up against the rose and yellow dawn. A grim satisfaction surged up through him, taking off the last tendrils of anger and tenseness. He could feel it, the popping of the small nerve clusters in his body, and it struck him that maybe yesterday's mood about the boy had been due to the unsated violence of his anger. He hadn't even given the boy a chance to prove up, and now he felt a tinge of shame because of it, and he wheeled his horse back for the home ranch ready to try the lad with an open mind.

The boy was out riding his jenny around the place when Waring came in. He still rode bareback with a hackamore and had not helped himself to a saddle, and the range lord noted that in his favor. But he did not romp out to greet the owner, or take a man's opportunity for a clearcut understanding at the corral, and Waring thought, *sullen and vengeful*, and the smile left his mouth.

It struck him he still didn't know what the boy's name was and he called him over on that pretext. The boy came dutifully, but somberly, lips clamped tight and eyes molten and accusing. He answered Waring's questions with civil restraint, telling precisely what was asked, volunteering nothing.

The rancher forced himself to recollect this was just a boy, and one fresh out of the hell of Flanagan's outfit, and against his grain and principles, made the first step to bridge the gap. "I was," he grunted, "undue sharp last evening, mebbe. The fight with Flanagan was still boiling in my blood."

The boy said, "Yessir," and watched him steadily without relaxing.

Waring's lips compressed. He recalled the boy's worshipping excitement right after the fight, and he thought that might open him up. He set about unsaddling, talking casually, in snatches. "A man doesn't like to have to fight that way," he allowed. "It is dirty fighting, and except for a man like Flanagan, something better forgotten than to be proud of."

The boy looked off into morning's streaming golden light. "You're a harder man than King Flanagan, I reckon, and he knew it. But not dirty like he is, and he knew that too, and I bet he counted on that to get away so he can come back sometime and even up the score."

For a quarter minute, the range lord froze. When he turned, his eyes were bleak. "Flanagan was out of the valley by sunup,"

he grunted, "as he was ordered. When his kind are licked, they don't come back!"

The boy swung his head and met his gaze levelly. "He was hurt bad, Mr. Waring, but he wasn't licked," he said. "If that had been you in his place, he'd have rope-hauled you a mile or two and left you stripped under desert sun a space to make sure."

Waring knew it, and didn't want to know it, and damned the boy because of it. In a way he had licked the man, but in another way he hadn't, and he couldn't put his finger on the latter reason and it bothered him.

He said sharply, "When you have driven a man and his whole outfit out of the valley at your orders, he's licked in front of the world, and that's the end of it!"

The boy shook his head. "Mr. Waring, you don't savvy the stubbornness in Flanagan!"

"I savvy this," Waring snapped with heat, "that I don't intend arguing with a homeless orphan boy we took off him about it!"

Instantly, the boy's face dropped and Waring felt the scalding waves of misery surging through the boy. He was sorry for the words he'd used, the harshness of his voice, but there was no way now to take them back and that irked him further.

HE PUT his horse in the corral and said to the boy, "You can turn that zebra out to pasture and cut yourself any paint you want from the home stock until we get time to find you a colt to break and train for your own. Take the small saddle and white bridle in the shed."

The boy moved awkwardly in his boots and stared at the ground. "Do I have to ride one of them paint cow ponies, Mr. Waring?"

"What's wrong with them?" the rancher grunted.

"I ain't never rid a real cow hoss," the boy admitted. "And Jenny's all right for getting around on errands and such."

Waring put his fists on his hips and his eyes turned leaden. "You don't figure to come out on range then?"

The boy flushed darkly. "I don't know much and I don't figure I'd be much use, sir," he mumbled. "But I can curry and fetch water and such around the stables."

"We hire a half wit to do that!" the rancher snapped. "But by Heaven, if that's all the gumption you've got, I'll switch him to cook's help and you can have his job!"

He swung toward the house, jawline hard and eyes harder, recollecting the hellion he had been at twelve, and what a real son of his would have been like. "By God," he grated to his wife as he slammed in, "that is some whelp you picked to mother!"

She turned with worry, the smile fading from her face. "Why Dick, what's wrong? He worships you for whipping Flanagan, but he thinks you've got no use for him."

"He's right on that last count!" he answered edgedly. "About that first, he worships me so much he plain told me I hadn't licked that human pig!"

She came over and rubbed the back of his black burned neck with soothing fingers. "He's all upset now, and no wonder after what he's been through! He'll change after a few weeks riding with you on range."

Waring gave a sharp, brittle laugh that broke in mid-note. "He's got that all fixed too. He can't ride a real hoss and don't want to learn. He wants his damned spotted jenny. And he don't want to go out on range. He wants to stick around the cake box and tend stable!"

"Give him a chance," she said again, perturbed. "Give him time to get the smell of the place and the feel of things, Dick. His folks only had a little town-farm in Pennsylvania—he doesn't know anything about cow country."

"He sure won't learn running errands to town and hanging around the corral!" he bit out.

"Just promise me one thing," she asked gently. "Don't harden yourself against him so you won't admit the truth even if he proves up."

"If he proves up, I'd be a happy man," he told her. "But he won't—it isn't in him!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullwhip Reckoning

THAT was in July, when other boys were breaking their necks for an excuse to get out on range, and learn their ropes, and toughen for the fall round-up. But the boy showed no interest in the range, or learning to ride a real cow pony, or rope or shoot. He had the stables and corrals and saddles and gear in apple pie neatness and order, Waring had to grudge him that, but what he did with his extra time was something the

rancher admitted he just couldn't figure.

Then, in August, he discovered the boy had been making himself a gut whip like the one Flanagan toted, twenty-four feet to the measure, and the braiding and limbering of it had taken a heap of effort. If it had been anything else, the rancher would have given the boy credit for stick-to-itiveness, but the whip simply roiled him. It showed where his mind was—still with Flanagan. For all the kindness the Warings had shown him, his unconscious admiration still lay with the brute who had near killed him with cruelty.

Waring turned harder, colder, speaking to the boy only when necessary in brief monosyllables. The boy was civil, there when needed, listened silently to whatever Waring had to say, and followed orders to the letter. But deep and burning resentment of the man smoldered in him; it was in the speed of his disappearance when Waring was about, in the way he looked steadily at his plate at meal time, in the look of his eyes when Waring caught them.

Worse, the boy had somehow won the woman's heart, and she was silently taking his side against her own husband. He could sense it in her, feel her indignation at what she considered his harshness and injustice growing; she would not see the boy himself made help or teaching him or friendship impossible. The boy was always hanging around the house instead of out on range where he might learn something. He was obedient, but resistant, to any suggestion of what to do with his extra time. He spent all of it, it seemed, playing with that damned whip for which he'd never have any use. In cow work, a bull whip was never over nine feet long. But for a solid month he came in bruised and battered and bloody from tangling with that dangerous overlength snake, and once he near to snapped his own eye out.

"He's trying to do something—he works with that whip like a demon," Abby Waring told her husband. "I think he's trying to prove something to himself."

"I think he's trying to prove Flanagan was a better man than me!" Dick Waring barked. He gave her a sudden bleak, flat look. "Abby, this boy is coming between us and he's not worth it!"

She turned her face away so as to hide her torn feelings; one hand caught at the

cameo beneath her full round throat. "Dick," she pleaded, "just give me a little more time to feel him out and find out what's inside of him! He's hurt, and pretending a lot of things to cover, but he's a good boy, and he worships you in secret, I know!"

"How do you know?" he demanded bluntly.

She made a gesture. "Never a day when you're late for supper but what he's up on that hill watching for your dust. And I've seen the look on his face when he thought nobody knew he was watching, and you were breaking or gentling some critter in the corral."

"More likely, hoping to see me break my neck!" he rasped. "No, there is something in him that is not right; he's got Flanagan's taint." He snorted a bitter note of laughter. "I asked him if he wanted to come along on round-up and he told me baldly he'd come if I said, but of his own, he didn't have the time!"

"He doesn't like to be away from here," she agreed. "Not even to town. Maybe it's because he had his roots torn away so violently. Maybe he's still afraid Flanagan will come back after him."

"Or hoping!" he mocked her, but there was no humor in his mouth. "Where do you figure I'll spend the winter with two of you to fight in my own house?" he asked.

"Don't put it harsh, like that!" she pleaded, edgedly. "Just give me a little more time, to round-up, Dick, to try and understand him!"

He got up moodily, jerking on his hat with temper. "If he were worth his salt," he grated through set lips, "I wouldn't mind so much. Even if he hated me, I'd say mebbe you were right for having picked the makings of a real man. But this boy is plumb yellow, and tricky beside that, Abby."

"I'm so sure you're wrong, Dick!" she protested. "Just to round-up, Dick—if I can't find a way to make him prove up by then, I won't say a word even if—" She swallowed hard and set her shoulders—"Even if you tell him to move along."

"But things between us will never be the same again!" he barked savagely and stomped out to the corrals.

He heard the spaced sound of a dull impact from behind a shed, followed each time by a grunting heave, and moving around, found the boy astride the jenny, teaching her

to lash out and kick a straw filled bag he had rigged hanging on a rope. It was a regular trick he was teaching at the touch of his hand, and he was so wrapped in concentration, he did not sense Waring there for five or six kicks.

He turned crimson and watched Waring with a guilty look, but did not offer any explanation of any kind. The rancher commented, "It is too bad you can't take the same pains with a real horse!"

"A hoss," the boy mumbled, "ain't quick enough with this trick, Mr. Waring, and beside, it needs too much space."

The rancher gave a look at all outdoors. "You don't figure this is space enough?" he grunted.

The boy made self conscious figures on his critter's sweat damp coat. "This is kind of a special trick I'm teaching Jenny for a purpose."

Understanding came into the rancher's face. The mustangs sometimes got to hazing the queer spotted mule pretty rough. "You jist be damned sure none of my riding string get lamed up from that purpose!" he warned the boy. "Or that blasted mule will go off this place pronto!"

"Yessir," the boy swallowed, and furiously watched the rancher cross toward the store shed. Just as Waring was vanishing from sight, the boy's shrill voice rang after him.

Waring turned with irritation and growled, "Yes?"

"There ain't no chance of you taking Mrs. Waring along on round-up?" the boy asked.

Waring's expression filled with contempt. "Scared you'd be stuck all alone away from a woman's apron strings?"

The boy turned beet red, but managed to blurt, "No sir, I wasn't thinking that!"

"If you weren't thinking it, you were feeling it!" the rancher growled. "Well, don't worry she's going to leave you. No woman comes onto a round-up, even if her man is hurt, until the dance and supper on Pay-off Day." He jerked his head toward a low saddle in the sunburned hills. "That will be over in that next basin, case you get lost on the way over."

THIS was hot country and the round-up came in late October with the gather and payoff usually falling on the last day of the month. During the three preceding days,

the round-up moved through a chain of canyons, funneling out into the basin, but except for the two ends, almost cut off from home range country. A few years back, this was when raiding Indians had swooped in to burn the unprotected ranches, and once a band of outlaws had cut in behind the round-up, gathering yearlings and cows and making a clean getaway.

The reason was simple—during these hectic last days with bad country to travel and a bulging gather to hold, every able-bodied man in the country was back of the line of sawtooth hills in those twisting canyons.

This year, maybe because he had spent more time on range, riding off the pressuring anger at his wife's divided loyalty, Dick Waring had figured a new wrinkle reducing the danger of a serious last minute stampede, and releasing a few men extra to beat the maze of brush draws.

He meant to run the big main herd straight through the canyon country and fan it in the basin where it would graze contented, without the excitement of branding and bawling cattle to fret its temper. That way, a few riders could hold it safely while the crews worked the last canyons and draws, and it gave the main body of market cattle three extra days to graze and fatten.

On the day the battered, gaunted, high-tempered outfit dropped down behind the sawtooths into the deep canyons, they met Willie Beazey with the supplies he had been sent for at the butte that served for Rendezvous. Willie brought him a chocolate cake and message from his wife that all was well, and that the country's womenfolk were getting all mixed up between food and dress-making in the last minute rush to be ready for their wagon rush to meet their men at pay-off, the big day of the year. The way Waring now figured things, pay-off lay four days ahead, a saving of two days time, and anyone's guess of how much temper and damage and trouble.

Beazey had brought other news—King Flanagan had cut north of the lower better trail on his return trip, going into the mountains at Tillson. His back had been wrenched, not broken, and he was fully recovered.

The overworked range men took this with hard grins. This established Waring's victory and right to crow without dispute, and

dust-soaked, grizzled ranchers and cowhands who had cursed his authority all morning, now moved forward readily to pay their homage and clap his shoulder. No excuse Flanagan could think of would ever cover this swing of his with men who knew the trail and country and the seasons. His reputation was destroyed, and the wolf pack would not be long in turning. It was Waring's doing, and more glory that he had not killed him, and every man on that range was proud of him and strutted a little in his reflected glory.

But Waring heard the facts with a sharp tensing of his nerves, mind automatically spreading out a mental picture of the country. Tillson lay thirty miles northwest of Fool's Gold Creek, and the mountain trail ran at right angles to the Tillson trail, swallowing an ox train for two hundred miles, but with feeder trails passable for riders.

He looked at Beazy with a hard light in his eyes. "When," he demanded, "did Flanagan pass into the mountains?"

"Why," Beazy figured, tracing back the stage driver's remarks, "it would be, I'd calculate, about ten to twelve days since."

At twenty miles a day, that put the ox train clean across the mountains and far east of the Tillson trail and no big ox train could find water to linger in those dry hills any length of time. The tautness sloughed off Waring. He then dismissed Flanagan from mind, and gave his plans for the morrow.

AT DAWN, they started the herd trailing through, climbing the steep grade to the funnel pass through the soaked up heat of late afternoon. The basin was where the brands would be untangled, and the ranch owners jogged ahead through the pass to survey the graze and agree on quartering it out for their own holdings.

What they saw from there was a black plume of smoke rising against the evening sky about where the town was. They were still studying on it when a cavalcade or maybe fortv horsemen and ten light, but loaded, wagons came dusting over the basin's rim along the valley trail.

Their first reaction was humor, for those riders were ponderous, heavy men unused to saddles, and they weighed down their horses like overstuffed, bouncing sacks of grain.

Then Waring stiffened, as somebody mur-

mured his own swift thought, "*A woman!*"

"A woman," the white haired rancher repeated. "And tied to her saddle by the looks!"

They could see clear enough, but it would mean fifteen miles of hard, treacherous riding down rough country to intercept that bunch, and once seen, the ranchers would be at a disadvantage clean north to the Creek. Beyond that, anyone with a planned getaway was sure to make it.

The men were staring at Waring, but then the hawk-eyed rancher added, "That's Flanagan's outfit!" and they jerked their attention away. Waring's breath caught and made an anguished sound.

Then a spotted mule came over the rim, moving for all its short legs were worth in the queer stiff-legged jumps it used for a gallop. A small figure leaned forward like an Indian along its neck, beating its rump with something black and shiny coiled in one hand. Little by little he was gaining on the party, and his shrill, near frenzied yell carried clear up to the pass.

Somebody grunted dryly, "Your boy, Dick," and Waring's face crowded with an added sickness.

They caught the flash of Flanagan's oiled red beard as he circled out and roared for a halt and the cavalcade turned, waiting for the boy to catch up. He came up at full run, almost crashing into Flanagan, and there were signs of some palaver before the giant threw back his head and filled the basin with bellowing laughter.

The old rancher commented with grim sympathy, "Pays to know where orphans come from."

"That one," Waring gritted, and lifted his reins, "came from a snake-nest, and he's gone back to it!"

His tough fibered body moved to put his horse thundering down grade, but in that instant, the miniature scene on the basin floor caught and held him. The boy let out a cry like an angered eagle, and in one jump, his little spotted jenny had switched directions, and almost in the same movement, her hind hoofs flew back, catching the tired mustang in the shoulders, and knocking it completely off balance under the enormous weight of Flanagan.

Somebody dragged a gun that glinted in the downing sun, but Flanagan's roar halted them as he sprang up from the dust. Gloat-

ing, vicious mayhem was in his anger. He spread his legs for a firm stance and his whip arm drew back at the same moment the boy leaped to the ground and sent his well-trained jenny prancing.

The ranchers were ready to ride again, but now the suck of Waring's breath held them back a second time, and they watched the boy dance back and to the side as Flanagan's whip snaked out. And then they watched an amazing thing—that pinched, awkward mite of a boy square off to the monstrous freight master, and lay his own whip back with an explosion that sounded like a pistol shot through the basin.

Standing there squared as the man he fought, laying back whip lash for whip lash, slashing and bringing an echoing bellow out of Flanagan, moving back a pace at Flanagan's wicked snake, and snaking himself and bringing another angered roar from the brute, and moving back another pace.

They circled, exchanging lash for lash, and suddenly Flanagan threw an arm up against his face with a howling oath, and tearing it down, started forward in blind rage, his face now crimson. The boy danced and hooted and gave a shrill cry of savage hatred. He ran to the side and circled nimbly, and this time they caught his words, "Don't you worry, Mrs. Waring!" and his thin arm swung in a great arc.

King Flanagan's leg jerked out at a crazy angle, and the next instant the thrust of his enormous body had thrown him clean into the air before he crashed. He was on the ground, thrashing in a boil of dust, his berserk roar breaking like thunder through the basin. Even in the pass, Waring's horse began to quiver at the wild sound, but down on the floor, the boy stopped and took a measured distance, and then his whip began to snake and dance rhythmically.

The boy stood down there and beat Flanagan until the brute's roars had changed to a thick bawling sob, and he began to crawl. The boy moved with him, never relaxing

the regularity of his exploding whip, tearing the clothes and making great red gashes on the man's body.

"Let's go!" Waring ordered thickly and put his horse full tilt down the slope.

THE bearded men of that cavalcade looked up with dumb amazement at the band of grim-eyed men riding down on them behind hot, whining lead. Some drew their guns, but they were no hands at snap shooting, and the men thundering down on them were ranging close.

A drover barked, "Let's get out of here!" And another shouted, "What about the wagons?" and the black-bearded giant thundered, "to hell with the booty—ride while you're able!"

The band swung, clapping spurs into their horses. In the spurt of dust, Flanagan pressed his hands against the ground and shoved his mammoth shoulders upward, lifting a blood matted bullet head.

"Boys!" he sobbed. "You ain't going to run off and leave your old King Flanagan here in the dust for them cattlemen to butcher?"

Some of them slowed from old servile obedience to his slightest command. One giant pulled to a dead stop, and swung his horse, and after a moment of contemplation boomed with one brute's scathing contempt for a fallen once-greater brute, "Hell now, King, guess we can't leave you at that!" And his gun slanted and gave its heavy, rolling bark three times.

Flanagan's great body twitched each time, but it was not until he heard the raw, merciless contempt of the black-bearded man's farewell whoop, that the spirit flagged out of him and he dropped heavily into the muck of his own blood.

It took long minutes for the ranchers to hump and slither down that drop, and the boy had gathered the woman's horse and cut her loose long before they got there. But

(Please continue on page 110)

Better Than a Bullet

The Indians were quick to make use of the various types of weapons that the white man brought with him into the West—particularly the rifle. Yet most Indians never lost their love for use of the bow and arrow, especially when on buffalo hunts. They could send the feathered shafts winging with deadly accuracy and a power so great that often the shaft drove clear through the buffalo's body.

—J. W. O.

GOLD FEVER'S FATAL!

By ROBERT L. TRIMNELL



The burro slipped over the edge
... turning slowly, with hoofs
thrashing at empty air.

*A burning malpais
sun, four thirst-
crazed men, and eight
pokes of stolen gold was
a deadlier combination
than black aces-and-eights!*

THE canyon was a long narrow oven with towering walls funneling the July sun down in a scarlet blaze onto the stream.

The four men shoveling gravel into the sluice were sometimes in water to their knees. Yet, by midday, even that gave no relief from the red broil of the sun. They bent

over and the blast thumped upon their backs like a spew of molten lead. Little red circles swam over the gravel wherever their eyes touched.

To Randy Walker, it was as though the sun was melting the canyon walls, distilling their essence, dropping tiny blobs of it, like whiskey from a still pipe, into the stream. As though each day an acre of wall was burnt out in that smelting oven of a canyon, and in the water condensed into those tiny, enormously heavy drops of gold.

Randy was very young and built like a two-year old bull. The others could not always take it all day. Often one would clamber into the shade of a rock outcropping and lay red-eyed and panting.

At dark the scarlet walls were washed with blue, cut by vast purple crevices. The four of them then crowded around the battered brass balance scales. Old Harry Corben had put the pinch of tiny yellow grains on the right pan. Dutchman Hoff waited impassively, his hands on heavy thighs. Dun Lemmet juggled the weights nervously, his black eyes flicking over the gold grains and at the open box of sausage shaped pokes. Randy watched eagerly as Lemmet tossed on the two ounce weight, and then the one ounce, and it still did not bring the pointer straight up. He flicked on a small cut-nail that was calculated as a quarter ounce and the needle leveled out.

The four of them relaxed a bit, calculating, though their eyes were still tied to the right pan, the misshapen fragments on it. The gold did not glitter. It was a dull yellow.

The glitter was in the eyes of the four men.

"Hah!" Dutchman Hoff said. "T'ree ounce heavy. You haf lost a dollar bet, Harry. You haf said light t'ree."

There was a grunt from Harry. From Lemmets, "What's a dollar? To anybody but a Dutchman, or a German, or whatever the hell you are, what's a dollar?" Then there was silence. A day of battling the sun had dried many things out of them. One of the first to go, Harry Corben often said, was the milk of human kindness. They growled and snapped at each other.

They had met here by accident, in this hell canyon in the malpais. Old Harry and Randy had come together, as partners, and met Lemmets and Hoff, who lone-wolfed it. A pan was dipped into the stream and rocked

and gold showed. So they were working it together. But none would take his poke and leave, though the heat was enough to drive a man mad. The flakes of gold made stronger chains than steel casting could be.

Dutchman said, "Ja, poot it away, Harry."

Harry Corben took a sausage-like poke from the box and spilled the day's take into it. He tied off the poke, for it was full. He thumped the bag back in with the others. The box contained nearly four hundred ounces now, some eight thousand dollars.

Dutchman said, "If I wasn't off my head, I take my eight pokes and I go walk to Dawson. Two days. In Dawson I sit under a green pepper tree. I trink beer. Cold beer."

"Shut up!" Lemmets spat suddenly. He looked up at Hoff and his black eyes danced. "Don't talk about beer!"

"Himmel!" the Dutchman cried. "Why sit in this heisskoffer, me? This hotbox! Maybe I take my pokes!"

Lemmets half rose. His stocky body was tense, his black beard seeming to bristle at Hoff.

Old Harry Corben said, "Easy, boys." His voice was calm, but Randy saw in his eyes that the oldster was worried.

Randy put in, "I bet nobody runs off until our grub is out. I won't. I'm sticking!"

Hoff mumbled on, "A nice cold beer."

Lemmets suddenly shouted, "Y' shut up, y' Dutchman! Y' shut up about beer!"

Harry said, "Easy Lemmets. Easy."

Lemmets' leathery face was paling, his black eyes bulging and now darting from one to the other. "Y' ain't goin'! None of y' goin'!"

HE LEAPED to his feet and ran up the slope to the shack. He plunged inside and came out. In his fist was Hoff's Smith and Wesson .44. He waved it over them and clicked back the hammer.

Randy started to rise, to go after him. From behind came Harry Corben's whisper, "Sit down, quiet. He's off his rocker. Let him burn out."

Lemmets laughed at the three of them. "No, you ain't goin', Dutchman! I'm gonna go drink beer!" He triggered the gun and flame lashed out. The boom of it smashed back and forth through the canyon. "Kid, you go catch my burro! No tricks! All the guns is in the shack."

Harry whispered, "Go get it, Randy. He'll

go crazy shootin' until the gun's empty if we don't keep him quiet."

Randy went down the stream to where the canyon widened and the flats on each side offered dried grass for the three burros.

"Hurry up, y' yaller-haired, fuzz-chin sprat!" Lemmets screamed after him.

Randy seized Lemmets's black, flop-eared little burro and hurried him back to the camp site. Lemmets's gun was quivering in his fist. The man was a black, shaking figure against the blue of the canyon wall, his shadow long in the last light of day.

"Throw the gunnysack rig on 'im!" Lemmets shouted.

The pack rigs were piled against the shack. Lemmets backed away as Randy went and got the double gunnysack pannier. He flung it across the burro and tied the ropes so it was solid and only the sacks swung loose.

"Now put the pokes in. Sixteen on each side."

The three of them swiveled around toward Lemmets. That meant the whole lot. He was taking all the gold, all their three months of labor under that broiling sun. His black eyes glittered and the gun jerked.

Hastily, they unpacked the box and threw the heavy pokes into the gunnysacks. Lemmets whirled and plunged into the shack. He was there a half minute when Dutchman rose stealthily and began to walk toward him. The dark doorway burst into flame; the .44 crashed and bruited, echoing, through the canyon. Dutchman backed slowly, a big red hand touching at his left arm. He looked at his fingers with horror rounding his blue eyes; there was blood on them. After that they stayed by the stream as Lemmets rummaged around in the shack.

He came out with Harry Corben's rifle slung over his shoulder, Dutchman's rifle sticking out of a sack, and his own Colt stuck in his waistband. He dragged a half-filled sack after him, waved them away with his revolver, seized the tie rope, and hustled the little animal off down the canyon.

He turned back every moment or so; as he went he stuffed the contents of the sack into the burro's panniers. The guns, canteens, a slab of bacon and a sack of flour.

Just as he took the turn that hid him from view, he fired a wild shot from the revolver.



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His cackling laughter was cut off by the turn in the rocks walls.

FOR a while the three men stood speechless. Randy was the first to recover. "Harry, where's that broke-up Colt you had? I'm goin' after the dirty son!"

"Easy, boy," the oldster said. "Set down and cool. Can't blow off." He left them and walked up to the shack. He came back carrying a whiskey bottle with a couple of inches of liquid in the bottom. He took a drink of it and smeared a horny hand across his watering eyes. He handed it to Hoff. The Dutchman drank, belched, and passed it to Randy.

"I don't want it, I want to beat that son into a bloody pile!"

The Dutchman shoved it into his hands. "It's goot for you, poy. Trink."

Randy drank a bit off the whiskey. It gagged him. He thrust it back to Harry. Harry'd been saving that whiskey for months, and Randy didn't want to cut the pitiful supply left.

"I reckon Lemmets'd been plannin' this for a long time," Harry said. "Just a-waitin' to get his guts up. Well, he got his guts up, and crazy. Gold crazy. Reckon we all got a touch of it—he's just gold crazier. But—Lord-ee!"

Randy said, "Get me that gun, I'm goin' after him!"

"We'll eat first," the oldster said.

"*Nien, nien*—no!" the Dutchman cried. "*Kein feuer, brennt nichts!*" He forced himself to calm down. "No, no *feuer*, fahyer—" He couldn't seem to manage "fire," but kept lapsing into German. "He'll come back and shoot if he a fire sees!"

Harry got the pieces of the Colt. A misfiring cartridge had wrecked the cylinder action. After he had assembled it, the cylinder would not turn.

"You can shoot one ca'tridge, then you got to break her down and shove another in. The cylinder's plain smashed out o' whack."

"One shot, that's all I need" Randy cried.

Harry sat against the rock with the gun in his hands. "I got an idee, boy, you're damn near crazy as the rest of us. I don't reckon I'll let you go after him."

"Why? Why? the Dutchman yelled. "You and Lemmets make a deal, mebbe? Eh? You got a deal—"

"Shut up," Corben rasped. He held onto the gun and sat there calmly and watched night fall like a black curtain into the canyon. Watching him, they too calmed. Harry Corben had roamed the hills for forty years and survived it. It was written into his wrinkled, leathery face and easy gray eyes.

"Harry, I'm goin' to go get him," Randy persisted.

The oldster scratched his leg with the muzzle of the Colt. "Look, boy. You'd just run off from your daddy's farm when I met up with y'. Everything you know about the gold trail you learned from me. It's been all right. I got me a pair of young legs to do the chasin', and you, you should of learned a thing or two from me. Right?"

"I guess so," Randy said.

"Well, Lemmets won't make it to Dawson. I've seen men go off gold crazy afore, and I know. He won't get there."

Randy seized the gun from him and leaped to his feet. "You're damn right he won't get there!"

"Let me tell y', boy. He ain't—"

"That's enough!" Randy cried. "Too much talk, and him with my eight pokes!"

Harry Corben nodded slowly. "If you got to burn it out of you, boy, go ahead. But listen. Lemmets will be dead from pushin' his burro all night, when the sun hits him tomorrow. He'll see devils dance when the sun scorches at his eyes. He'll drink too much water, he'll be sick, like as not. But the man goes after him has to have a clear head and be rested. Especial, when the man's got only one shot in his gun."

Impatiently, Randy listened.

"Now me, I may be gold crazy, but not *that* gold crazy. Dutchman, you don't figure to chase 'em?" He received a negative shake of the head. He settled back against the rock, took out his pipe, and began loading it.

"Now, I know y' won't sleep afore takin' off, like y' should," the oldster said. "So you go hike an hour or two, until you're dead beat. Then sleep a couple. Then run fast trail 'till y' catch 'em. The Dawson trail is the only one he can be on. Me, I know the malpais good as Lemmets, and I wouldn't take any other. And remember he took all the canteens so you carry your water in your belly." He handed Randy the gun and a box of cartridges.

"Good luck, boy."

As he turned the corner of the canyon,

Randy turned and waved back at them. The two stood there by the stream, waving their hats until he was gone.

HE DRANK his last at dawn, when the scarlet of the sun crashed into the canyon like an explosion. There the trail left the stream, for the stream wandered insanely off through the malpais canyons and lost itself God knew where. The Dawson trail to the town of Dawson, was two days on canteen water, for there was nothing wetter than a man's own tongue until you reached the wells of Dawson.

Randy had tried to follow the oldster's advice, and laid down for an hour, but he was driven by a fever, a craze to get his hands on Lemmets's greasy beard and rip and tear. Months of slaving in that hot box of a canyon, and then gone like a leaf in the wind.

Oh, Randy had heard of claim jumpers, and of men murdered for their pokes, in the two years since he ran off from his father's farm. He'd heard what men would do for gold; he'd learned and had soaked up the fever until it was a knot inside him. Each evening they weighed the washings he felt his tongue dry and a hotness grow in his stomach, and he knew he had it, and he should have known what some men would do for it.

He was following a rocky, dry canyon through a cloud of feathery white dust that stirred as he struck it, and foamed around him and swarmed into his mouth and nostrils. He lifted his bandanna to his face and strode on. The white dust was everywhere; it had been mud when the spring flood deposited it. He could see the marks of Lemmets's boots plainly, and the little round track of the burro. Lemmets's boots were pointed straight ahead and his strides long as Randy entered the canyon. After two hours of hard walking he could see them turning out like duck feet, and the length of pace was shorter. Then there was some burro dung, very fresh Lemmets had lost a lot of ground to him.

The trail led out of the canyon into a narrow wash. He climbed it and his skin began to draw tight from the heat, and the last of the water left his boots until they chafed dryly. He pulled the hat down as low as possible over his eyes, to cut out as much sight of blazing rocks as he could and he threw himself into clocking an even pace, slow enough, but steady, never faltering and

losing an inch, never a wasted advance of the foot. His mouth was dry now, unbearably dry. Visions of the wet green meadow at home came to him and tortured him. He wanted to lap the wet riverbank mud, to suck wetness, to roll in it. He fought his way on to a steep-walled canyon, solid rock, and there the trail burned out.

There was a fair path on the right wall so he took it. After ten minutes it ducked under an overhanging cliff. He looked at the shade with desperate longing. When he reached it he stopped. Harry would say, rest here. You've got to rest, that'll give you another hour's walking.

But now he could see thirty-two little sacks of gold burning before his eyes. He could see the cheap cloth turn to gold, and see gold glitter out of it like diamonds, like gold never was, really, but only in the eyes of men blazing with the fever. The shade was almost chilling in its effect; he got up against the coolish rock. Yet, after a moment he was aware that here too the heat was suffocating. And more, there was a cord around his throat, jerking, and voices rasping, "Go get him!"

He plunged out into the blast of the sun. The trail climbed until he was nearly walking the ridge. Below him were flat-sided blazing walls, and the bottom was a tumble of giant boulders. You'd never go through that. He went on and it was the same, but the rock walls narrowed until he was scarcely a hundred yards from the ridge across the chasm.

Now he came to a dusty spot on the trail where there were many burro prints and foot marks. He examined it; the marks were all from Lemmets. He had stopped here. Odd, because there was no shade. There were smudges as though from the gunny sacks being set down, and under one of them, some dust clotted to mud chips.

Lemmets would not waste water, enough to make mud.

He went on for a mile as the heat increased and the entire rock face danced before him. His eyes burned against his brain. Once he reached up and grasped a rocky projection to keep from falling, and he clung there while the canyon spun before his eyes.

Then the canyon exploded.

Rock fragment snapped at him from the wall. A second crash, and he threw himself flat on the ground and this time heard the

shriek of lead passing close to his head.

Then he saw Lemmets. On the trail ahead where it crawled along the canyon wall. Firing a rifle over the burro's head. A black, stooped figure, jerking from side to side as he fired, kicked the burro along, and fired again. Lemmets was coming *back*!

Randy crawled to his feet. The rock was furnace-hot if you laid on it. He stood there panting. Lemmets coming back!

A turn in the trail hid the man from him for a moment. Randy broke into a loping run along the trail, over cliffs and out-juttings of rock that a sane man would crawl around. He had to close the range to hand-gun distance. And suddenly they were again in sight of each other, fifty yards apart.

Randy raised Harry's old Colt and fired.

Lemmets ducked and scrambled against his burro. The burro had already shied, chopping its tiny hoofs at the rock, slipping, sliding toward the edge of the canyon wall and the yawning chasm beneath.

Lemmets clawed at the animal, dropping the rifle and catching a pannier. The rifle clattered over the edge and shot out into space. The burro slipped over the edge. Lemmets clinging frantically to a gunnysack pannier. It ripped open as the animal fell. Little heavy bags tumbled out. The flour bag hooked on a sharp rock and exploded into white smoke. Then the form of the burro, turning slowly with hoofs thrashing at empty air. A sort of scream rattled from the little animal. After a long minute, the thud, sounding like a splash.

Lemmets stood there staring down. In his hands he clutched a piece of gunnysack and the strap of a canteen, dangling against his legs.

RANDY hurried on the trail toward him. It was open and blank here, but there was a slab of rock slanting upwards, the lip of which would give a few inches of shelter. Lemmets had dropped the canteen and hauled out the Smith and Wesson from his belt. He fired as Randy flung down on the rock slab.

Almost instantly the rock burned through his shirt and pants. It was a burning stove top. He glanced feverishly around. There was no cover for a long distance each way on the trail. He peeped over the edge at Lemmets and two shots cracked out, one

blasting fragmented rock into his cheek.

He reloaded Old Harry's Colt, cocked it, and as the rock burned him until he could take no more, leaped to his feet.

He fired and saw Lemmets throw flat and saw rock explode above the man's head.

Lemmets raised his gun and fired twice. Randy flung himself down on the searing rock, took out another cartridge, broke the crippled gun, jammed the new cartridge in. He leaped up again as the heat became unbearable. He raised his gun and gave plenty of elevation and fired. Then down again, as Lemmets's revolver sent three shots like thunderclaps smashing through the canyon walls.

He fired six shots. He didn't know how he managed it. He was writhing over the flaming rock; gun and cartridges were almost too hot to touch.

At last Lemmets called out, his voice a hoarse croak. "I got no water, Randy! My canteen's holed, I got to go back to the stream!"

Randy stood there swaying, with the canyon a flame before him and Lemmets a tiny whirling black spot. So he'd hit the canteen with a lucky shot. Somehow there was no feeling of victory in him.

"We'll split it! We'll split it between us, Randy!" the man screamed.

Lemmets was coming toward him now. His legs stabbing drunkenly at the ground. Walking around the open trail. His eyes kept stabbing down at the canyon depths, where the burro and spilled gold lay.

Perhaps it was melting now, Randy thought, dripping back into the hell from which it had come. Dutchman once had called it sweat from the devil's nose. He believed that now.

Lemmets came teetering on. The man's gun belched and a bullet struck rock high above Randy's head, and stones tinkled down the canyon wall. Another spark of flame, scarcely brighter than the canyon walls. Lemmets came on.

"Lemmets," Randy called. "Put down your gun, I'll help you back to the stream." His voice was weary. The craze was burnt out of him now, and the fear. Lemmets could not hit him with that gun, any more than he could carry that gold out of the depths of the canyon without burros. He repeated it, "Put down your gun, Lemmets. You got to have help to get to the stream."

Lemmets stopped, his black eyes rolling crazily. "You'll take my gold!" he shrieked.

Randy stood there with his arms hanging limp. "Easy now, Lemmets, back to the stream with me—"

"I got to get my gold! I got to!" Lemmets cried. He fired once more, a ramming boom of sound. He stumbled on the trail and then turned and took the first step toward walking down the canyon wall toward his gold.

There was no second step. He walked down like a pinwheel and splattered on the rocks at the bottom. He was not even very close to the strewn pokes of gold.

* * *

It was toward dawn the next day when Randy stumbled down the stream to the camp. He sat down at the water's edge and looked at the thrust of the black canyon walls above, while he waited for Dutchman and Harry to crawl out of their blankets.

He told them what had happened. "Funny, he'd turned back already when I met him. Then yelled his canteen was holed.

I figured I plugged it with a lucky shot, but why was he comin' back already?"

"Harry said, 'I pinholed all of the canteens a month ago, when the big heat begin to bore in. I've seen men go up in a puff of smoke before, and I figured some one of us would get his greediness up when the craze got so he couldn't stand it. Pinholin' them that way, the canvas around 'em soaks the water and it evaporates off so you don't see any drip. Like as not he'd only lost a quarter of it when he turned back.'"

"Why didn't you tell me you holed the canteens?"

"Y' didn't give me a chance, one thing. Another, if you learned anything from me these two years, you'd make it back here."

Slowly, Randy smiled. He glanced up at Hoff. He scooped up some water and sucked it from his hands. "How about some beer, Dutchman?"

"Ja. Pretty soon we haf some beer. Gott, we *svim* in beer!"

They laughed at that. And when the canyon walls turned again to scarlet, they did not feel the heat so badly. The fever was burnt out. ☆☆☆

"It's no mystery to me!"

SAYS STAN WARREN, PRIVATE EYE

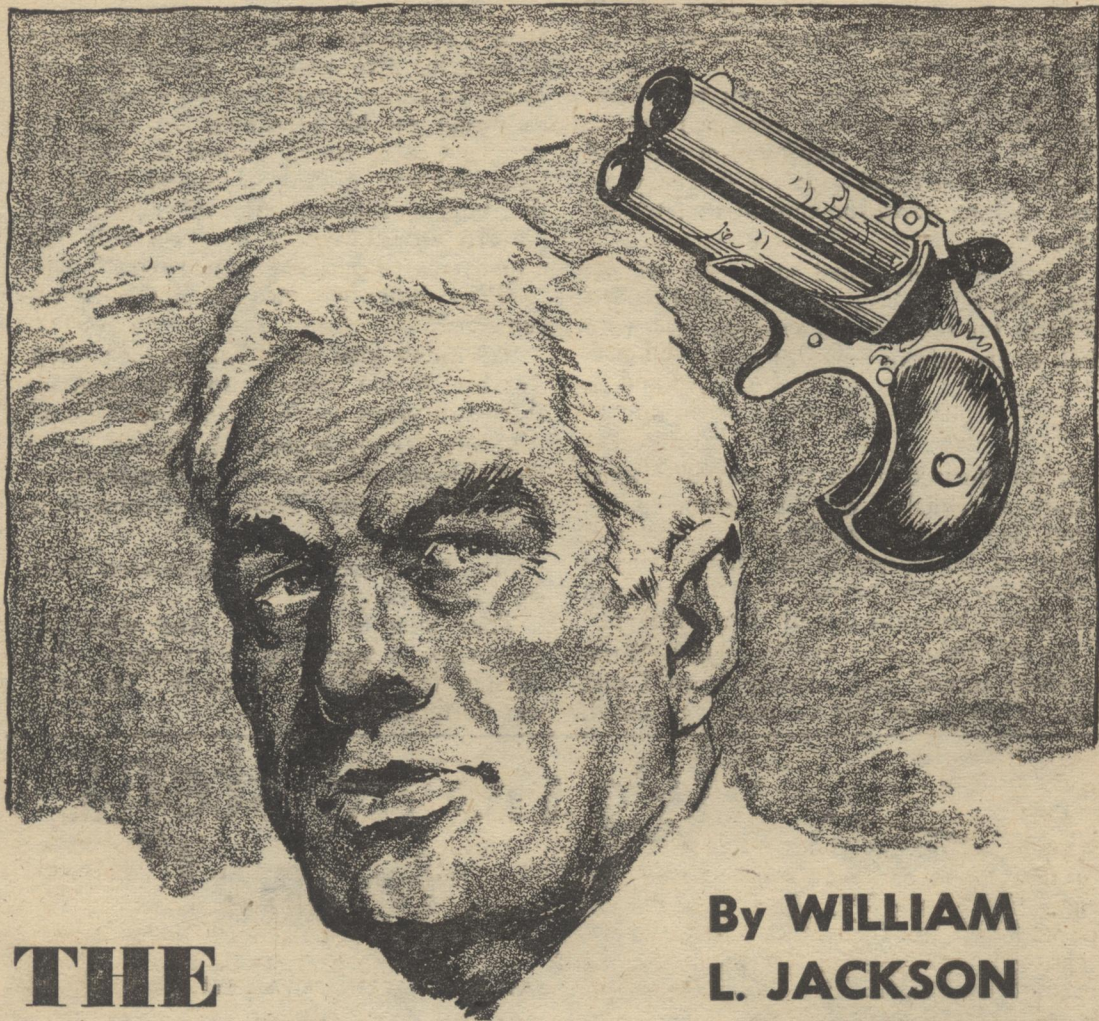
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"You sent my brother to hell with a bullet in his back, and you're railroading me to the pen. But someday I'll be back. . . ."



**By WILLIAM
L. JACKSON**

THE KILLER RIDES HOME

AT SIX O'CLOCK old Matt Foster was sitting in his wheelchair on the porch of the rooming house he owned, watching Abe Danyon's saddle shop uptown. He saw Abe's last customer of the day leave, and he saw Stan Reiss, the town liveryman and a magpie of a man, hurry across the street to poke his head into Danyon's door.

He knew that Reiss would be saying something like, "He just rode in, Abe," and Danyon would be sick inside and trying not to show it, maybe asking how Len Foster looked now. Reiss, a careful man, would

probably shrug and answer, "About the same."

No, not the same, Matt was sure. Tougher now, and older, a little pale from five years behind walls, but still driven by the promise he had made before he went to prison.

You back-shot my brother, Danyon, and I'm going to the pen. Someday I'll be back to settle that up. You can count on that. I'll be back!

Matt watched Danyon thank Reiss, lock his shop, and start up the street. The slim saddlemaker glanced up and saw Matt on

the porch, and a touch of grim humor tugged at Matt's lips.

Matt was the only person in town who still blamed Abe Danyon for killing his oldest son, Ron, and sending Len Foster to jail, and yet Danyon still rented his room from the retired lawyer. Matt knew he would see fear in Danyon's eyes tonight, and he remembered that other night five years ago.

That night, according to Danyon's testimony, he had left the rooming house for a walk uptown. He passed his shop and saw two men inside, he said, one at the cash drawer, the other working on the safe where he kept the silver he used for trim and ornament on his leather work. He yelled and the two men ran out his back door. He pursued them through his shop, taking his gun from the desk, and pounded out into the alley to fire at them as they fled.

One of the running figures fell and the other stopped, started to raise his gun, and surrendered when the mouth of the alley was blocked by men from the street. When Abe reached them, Ron Foster lay dead, and his brother Len told a story of forcing entry into Danyon's shop to play a joke on him, not to rob him. Danyon, Len said, had started shooting before he knew what was going on.

Len's story Matt believed, and the aging, crippled lawyer had come out of retirement to take his son's case. More money than could be easily explained was found in Len's pockets, but Matt knew that luck at poker could account for this, for he readily admitted that Len spent too much of his time in the all-night games in town.

Though able to appear in court only in his wheelchair, Matt did all that was humanly possible at the trial, but Len's testimony was not believed, and the jury returned a verdict of guilty. Len maintained his innocence to the end, and when sentence was passed he voiced his threat to Abe Danyon.

Matt heard of this later, for when he heard the verdict of guilty the old man left the courtroom, unable to remain for the sentencing. His wife had been killed years before in the same wagon accident which had crippled him, and his sons were all the old man had left. Now one of them was dead, killed committing a robbery, and the other was headed for jail.

Though unable to agree with the verdict, Matt knew he could not rightfully contest it.

The trial had been fair, and the men on the jury he had known, some of them as good friends.

It was Abe Danyon who told him that the judge had given Len only five years, and Matt had been forced to admire him for coming to face him. "I'm sorry, Matt," Danyon had said. "I'll move out of your place tomorrow."

"You needn't," Matt said wearily. "The verdict was guilty, wasn't it?"

Abe stayed, and Matt watched him carefully, though he acted as if Danyon no longer existed, ignoring him even when he cut wood and quietly did chores around the place. He watched him for five years.

NOW on this day when Len had at last returned, Matt looked squarely into Danyon's gray eyes as the younger man stepped onto the rooming-house porch. Danyon met his glance and said, "Evening, Matt."

Matt kept his snapping black eyes on Danyon's face. "Not a very good evening for you, I suspect," he said. "My boy's back."

Danyon went into the house without replying. He stopped suddenly in the hall, and Matt knew that he was wondering if Matt had waited for this night of reckoning just as Len Foster had waited. Then Danyon stepped into the parlor, and in a moment Matt followed, quietly easing his wheelchair down the hall and looking in.

Danyon opened the drawer of a table in the parlor and drew forth a .45 Colt, still new and shiny, its holster undarkened by oil and use. His knuckles went white on the butt of the gun, so tightly did he grip it, and Matt knew what kind of fear must be in him.

Abe wasn't a gunman. Until he bought this gun, the only weapon he owned beside the old pistol in his shop was an ugly deringer which a gambler long since gone from town had used to pay off a boot-making bill. The little gun lay on the table before him, looking much older and deadlier than the stiff new Colt in his hand.

As Danyon belted the .45 on his hip, Matt rolled into the parlor. "A few things I ought to straighten up in here," he said, and Danyon clamped his jaws together and left the room. Matt heard him step onto the porch and face toward town, and in a few moments he turned about and came onto the porch behind him.

Matt saw men swing aside on the walks as a lean, casually walking man came out of a saloon. Heads swung to follow Len Foster's route, and Matt knew that the whole town was watching.

His throat tightened as a hush fell over the main street. They knew they would see something now. Some of them had had doubts a few days ago when Len had not shown up, but their doubts had been dispelled when the sheriff left town for his weekly swing of the county and Len appeared. They had known then that he had waited somewhere outside town until the sheriff had left.

Len stepped into the street now, and Matt wondered if he was catching any of Abe Danyon's feelings as he watched his son's boots kick up slowly settling plumes of dust. Len came on unhurriedly, and Matt could tear his eyes from his advancing figure only when he heard a half gasp of pure fear from Abe Danyon's lips.

Matt Foster said nothing, and he did not move. He watched Len steadily, waiting for his son's next move almost as Danyon waited. Len did look a lot the same, he thought, just a little tougher and older. His deep-set eyes were bright and fixed, his head lifted, his body relaxed and ready. His face was light with a prison pallor as yet unconquered by the sun, but there was the same tightness across his cheeks, the same willful lines cut deep about his mouth. He was looking at Danyon's waist.

"Got yourself a new gun," he said, and his voice was worded laughter.

Abe Danyon's voice was uneven, wound tight. "You didn't come here to talk about a new gun."

Len's voice was flat and bitter, "No. I came to talk about a few measly bucks you shot my brother for. You got your money back, but you've got something else coming yet."

Matt heard his own breathing suddenly

matching Abe Danyon's. This was murder, whether Ron's death had been or not. Danyon didn't have a chance. Matt pushed himself forward and as he did so, a vagrant wisp of breeze stirred the blanket across his lap. Len's eyes switched to him for a moment, then back to Danyon, and Matt could see Danyon physically brace himself.

Len did not reach. His face loosened perceptibly, and some of the threat went out of his voice as he spoke again. "You've got a right to know that it's over and done with," he said. "That's all." His voice fell so low that Matt had to strain to catch his words. "I won't be troubling you no more." With this said, he turned easily on his heel and walked back to town, his back ramrod straight and his strides long.

The questions running through Danyon's mind were plain on his face, and his eyes mirrored nothing but shocked surprise and relief. His hands dropped to his sides, and he stood stone still on the porch. He was still standing this way when hoofs pounded at the other end of the street and Len Foster drummed out of town.

Danyon turned to go back into the house, but was stopped by Matt's weary voice. "That wasn't my boy," Matt said, with all of his abandoned hopes and canceled memories in his voice. "That wasn't my Len. That's why I had to do it."

"Had to do what?" Danyon said.

There was little life left in Matt's eyes. "Scare him off," he said, "that's what. My own son. You wondered why he backed off." His hand came from beneath the blanket across his legs. "Here's why."

With this gesture he let Danyon know that he had watched and measured his son, that he had measured and passed a verdict of his own which could never be changed. He let Danyon know this as surely as his eyes let him know that he would really have used the ugly .44 derringer which he now held in his hand. ***

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Fifteen Western Tales, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1951. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County. My Commission expires March 30, 1952 (Seal) —Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 67)

HOW'S your knowledge of the cattle country and the West in general holding up these days? Pretty well? Then try dabbing your loop on the twenty rangeland brain twist-ers listed below. Answer eighteen or more of them correctly, and you rank excellent. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're still good. But answer fifteen or fewer, and you land in the tenderfoot class. Good luck!

1. If the ranch boss sent you out for some "grizzlies," which of the following would you return with? A pair of chaps? Traps for a wild animal? Two ranch managers?

2. True or false? A "greasy sack outfit" is one which carries its commissary pack on a mule.

3. What is the meaning of the Western slang term to "flag his kite"?

4. What are two definitions of the rangeland slang term, "getting ready for high riding"?

5. True or false? Westerners sometimes apply the term "dump" to the bunkhouse.

6. True or false? A Westerner who lives by sponging off of dudes is known as a "du-dolo"?

7. What is the meaning of the Western slang term "hell in his neck"?

8. True or false? The Western slang term "curled up" means "dead".

9. What is the meaning of the rangeland slang expression "cow savvy"?

10. What is the meaning of the Western expression, "coyoting around the rim"?

11. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "concha," which one of the following items would you return with? A rabbit? A shell-like piece of metal? A pure black horse?

12. True or false? A white patch on a

horse's face which includes part of the lower lip is sometimes called a "chin spot."

13. True or false? The Western term, "chivarras," comes from the Spanish word, *chiva*, which means female goat.

14. Yes or no? A "brush whacker" is a "brush hand," according to Western terminology.

15. Would you more likely hear the term, buckaroo, in the Northwest or Southwest?

16. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "bronc tree," which of the following should you return with? A hitching post? A bronc saddle? A tree shaped like a horse?

17. Where is the most famous brush country located—in the Northwest or in the Southwest?

18. If the ranch boss sent you out to find the "buckboard driver," which of the following would you return with? A mail carrier? A small child on the ranch? A special type of Western saddle?

19. If a cowpoke acquaintance of yours referred to "blue lightning," which of the following would you think he was talking about? A sixgun? A special rangeland storm? A Western bucking horse?

20. True or false? A "blocker loop" is an extra-large loop, utilized in roping.

IF THE BADGE FITS—

By WALLACE
UMPHREY

Sixgun
Saga
of a
Town
Tamer



"All right, Charlie,"
the man in the bed said
calmly, "what shall we do
now?"

*Sometimes, an owlhoot town needs something more than a fast
gun . . . it may be a man old enough, cool enough, and with guts
enough to know when not to start shooting!*



CHAPTER ONE

Trouble Lawdog

WITH the election over, Kim Hardy was the new sheriff. It had been a bitter campaign, and he had won by only a small margin. The opposition, under the leadership of Trig Peters and Val Grossman, had put up a hard fight against Charley Starke's choice.

The sheriff's job carried with it a sense

of security, at a time when wages were low and money hard to get. Despite the trouble between Kim Hardy and Johnny McCloy, Kim and Janet had immediately announced their engagement.

About the only open objection to the engagement came from Johnny McCloy. "I'd rather have Sis marry up with the devil

himself," he said. "A lawman for a brother-in-law? It shouldn't happen to a dawg."

There were some who figured that banker Henry Durban wasn't too pleased either. But if so, he kept all such objections to himself. Henry Durban didn't talk in public about his emotions.

Old Charley Starke was content. He'd worn the badge himself for a good many years—too long, some said. Pride had made the admission difficult, but he had finally realized he was getting too old and stove-up to hold the job any longer. It was time to step aside. So he had hand-picked young Kim Hardy to wear the badge.

The old man was pretty jealous about that badge. It meant a lot to him, for his life had been wrapped up in being a lawman. There had been Dodge and Abilene and other trail towns before he had settled down as sheriff of Wallula County, a job he had capably filled for thirty years. The voters trusted him and they'd taken his word for it and elected Kim Hardy to replace him in office.

The opposition had made much of the fact that Kim Hardy was young and relatively untried. Both of these things were true: And yet Charley was reasonably sure in his own mind that things would work out. He had always considered himself a good judge of human nature.

True, a couple of small doubts had nibbled at the edges of his mind. These he had managed to minimize. Kim Hardy was apt to act first and think about it afterwards. And when he shot, he shot to kill. A man might make a bad mistake that way.

Young Kim Hardy had struck old Charley as the most likely candidate. Hardy had once ridden on a posse with him, and Charley had watched him closely, liking the serious way in which he had gone about the job. There was no nonsense about him. A little later Charley had appointed Kim Hardy his deputy. That had been two years ago. Now the sheriff's badge was the logical step upward.

At first Kim Hardy had been a little worried about accepting the responsibility. Old Charley had told him sharply, "If the badge fits—wear it!" That had quieted Kim's doubts.

Trig Peters had run against Kim for the office, supported by the rougher element of the town. It was true that Peters was older,

and that he had more experience. Charley claimed that Trig Peters' experience was all the wrong kind. The old man was convinced that Kim was by far the best man for the job.

It was the county farmers and ranchers who elected Kim Hardy. In town, banker Henry Durban supported Kim. But Val Grossman owned the big Eagle Bar and controlled a lot of votes, and the town gave Trig Peters a slight majority. But the majority was swept away when all the county votes were in and tallied. Kim was the winner.

Banker Henry Durban said stiffly, "It's lucky the people out in the county have some sense, even if the townfolk haven't. Trig Peters is Val Grossman's man from the word go." Charley had only grunted. When it came right down to it, he preferred Val Grossman to the austere banker. Henry Durban had always struck him as a do-gooder. At least Val Grossman was human.

After the election Val Grossman said, "Well, you win, Charley. You and Kim Hardy. I supported Trig Peters because I know which side my bread is buttered on. With him I know where I stand. But I'm a believer in law and order, and I don't like trouble. No hard feelings?" He had extended his hand and Charley had taken it.

Outwardly, Trig Peters seemed to accept defeat in good grace. But Charley wasn't sure about him. Peters had always struck him as being a little sly. Trig Peters and Johnny McCloy and Val Grossman were all friends.

Old Charley was glad when it was over. From now on he intended to sit on his front porch and spin yarns about Dodge and Abilene to the wide-eyed youngsters, who were always pestering him. His guns would be hung up for good. When he felt like it he'd go down to Val Grossman's Eagle to play checkers with his cronies. From now on he was going to forget about being a lawman.

THE day came when Kim Hardy took office. Charley cleaned out his desk and handed over the badge and keys to the new sheriff. It gave him a kind of funny feeling—sort as if he were being buried before his time.

Within the next two hours Kim was pretty busy. Three ranch hands from nearby spreads tried hoorawing the town. Kim sum-

marily juggled them all. It showed that he meant business, and so there was little more trouble of that nature.

A couple of days later Janet McCloy and Kim Hardy announced their engagement. Johnny McCloy got drunk and abusive. He drank for a while in the Eagle with Trig Peters, then kept on drinking by himself. By mid-afternoon he was mean and surly.

"I should've killed Kim long ago," he muttered. "He's no better than a polecat, and Janet's got no sense."

Charley looked up from his checker game. Johnny McCloy was only a youngster, a tall red-headed young fellow with a bad temper. He was like his dad had been—mean and no-account. Charley had once hoped there was enough of Janet's ma in him to balance things up, but that hope had dwindled. Johnny was just all bad. Traveling with the wrong crowd hadn't helped him any.

Val Grossman leaned over the bar and said, "You've had too many, Johnny. You got nothing against Kim Hardy except that he's a lawman. There ain't no sense in hating everything on the side of the law."

"He's a polecat," Johnny repeated. "He's even worse than old Charley."

Old Charley didn't mind. He'd had several run-ins with Johnny McCloy in the past. Such abuse couldn't hurt him. He'd always had Johnny pegged as mostly bark and little bite.

"You've had enough, Johnny," Val Grossman said.

Johnny McCloy pounded on the bar. "Gimme another bottle. I reckon my money's as good as anybody's."

"No," Val Grossman said quietly. "I don't want trouble. Get out."

Johnny McCloy was wearing a gun slung low on his hip, and now he hitched up his belt. He said grimly, "You want to try throwin' me out?"

Val Grossman shrugged a little helplessly, glancing at old Charley. Charley grunted to himself. When he had handed over the badge and keys, he had told himself he was through with trouble. This was none of his business.

At that moment Kim stepped into the Eagle, blinking a little in the dimness after the glare outside. His new badge, shined to a mirror-like brilliance, was pinned to his vest. He was three or four years older than Johnny McCloy, about the same size, with

a dark, wedged face and a hard strong jaw.

Johnny McCloy turned and hooked his elbows over the bar. "I been thinkin', Kim," he said belligerently. "This town's too small for the two of us. I'd rather be dead than have a polecat like you for a brother-in-law."

Kim flushed. "You're drunk, Johnny."

"So what?" Johnny McCloy sneered. "That don't make the town no bigger."

Val Grossman said: "I don't want trouble."

"That don't make the town no bigger."

"Johnny, just because Janet's your sister don't mean I won't treat you just like anybody else. She knows that. You're her only kin, but she knows what makes you tick. Someday if you ain't careful you'll find yourself stretched out in a grave. She'd rather have you in jail than buried six feet deep."

"A fine sister!" Johnny McCloy said grimly. "She's been at me to leave town. Well, I'll bet you put her up to it! You hidin' behind that tin badge don't scare me none."

The flush deepened in Kim Hardy's face.

Johnny McCloy laughed. "She's a fine sister, all right! A little snipnosed—"

Kim tensed. "Careful, Johnny. You leave her out of this. There's nothing I'd like better to do than put a bullet in your no-good hide."

"You figure you're man enough to try it, Kim?" Johnny McCloy asked.

The tension had almost reached the snapping point. Old Charley could feel it, and he shook his head. There was a flat, deadly look in the new sheriff's eyes. Kim was letting himself be goaded into a gun duel.

Charley slid quietly along the wall and came up behind Johnny McCloy. Neither man seemed to see him. The tension mounted and snapped—and both men clawed for their guns. Charley moved fast for an old man.

He came around in front of Johnny McCloy and snapped the flat of his hand against Johnny's gun wrist. Paralyzed, Johnny McCloy dropped the gun. Charley stepped hard on his toe, and Johnny doubled over in pain. Charley's knee came up and caught Johnny squarely on the chin. Johnny McCloy fell over on his face.

The new sheriff's gun was still lined on Johnny when Charley turned. Kim said a little shakily, "For God's sake, Charley! I damn near drilled you."

Charley picked up the gun which Johnny

McCloy had dropped. Kim holstered his weapon, saying, "You damn fool, Charley! Don't ever jump in front of my gun again!" He was sweating. Johnny McCloy groaned and stirred.

"You can't go shooting every man who tries to tell you off, Kim," Charley said reasonably. "Everybody argues with the law, sooner or later. Pretty soon there wouldn't be any town left."

Kim flexed his fingers. "When I lose my temper, I reckon I just stop thinkin', Charley. That's the way it is. Thanks for what you done."

JOHNNY stirred and slowly pushed himself up until he was sitting on the floor. He looked a little ludicrous sitting there, and he knew it. That didn't improve the way he felt.

"I'll get you for that, Kim," he said sullenly. "You too, Charley. I'll kill you both."

Kim stepped forward. He had latched on to his temper and he said coolly, "We've had enough of you, Johnny. You're just a damn nuisance. You've got twelve hours to ride out of town."

"Yeah?" Johnny said, getting tough. "The next time I see you I'll shoot first and talk about it afterwards."

Old Charley snapped, "Maybe the law badge don't mean nothing to you, Johnny. But it does to the rest of us. You do that and you'll be dancing on nothin' but air."

Johnny McCloy licked his lips. He looked up at the circle of faces around him. There was no sign of friendliness. Everybody knew him as a troublemaker. It was Kim's prerogative, as sheriff, to run him out of town, if by so doing gunplay could be avoided.

Charley expected Val Grossman to protest, since he and Trig Peters and Johnny McCloy were all friends. But Val Grossman didn't say a word. Maybe Val Grossman really meant it when he said he didn't want trouble.

"All right, maybe I'll go!" Johnny McCloy said harshly. "This is a hell of a place anyway. But before I go I'll leave you something to remember me by!"

There was a silence while he staggered out. Charley passed the gun to Kim. Charley said, "How's Janet gonna take it?"

"It'll hurt some, but I reckon she'll be glad," Kim told him. "She worries a powerful lot about Johnny. She'll agree that it's for his own safety. Janet's got brains, and

I'm sure she'll realize it's all for the best."

Kim went out and Charley returned to his checker game. He felt restless and worried, and he didn't like it. This was none of his business. He was through with trouble.

Val Grossman came over and said, "I don't like the way Kim handled that, Charley. Kim was all set for gunplay. If you hadn't broken it up, there's no telling what would have happened."

"Kim's all right," Charley muttered.

"Well, I hope you're right," Val Grossman said. "I'll admit I supported Trig Peters in the election. I think now maybe it went further than just friendship. I'm not convinced that Kim's the man for the job."

"We'll see, Val."

"What do you think Johnny meant by that last crack?" Val Grossman asked.

"Johnny's pretty much failed at everything he's ever tried," Charley said. "Maybe he was just shootin' off his face." And then under his breath, "I hope."

CHAPTER TWO

Fast Gun—Wrong Corpse

OLD Charley Starke was sitting on his front porch telling some tall tales to a ring of wide-eyed youngsters when Kim Hardy rode into town. Kim was riding one horse and leading another, across which was tied the body of a man. It was only mid-morning and the robbery hadn't taken place until late last night. That was pretty fast work.

He shoed the kids away. When Kim was within earshot he called out cheerfully, "Got him, eh?"

"Got him, all right," Kim said quietly. "In that old trapper's cabin up Shale Crick, just like Trig Peters figured when he seen the smoke. He came to the door with a gun in his hand and started foggin' right off the bat. It was still kinda dark and—well, there wasn't much I could do. He's kilt dead as hell."

"You're a good shot, Kim. Find the money?"

"No money."

Mopping the back of his wrinkled neck with a large bandanna, Charley said, "Hot as the hinges. . . . Is it anybody we know?"

"Take a look."

Charley did that, turning the dead man's

face a little to get a good look. Then he took a deep breath and said:

"Well, Gawdalmighty! So it was Johnny McCloy. Well, I'll be—well, I never figured he'd stick up the bank before he hauled out of town!"

"Janet's gonna like this, ain't she?" Kim muttered. "I dunno. Seems as though I ought to have just winged him—except everything happened too fast. Well, to hell with it. It's over now. Has Henry Durban awakened yet?"

"Not yet, Kim. Not the last I heard, anyway. Doc Burley says it's mostly shock. Henry only got a scratch in the holdup, even though Marsh Walker got killed. Soon as Henry wakes up he can identify Johnny here as the bandit. Funny thing, Johnny pullin' something as fancy as a bank robbery. I didn't think his threat meant much—and I sure as hell didn't figure he had robbery on his mind. Wonder what got into him?"

"He sure ain't gonna tell us now, Charley. Any witnesses come forward yet?"

Charley shook his head. "Guess nobody saw it happen. They heard the shootin', but

by the time anybody got there it was all over. Both Henry and Marsh Walker were down. The teller was already dead, and Henry was out cold. I reckon Henry Durban is your only witness."

"It's lucky Henry wasn't kilt too," Kim said, and picked up the reins. "I kind of hate to be one to tell Janet."

"I'll tell her, Kim, if you want."

Kim looked relieved. "Well, I better take the body down to Sundstrom's Mortuary."

Old Charley watched him ride off down the street, leading the second horse. He felt pretty upset. There would be a lot of talk.

He walked slowly along the high board walk toward Ma Benson's boarding house, where Janet waited on tables. It was going to be hard telling her that her only brother had been killed by the man she was going to marry.

Too bad that Johnny McCloy was just like his old man. Too bad there hadn't been some of Janet's ma in him. Charley stopped and kicked at an empty paper bag. He didn't like thinking about Janet's ma. Even after all these years it was hard thinking about her.



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"JEFF HITS the headpin right, but he'll never make a hit with that unruly hair. He's got Dry Scalp. Dull, hard-to-manage hair . . . loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. . ."



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Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to **DR. CHRISTIAN**,
starring **JEAN HERSHOLT**,
on CBS Wednesday nights.

Ma Benson showed him into the parlor and then went out to fetch Janet. Janet stood there looking a little scared. Ma Benson stood there too, and Charley stared fixedly at her in silence. Finally she got the idea. Pinching her lips together, she flounced away.

Janet said, real low, "It's about Johnny."

Charley nodded. She must have always been expecting bad news about her brother. Gently he pushed her down on the horsehair sofa.

Charley told her. For a moment she sat there rigidly, her hands clenched in her lap. She was a tall, thin girl with auburn hair. Charley found himself thinking she looked exactly like her ma had looked at the same age. It bothered him, just thinking about it.

"Not Johnny," Janet said tonelessly. "Not Johnny . . . not Kim."

"Johnny came out shooting," Charley tried to explain. "It was kinda dark and—well, Kim didn't have no choice."

"He didn't have to kill Johnny. . . ."

Charley said, "After all, don't forget Johnny was a killer and a bank robber."

"I don't believe it!"

Charley shrugged and she said, "But you don't *know*! I don't believe it. Kim didn't find the money. Suppose it was somebody else?"

"Johnny ditched the money some place," Charley said. "Kim will find it."

"They hated each other. I loved them both. I don't believe Johnny robbed the bank!"

Janet seemed to fall all apart. She put down her head and her body shook with sobs. Awkwardly Charley tried to comfort her. Then Ma Benson, who had been listening shamelessly outside the door, bustled inside. She frowned heavily at Charley as she sat down on the edge of the sofa, pulling Janet's head over onto her ample bosom. Charley took the hint and got out of there. He was kind of glad to get away.

HE STOOD blinking in the hot sunshine. He pulled out his red bandanna and mopped the back of his neck. Across the dusty street, Doc Burley hurried past.

"Hey, Charley!" the medico called out. "Henry Durban just woke up."

Doc Burley hurried on past. For a moment Charley just stood there, trying to tell himself that it was none of his business. Kim

was the sheriff now and he would get everything worked out. Yet he couldn't stop the feeling that he had a stake in the outcome.

He passed the bank on the corner and turned in at the house next door. Half a dozen men were already there, among them Trig Peters and Kim Hardy. Trig Peters was haranguing the crowd.

Kim was standing off by himself, looking down at the ground. Without looking up he asked, "How'd Janet take it?"

"It kinda busted her up," Charley admitted. "I reckon she'll get over it, after Henry tells his story. She won't let herself be convinced that Johnny robbed the bank."

Trig Peters was saying loudly, "Like I claimed all along, we need a sheriff with experience. Johnny was my friend. Now I ain't sayin' that he didn't rob the bank, but I figure he should've been brought in alive to stand trial. I don't hold with these lawmen who have itchy trigger-fingers."

Charley tapped him on the shoulder. "This ain't no place for a campaign speech, Trig. The election is over. That kind of talk won't do anybody any good. It was you yourself who gave Kim the tip-off about the smoke from that deserted cabin."

"Sure I did," Trig Peters said. "It looked suspicious. I knew the bank had been robbed. I always figure," he added righteously, "that every citizen should help the law."

Charley said, "Seems as though you were mighty anxious to let Kim know. Ridin' hell-bent into town in the middle of the night, 'stead of waitin' till morning."

"After I heard about the robbery—well, I figured it was important."

Charley turned away. It was hard to imagine Trig Peters wanting to cooperate with the law. Especially with Kim.

The door opened and fat Doc Burley came out on the porch. He called out: "Hey, Kim! You want to talk to Henry now?"

Kim nodded and started up the steps. On an impulse Charley followed him. Doc Burley barred the way.

"You ain't the law no more, Charley. I don't want Henry disturbed no more than necessary. He's still suffering from a bad shock."

"I'll keep my mouth shut," Charley said.

Kim Hardy said, "You might as well let him in, Doc."

The shades were drawn. Henry Durban was sitting in bed propped up by a couple

of pillows, a white bandage around his head. His eyes looked cold and bleak and his first question was: "Did you get the money, Kim?"

Charley thought that the question was wholly in character. Henry Durban had a great fondness for money. Kim coughed into the momentary silence and then explained briefly what had happened.

"Nonsense!" Henry Durban snapped. "Johnny McCloy no more robbed the bank than I did."

Kim Hardy looked stricken. Henry Durban went on, "I ought to know. The bandit stood in the doorway, the light on his face. I saw him plain—and it sure wasn't Johnny!"

With a visible effort Kim pulled himself together. "You better start talking . . ."

CHARLEY was standing at the bar with a glass in front of him. He wasn't a drinking man, but he felt the need for it now. The whole thing was bad—very bad.

The banker had described the bandit. A short, broad-shouldered man with sandy hair. It simply couldn't have been Johnny. Henry Durban had gone on to explain that he and Marsh Walker were taking an audit of the books for the bank's annual report, which was why they had been working late. No two ways about it. It looked as if Kim had killed an innocent man.

Talk had already started. Trig Peters had probably started it, although that didn't matter now. Already the talk was that Kim was a cold-blooded killer who had found an easy way to settle his difference with Johnny McCloy.

And there were even whispers that old Charley was partly to blame because he had supported Kim so strongly.

Val Grossman put his hands flat on the bar and said, "Look at Kim over there. He's not doing himself any good."

Kim sat by himself at a table, a bottle of whiskey in front of him. He was slugging down drinks as fast as he could pour them. Val Grossman was saying, "I was afraid something like this might happen. Kim's not level-headed enough for the job." Charley felt pretty bad. Eating crow was not easy.

"Look at him," Val Grossman said. "He ought to be out looking for the real bandit."

Charley said, "Listen here! He's engaged

to Janet. You know what may likely happen?"

"Well, that's not my affair," Val Grossman said.

Trig Peters sidled up. His big shoulders were hunched, his eyes guileless. Charley gave him an unfriendly stare.

"It's like I've always claimed—" Trig Peters began.

"Now you shut up" Charley told him. "Kim beat you in the election and it may give you a lot of pleasure to see him shown up but I don't want to hear about it! It seems to me you were mighty anxious to ride into town last night and suggest it might be the bandit hiding out in that deserted shack" A sudden idea hit Charley's mind. "How'd you know the bank had been robbed?"

"Well—"

"Who rode up to tell you?"

Trig Peters looked a little sick and Charley yelled, "Why, Godalmighty! Johnny must have let the idea slip out himself. When you saw smoke, you figured it was Johnny holed up in that shack. So you fell all over yourself ridin' into town trying to get Kim up there. You knew Johnny would come out shooting!"

"Now—"

"You only wanted to get Kim into trouble!"

Kim Hardy came out of his chair in a wild leap, pinning Trig Peters against the bar. His face was white with fury. He hauled back his fist and then Val Grossman said sharply: "That's enough!"

Val Grossman had a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. "You go sit down, Kim. You've caused enough trouble already. Johnny McCloy was a trouble-maker, but it appears to me you're just as bad." He waited until Kim had calmed down before turning toward Charley.

"You're just trying to make something of this, Charley," he said. "Johnny wasn't the bandit—Henry Durban said so himself. So how could Trig here have known anything about Johnny's plans?"

"Well, maybe he saw Johnny riding up there. He put the idea in Kim's mind that it was the bandit. He was pretty sure that Johnny would come a-shootin' when Kim called out to him."

Trig Peters sneered, "That's a wild guess."

"What was Johnny doing there?" Charley asked.

"We'll never know that now," Trig Peters said. "Kim saw to that. I reckon Johnny was just on his way out of town. There's no law against him stayin' there all night, is there?"

Val Grossman said, "Trig, you acted in good faith, didn't you?"

"Sure," Trig Peters said.

Charley felt defeated. He was sure that Trig Peters had known it was Johnny McCloy in the shack. He felt that Trig Peters had sacrificed his friend just to show up Kim. Still, there was no proof.

The door opened. Somebody said: "Uh-uh-uh." There was a heavy curtain of silence. Everyone was staring toward the door at Janet McCloy.

Her face was pale, strained. She clenched her hands at her side. Looking neither right nor left, she approached the table where Kim Hardy was sitting. Her tread was slow and measured, like the ticking of a clock. Kim didn't move.

"You murdered Johnny," she said flatly. "You kill without thought. I hate you."

"Now, Janet—" Charley began.

She paid no heed. The flat dead quality of her voice was worse than if she'd screamed the words. She pulled a ring off her finger and threw it at the table. It hit the table, bounced, rolled to the floor. Turning on a heel she walked out.

The silence returned. Without conscious thought Charley got down on his hands and knees to look for the ring. He laid it on the table in front of Kim. Kim didn't pick it up. He looked at it a second, then reached up and pulled off his lawman's badge and laid it beside the ring.

Charley said, "You can't just quit like this, Kim! We'll work something out—"

"I'll never touch a gun again as long as I live."

"Now, Kim, that don't make sense! Think it over a while."

"I'm through, Charley."

"You can't quit like this," Charley said desperately. "The town needs a sheriff—"

Kim said flatly, "Let it get one."

"Well, look a-here!" Charley managed. "At least appoint me as deputy. Think it over. You'll change your mind."

"Okay, Charley, you're a deputy," Kim said. "My mind's made up now."

He walked out. Charley was saying over and over, "He can't quit like this. It ain't right. A man just can't up and quit in the middle. I've got to show him that."

Val Grossman said, "We'll hold a special election."

Trig Peters was grinning. "Like I been claiming all along, Kim just wasn't the man for the job."

Charley said, "I ought to bust you one!"

The memory of Janet's ma was clogging his mind. He had been young, then. An ambitious lawman, with Dodge and Abilene already behind him. He had been brought in to clean up the town and he had done that and then he had been elected sheriff of the county. He liked the country and he wanted to stay and settle down. And there was a girl he was going to marry . . .

A group of suspected rustlers had been trapped in an adjoining county, and he had ridden over to identify them and bring them back to stand trial. Full of pride and ambition, he had told no one where he was going. There was a price on the head of the rustlers, and it was going to be his wedding present to his future bride. The trip shouldn't have taken over a couple of days.

It had taken three months. A chance bullet in a saloon brawl, a fight not of his own making, had almost killed him. Feverish and out of his mind, the girl he was to marry wasn't notified. She didn't know what had happened. It was a misunderstanding and she thought he had gone for good and it had hurt her terribly, and she had married someone else. The girl had been Janet's ma . . .

A misunderstanding. Just like this thing now. Nobody could really blame Kim for what had happened—and yet they were all doing just that. Charley knew all about loneliness. The same thing was happening to Kim Hardy. Something should be done about it. Yet what could he do?

CHAPTER THREE

Trig Peters

CHARLEY sat easily in the saddle, riding up the bank of Shale Creek toward the hills. The voice of the swiftly-moving water was in his ears. But in his head was another voice which was saying, "If the badge fits—wear it!"

That was what he had once told Kim Hardy. Now it seemed like a long time ago. The statment still went—and yet Kim was no longer wearing the badge.

And the deputy badge Charley was now wearing made him feel a little silly. He sure as hell hadn't given up the sheriff's badge only to trade it in for that of a deputy sheriff!

The old cabin was directly ahead now. Charley rode up and then dismounted, letting the reins drag. For a moment he paused to examine a lightning-blasted stump beside a corner of the cabin. He lifted his eyes and saw another horse grazing a short distance away. Charley pulled out his gun and quietly approached the door.

He pushed inside and then said, "Okay, Trig. You looking for something?"

Trig Peters whirled. He was crouched in one corner, methodically tearing up the floor. He rocked back on his heels and his hand hovered over the butt of his own gun. Then he gave up that idea. He pulled his lips around into a grin and said, "What brings you here, Charley?"

"The same thing that brings you, Trig. The money."

"What money? You know yourself that Johnny McCloy didn't rob the bank."

Lordamighty!" Charley said. "I'm not an idjit. You and me, we both think that Johnny pulled the job, despite what Henry Durban claimed!"

Trig Peters frowned and Charley went on, "You found it yet? No, of course not—else you wouldn't still be lookin'. Well, you might as well keep right on. No use me exertin' myself, not when you're here."

Trig Peters started to protest, but Charley silenced him. Charley leaned contemplatively in the doorway, keeping Trig Peters covered all the time. Cursing, Trig Peters kept on looking.

"You tried above the rafters yet?" Charley asked.

"There's no money here," Trig Peters said.

Charley sighed. "Reckon you're right. What do you suppose Johnny done with it?"

Trig Peters flared, "To hell with it. To hell with you too!"

"Don't get proddy," Charley said affably. "You want the job of sheriffin', Trig, which you figure is open, so don't go and lose your temper! The town's had enough of short-triggered sheriffs."

Trig Peters wet his lips, then tried a disarming grin. "Well, Charley, I guess you're right. I *was* looking for the money. I just figured if I found it and returned it, the voters would see I'm on the job."



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"Listen!" Charley said. "If you ever found all that money, nobody'd ever see it again. Nor you either, probably!"

Trig Peters said, "You got no call to talk like that!"

"Maybe not."

"Can I go now?"

"I ain't stoppin' you," Charley said.

He watched Trig Peters mount and ride away, crossing Shale Creek and riding up the further slope toward his tumble-down ranch. It didn't help Charley much to know that Trig Peters had hit on the same idea that had been puzzling him. Despite Henry Durban's air of assurance, he must have been wrong in his identity of the bandit. It just had to be that way. Charley decided he'd have to talk to the banker once again.

The trouble was, Henry Durban was not a man to admit he had made a mistake.

Charley paused again beside the lightning-blasted stump. There was a hole down inside which would make a pretty good hiding place for something. There was nothing in the hole.

Shaking his head, Charley mounted and rode back to town. On the way he decided he'd better stop in and see Eli Sundstrom to find out the time of the funeral.

"Johnny was laid away whilst you was gone," Sundstrom told him. "Janet wanted it over with—and besides, a body don't keep in this heat." He paused and then added, "Funny thing, Charley. It seems like Johnny's leg musta been broke before Kim Hardy shot and killed him."

Charley said, "How's that again?"

"Well, it's like this, Charley. I found three of Kim's slugs in him. But right down here now—" Sundstrom tapped his own right knee—"well, it kinda looks like he was hit by a small-caliber gun."

"The kind Marsh Walker carried?"

Sundstrom looked up with quickening interest. "I'd say so."

Charley nodded. "Thanks, Eli. Keep it under your wig."

The sun went down and Charley was sitting with his feet on the sheriff's desk. Several ideas tumbled around in his mind and he didn't like the taste of any of them. He hadn't seen Kim since Janet had walked into the saloon to break her engagement. Somebody had told him that Kim was still drinking hard. That was bad. Charley didn't

blame him for drinking, not after what had happened. But he did blame him for quitting. A man couldn't just up and quit.

Purple twilight came and then it was dark. Charley stirred. He wanted an excuse to talk to Henry Durban. He wanted the excuse badly. Pulling open a desk drawer, he took out a sheaf of wanted dodgers. Henry Durban might as well take a crack at trying to identify the bandit.

HENRY DURBAN said, "I'll take a look, Charley. Maybe you'd better move the lamp closer."

The banker was sitting up in bed, the bandage still around his head. Obliging, Charley moved the lamp a little closer. Henry Durban riffed through the dodgers, pausing now and then to look more carefully. "This looks like him, Charley," he said once, and then added, "No, I'm wrong. There's a resemblance, though." Afterwards he tossed aside the sheaf of dodgers. "No luck, Charley."

Charley said, "I reckoned as much."

Henry Durban nodded. "I'm sorry about all this. It's hard admitting we were wrong about Kim Hardy."

"Janet took it kinda hard," Charley said.

"I don't blame her."

"It kinda fits your plans, don't it?"

Henry Durban raised an eyebrow. Then he said: "I won't try to dissimulate. She's an attractive girl—"

"Well, I ain't admittin' we were wrong," Charley muttered. And then he said explosively, "Hell's Bells! You'd never pick out that bandit in a million years! You robbed the bank yourself!"

The banker looked shocked. "Why that's preposterous!"

"Johnny McCloy stuck up the bank, all right," Charley said. "Marsh Walker hit him in the leg with a wild shot. That drove Johnny off, and Marsh Walker was fatally hit. You robbed the bank yourself. Gawd-almighty!" Charley yelled. "Either way you were in the clear. If Johnny made a get-away, nobody would ever know. And if Kim found him—well, you counted on the two of 'em blazing away at each other."

"That's the wildest thing I've ever heard!" Henry Durban cried out. Then his voice softened. "Where are you going, Charley?"

Charley said, "To look for the money you stole. You wouldn't have left it at the bank."

But maybe it's around here some place."

"I wouldn't look a bit further," Henry Durban said. "Charley, I really wouldn't."

His hand came out from under the covers and there was a gun in it. Charley stood there with his hands hanging loosely at his sides. He was saying over and over, "Well, I'll be—well, I didn't ever figure you for a gun hand—well, I'll be—" He took a couple of backward steps.

"All right, Charley," Henry Durban said calmly. "What shall we do now?"

"Well, we might talk, Henry," Charley said.

He took another backward step. Beyond the bedroom, the parlor was dark. The door was open. If he could just gain the protection of the darkness, he might have a chance.

"I trust you, Charley," the banker said. "Your word is good for me. Just promise that you'll keep all this to yourself."

Charley took another slow backward step. "What about the money?"

"I'll put it back, Charley. I took a quick gamble—and it failed. Can't you see? The opportunity was sudden and unexpected. When Johnny rode away without the money, I just cleaned out the safe and laid it on the bandit."

"That puts Kim in a tight spot."

"I'll admit that," Henry Durban agreed. "I couldn't identify Johnny as the bandit because everybody would wonder what happened to the money. It's hard on Kim Hardy, I agree. The town will just have to go on thinking that Johnny was in the clear. You can just happen to find the money any place you decide we ought to put it."

Charley said, "It's hard on Janet, too."

Henry Durban nodded. "But you're in no position to bargain, Charley. Janet may get over it. If she doesn't—well, it's too bad. What's Kim Hardy to you?"

The door was right behind Charley now. Another backward step and he would be through it. All he had to do was keep Henry Durban talking a second longer. Charley said, "So you weren't really unconscious like you claimed."

"The bullet just creased my head. I pretended shock."

"The trouble is," Charlie began, "I think Trig Peters is kinda suspicious too—"

He took a mighty backward step into

darkness and clawed for his gun. Something lashed down on his head and he dropped without a sound.

TRIG PETERS was saying, "It's this way, Henry. I been outside listening at the window. Ain't you ever heard that too much fresh air is bad for your health? Charley had everything figured out better'n I did. Saved me a lot of bother."

Old Charley opened his eyes. His head hurt and his hands and feet were bound. He had been dragged back into the room. Henry Durban was lying bound on the bed.

"Where's the money, Henry?" Trig Peters asked.

The banker remained silent, both hate and fear in his cold eyes. Trig Peters closed the window and then picked up the kerosene lamp, walking carefully around Charley into the other room. Charley could hear him rummaging around. When he came back he carried a paper-wrapped parcel in one hand.

"Pretty cute, Henry," he said, setting down the lamp on the edge of the table. "The money—all wrapped up ready for mailing. Got your name on it. You'd pick it up later, eh? A banker can always make a trip without making folks suspicious."

Charley said, "Push that lamp a little further on the table, will you, Trig? It might fall off."

Trig Peters grinned. "That'd be pretty awful, wouldn't it?"

Henry Durban gasped. "Trig, take the money! We won't talk, not till we have to. You can be long gone by then."

"Trouble is," Trig Peters told him, "I ain't sure I want to leave town. Nice place here. And I kinda hanker after that there sheriffin' job. Maybe I can have it and the money too. If I have to run—well, I'll do that. I'll keep my eyes peeled for signs. But I'd like to stick around and keep the money too."

A look of horror crept into the banker's eyes. "You'll kill us both" he managed. His austere mouth shaped itself to scream out the single word, "*Murder!*"

He never got it out. Trig Peters leaped forward and brought the butt of his gun crashing down on the top of the banker's skull. There was a terrible sound of crunching bone. Charley figured that Henry Durban was as dead right now as he'd ever be.

"Careful with that lamp," Charley said.

"I'll be careful with it, all right," Trig Peters said, and sent it spinning to the floor.

The lamp shattered, spilling out kerosene. Tongues of flame licked along the rug. Trig Peters' boots rang hollowly through the house. A door opened and closed. Everything was quiet except for the sputtering of the flames.

Panic gripped old Charley Starke, for a moment. He pounded his heels on the floor, straining at the ropes that bound him. That wasn't getting him anywhere. He calmed down, listening. The town was quiet. All he could hear were the flames and the sound of his own hoarse breathing. Then he began rolling over and over toward the shattered lamp.

The flames hadn't spread much yet. Lying on his back, he pivoted around until his boots were in the flames. He was aware of the smell of scorching cloth and leather. The heat came through the tough leather of his boots. He saw the rope smoldering. Scissoring his legs open, the rope binding his ankles parted and he scrambled to his feet.

A quick look told him that Henry Durban was dead. The flames were higher now. Old Charley lifted one booted foot and drove it through the window. The sudden draft did queer things, and flame ran up the curtains.

Charley started to dive head-first through the window, then thought better of it. The glass had broken in a jagged edge. He turned his back to the window and began sawing his wrists across the sharp edge of glass. He felt blood spurt from numerous lacerations—but the ropes fell away. He stepped through the window and dropped to the ground outside, beating out the flames that were still curling up his pant legs.

Flames licked through the window and along the sash and up the side of the house. The fire was roaring now, tinging the sky with a dusky glow. In the distance a voice yelled, then another. Charley faded into the shadows.

Half the town arrived shortly. Charley stood in the shadows and managed to knot his red bandanna around the worst cut in his wrist. Men began carrying buckets of water from the well, but the flames leaped higher.

Somebody yelled, "We can't save it! We better wet down the roofs on the buildings next door!"

Val Grossman spoke suddenly, "Where's Henry? Good Lord, the man must still be inside!"

"You can't go in there, Val!" somebody said.

Val Grossman paid no heed. Holding his sleeve over his face, he plunged into the burning building. Charley came out of the shadows and mingled with the crowd. Neither Trig Peters nor Kim Hardy were a part of it. Val Grossman staggered out, pulling the partially-charred body of the banker after him.

Charley spotted Janet McCloy at the edge of the sidewalk. He approached her and whispered, "Where's Kim?"

"That's of no importance to me—" Janet began.

Charley gripped her arm. "Where is he, Janet!"

"He's been drinking all day. He went up to his room at Ma Benson's a while ago. Probably to sleep it off." She tried to pull away. "Stop! You're hurting my arm!"

Charley said, without letting go, "Janet, go get him. Tell him I'll be down at Val Grossman's in half an hour. Tell him it's big trouble."

Janet began: "I certainly won't—"

"Tell him!" Charley whispered angrily.

Janet stared a moment, then nodded meekly. "What is it, Charley . . . Oh, all right, I'll tell him!"

Somebody yelled, "Henry's skull was caved in!"

In twenty minutes the house was gone. The immediate buildings had been saved. Two men carried the body toward Sundstrom's, and the rest of the crowd began to disperse. Val Grossman nodded at Charley when he went past. Val Grossman's clothing was charred.

Charley waited another ten minutes, then began walking toward the Eagle, his boots hitting the board walk hard. He reached for his bandanna to wipe the back of his neck, then remembered it was wrapped around his wrist. Charley had always tried to avoid trouble, but he was asking for it now.

WHEN he reached the Eagle things had settled back to normal although everybody was talking about the fire and what had happened to Henry Durban. Charley edged along the bar and a bartender came

toward him. Charley decided a drink might do him some good.

He ordered that and then asked, "Where's Val?"

The bartender jerked a thumb toward the rear, where there was a small office and living quarters. Charley said, "I want to talk to him."

Watching the bartender knock on the door, Charley sipped his drink. Val Grossman appeared. He had already changed his scorched clothing.

"Let's have a talk," Charley said. And added, "Back in your office."

"What's wrong with right here?"

"In your office," Charley repeated.

Val Grossman let his lids come down over his eyes. His lips were a little pinched. He hesitated a second, then shrugged. The two men walked toward the back of the big room.

The office was small and neat and empty. Charley shut the door behind him. There was another door, closed, which led into the living quarters. Charley tried not to look at it, and he kept his hand away from the gun at his hip. Val Grossman went around his desk and sat down.

"All right, Charley," Val Grossman said.

Charley wondered where Kim Hardy was. He moistened his lips and then said, "I won't beat around the bush, Val. That fire tonight—Trig Peters started it. He killed Henry Durban. He tried frying me alive but I got away."

Val Grossman jerked out a startled, "Why?"

"Henry Durban robbed his own bank, and Trig Peters suspected it," Charley said. "Johnny McCloy failed at everything. At being a bad man and finally at robbing the bank. Henry robbed his own bank, Trig set up Johnny like a pigeon for Kim Hardy to shoot. That was to discredit Kim. Trig made a try for the money and the job of sheriff too."

"I won't believe it," Val Grossman muttered.

Charley said quietly, "Why not ask Trig?"

Val Grossman studied Charley out of his lidded eyes. His body was tense, his hands flat on the desk. The knuckles were white. He sat there unmoving for a second, then leaned back. He turned his head sharply and called out, "Trig!"

A door burst open and Trig Peters

stamped in. The gun in his hand was aimed at Charley.

"Damn you, Trig!" Val Grossman said bitterly. "You're all bad. Once you saved my life and I've owed you that debt ever since. You've got your life now, and we're all square. Get out of town and keep on going!"

The gun in Trig Peters' hand didn't waver. He kept on looking at Charley when he said, "I'll go, Val. Just keep Charley here for an hour."

Val Grossman pulled open a drawer of his desk and took out a silver-mounted pistol. He held it leveled at Charley's stomach.

"You have an hour, Trig," he said. "Leave the money."

Trig Peters laughed harshly. "The money goes with me, Val. You ought to know that. I've had a lot of trouble getting it."

The gun in Val Grossman's hand wavered, then lined up again. Staring at Charley, he said tightly: "How far does a debt like this go? Okay, Trig. You can take your hour."

Charley said, "Trig made Kim look bad, Val. We're the only ones who know just what happened. Trig will have to stand trial."

"We can tell the story later," Val Grossman said.

"Who'd believe us?" Charley asked, his voice bitter.

Trig Peters laughed and Val Grossman told him, "Don't break the string on that debt I owe you, Trig."

"You don't think I'm staying here, do you?" Trig Peters said.

There was the sudden sound of shattering glass. First a gun and then Kim Hardy's lean face appeared in the frame. "Drop it, Trig. You too, Val!"

Trig Peters crouched, tense as a wound clock spring. Then he cursed and his gun slid out of his fingers. Val Grossman lowered the pistol in his hand. Kim Hardy climbed through the window and said: "Janet told me, Charley. A bartender told me you were back here. I've listened to everything."

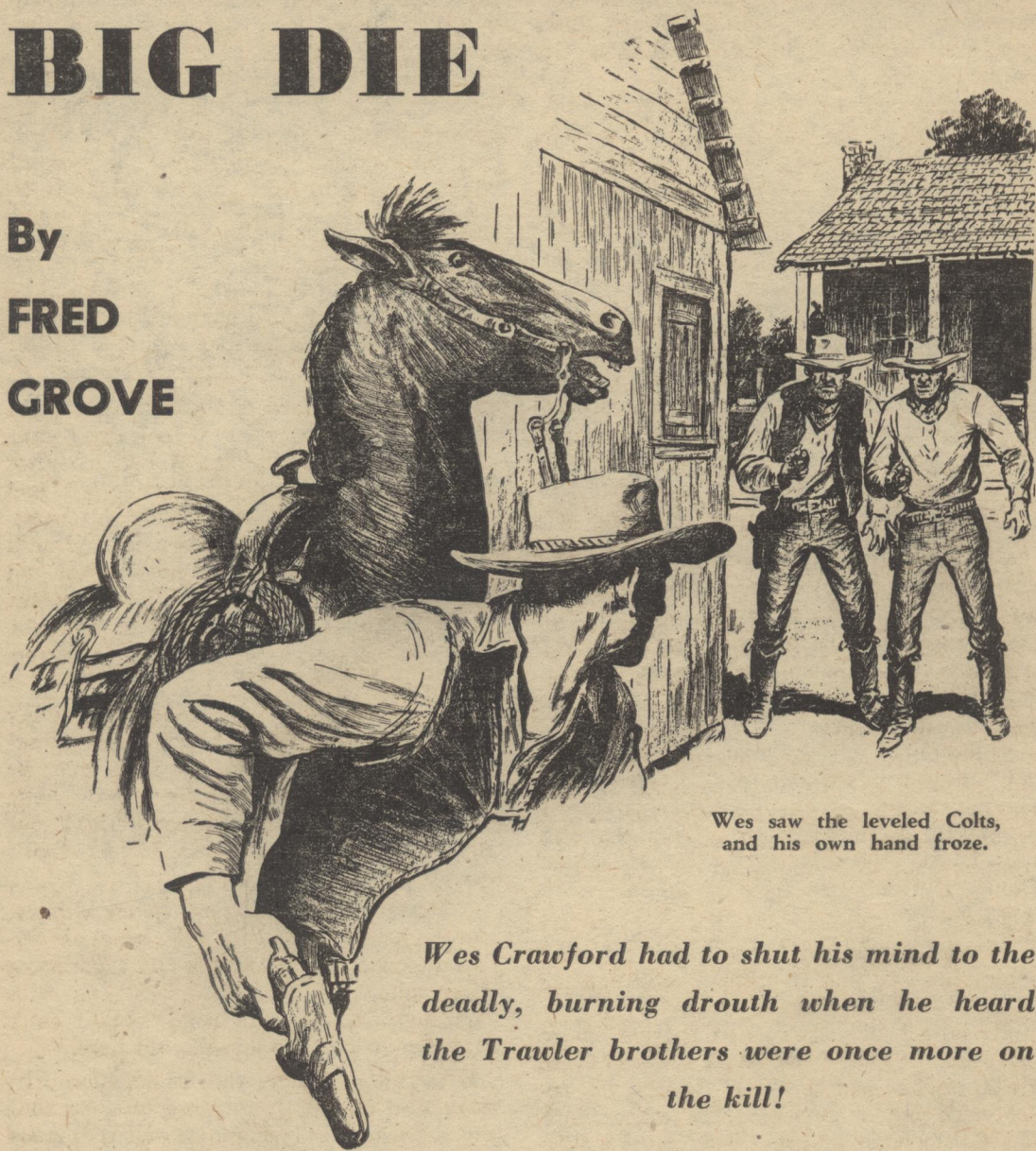
Kim Hardy's eyes were shadowed. He didn't look drunk. Charley saw that the sheriff's badge was again pinned on Kim's vest.

And then Kim Hardy's lids came open

(Please continue on page 111)

SUMMER OF THE BIG DIE

By
FRED
GROVE



Wes saw the leveled Colts,
and his own hand froze.

*Wes Crawford had to shut his mind to the
deadly, burning drouth when he heard
the Trawler brothers were once more on
the kill!*

RIDING past the house, Wes Crawford could feel the run-down shabbiness of the scattered ranch buildings. It hadn't bothered him last fall when Lily came, for his hopes had been high then. Sun-cracked and bleakly gray, the place was an ugly reminder of plans blasted by fickle weather. There'd been the long, harsh winter, and now the dust and heat of a grass-killing drouth kept hanging on

He was in no hurry and he rode slowly inside the corral of warped jackoak poles, the clanking of the windmill grinding in his ears. He watered the gelding and unsaddled over by the horse shed. As he forked loose hay, he stared at the ribs of the empty grain crib. Then his head came up and he paced through the hot wind across to the house, where the cottonwoods threw out black patches of shade.

Before going in, he glanced up at the cloudless, copper sky, sliding toward dusk now, and a little shudder touched him. He stepped inside.

She was bending over the wood-burning stove. Against the yellow light of the coal-oil lamp her face was flushed and shining. She looked up and straightened, the round, full shape of her blouse rising and falling as her hands worked.

"Supper's ready," she said.

Awkwardness came on him and he was weary all through, not wanting to tell her what he'd seen today. Always like this, at the wind-up of his long fence-riding rounds, they would talk and always the talk drifted to short water and grass and lank cows.

"The Pretty Water is gettin' down," he said. "But no more than I expected and it's never dried up. We've had dry spells before."

He spoke with a forced good humor that he didn't feel. He thought of Sol Beeson's invitation that morning as they squatted in the thin shade of the blackjacks where the Saddle Rock spring seeped. "Dance at Beeson's place tomorrow night," he said. "I figured we might go."

She nodded, her eyes searching his face, and abruptly he wanted to reach out for her. Instead, he dipped water from the bucket on the wooden stand and washed the dust from his face with a noisy, grunting relief.

HE WAS reaching for the roller towel when he heard her say, "Wes," and something told him that she'd been figuring again.

He pulled out a chair at the table before he spoke. "Farley?" he asked, low and even. He knew his own face was showing his resentment and he could see the color climbing in her cheeks. At that instant she looked drawn thin again. It dug into him that maybe she'd worked harder than he'd realized.

"Why, yes. How'd you guess?"

He tried to smile. "I can read the signs." The smile vanished. "We've been over it before—a couple of times."

All at once she sat down across from him and he caught the faint, clean scent of her hair. "Wes," she said breathlessly, "I'm just trying to help us. John Farley rode over to ask me again. He wants me to take my old job back—teach the next term in Mesa. School starts in two weeks and he has to

know right away. It isn't much, but it'll help us get by here. You've said yourself that we're burned out this year."

"Not yet," he said in a flat, stubborn voice. "This drouth'll break soon. They always do. And I thought we'd turned down Farley for good." Tight-lipped, he stopped talking, trying to think of the right way to say it. "You're a town girl, Lily. I know that and I know this is a hard year on a woman—any woman."

"That's why I want to help." She leaned forward, her face upturned.

Last fall he'd have told her that having her here was what counted. The thought turned him awkward and stiff again. What he wanted to say was that it took two people—a man and his woman. But he couldn't straighten out in his mind what he felt, and he was straining against a rising bitterness.

"You're helping plenty," he said. "What'll people say if you move into town? That you had to because I can't make it for us out here." He swallowed hard and he knew he was getting it mixed up. "I've got my pride, Lily."

He saw the gray eyes widen, heard her voice high and aroused, "And I have mine! What if people do talk? It's nothing to be ashamed of, and it's only for a little while . . . this fall. You're wearing yourself out while I just watch. I don't feel that's enough."

"Maybe," he heard himself saying bitterly, "I'm just now gettin' it. It'd be easier for you in town. Maybe you could have some of the things you don't get here." His voice was rough-edged and he said, "No—I don't want you to go. We'll make out here."

He saw the swift change in her face. She seemed to shrink away from him, to shut him out. Quickly, she got up and Wes stood with her. It rushed over him miserably that he hadn't meant to say it that hard. Trouble was the town job had long been a sore subject between them. It had been ever since Farley had offered it last winter, and the wedge between them had grown as the drouth sharpened tempers.

"Lily," he said, taking a step.

"Don't touch me!"

She jerked away and stood there, rigid and hurt, not looking at him. He could hear her rapid, broken breathing. He was groping for the right words, the words that wouldn't come. But smooth talk had never been easy

for Wes Crawford, a big-boned, drawling man with rope-roughened hands. Then she turned and was gone into the other room. Everything was empty and wrong inside him when he swung outside.

It was almost dark, with the strong-scented smell of the dry prairie grass keen on the climbing wind. A wind that was like a hot tongue licking against his face. The words he had said whipped back at him, the clumsy, hurting words, and he saw himself big-handed and rough and awkward. Lily was right. They were burned out and the place he'd slowly built up was slipping back to dust. Yet—he ground around stubbornly—her way wasn't a man's. It wasn't false pride for a man to stiffen and fight back in the only way he knew. He found himself searching the beginning of the faintest suspicion in his mind. Was this her way of easing out of a poor match?

With a sudden self-disgust, he realized that wasn't fair thinking. Still, the thought kept sliding back, dark and ugly, hitting at his pride. He hadn't really told her how bad it was. Gaunt, bony-ribbed stock was bawling and some dying around the mud-cracked water tanks. In places the creek had dried down to shallow holes, even in the deep stretches where the Pretty Water ran past the Trawler range. He'd seen it again today, the water green and murky and the flat rocks showing. The horse ranch of Murdo and Tharp Trawler held a heap of memories, none of them pleasant.

THEIR headquarters was a shack cabin and scattering of lean-to sheds and rackety corrals in the rough hills across the creek. It was there that Wes, then a deputy marshal saving his pay for the ranch on the other side, had caught the brothers with stolen horses. On Wes' testimony they had drawn five-year sentences in the penitentiary at Concho. One day they'd finish their time. They'd come helling back. They'd come looking for him. He'd got that in Mesa's crowded courtroom after the trial was over.

Grim-mouthed and surly, Murdo and Tharp stood sullenly between deputies Ed Bowdre and Tom East, the shock and disbelief showing on the brothers' dark faces. As Wes was walking past, Murdo's head jerked and Wes halted. He was aware of the thick quiet, the restless shuffling of boots, as if everybody waited for something.

"We ain't forgettin' you," Murdo grunted, letting the words sink in. His heavy-lidded eyes seemed to narrow in their sockets, to flicker their hatred, and he swung his square and solid shoulders.

"They used to hang hoss thieves," Wes snapped. "You got off easy. You can cut your time down by good behavior."

Murdo's bushy mouth was working. "Yeah," he sneered, "that'll help."

Murdo was the waspish one, Wes remembered. A dark, moody man, he made decisions for the brothers, and Tharp followed them with a blind and reckless devotion. Tharp was weak, unpredictable, dangerous—and yellow. He tried to mimic Murdo's swagger, Murdo's tough talk, though he didn't have his brother's nerve. He was thin-faced and bony-shouldered, with restless, smoky eyes and skinny hands that were never still.

"We'll remember," Tharp joined in, his voice a raspy imitation of Murdo's.

"Good enough," Wes gritted. "I don't hold grudges. But when you get out, remember where the fence lines run. My grass takes in the Pretty Water past your place—your range is on the other side. Remember that."

"Come on, Murdo," Ed Bowdre spoke up irritably. "Long ride to Concho. Mind your ways and we'll forget the cuffs, but let's go."

It happened all at once, like something long held in suddenly bursting. Murdo shuffled his feet, turned reluctantly with the deputies behind Tharp. Murdo took a slow step, with his shaggy head lifting. He stopped, boots planted wide. In one jerking, hating motion he wrenched around. Wes saw the big fists knotting.

"Damn you!"—Murdo drove his voice at Wes—"you better stay primed! We'll be back quicker'n you think!"

"Shut up, Murdo!"

It was Ed Bowdre's alarmed voice. He was reaching for his gun when Murdo lunged and flayed out murderously. Wes ducked and threw up his arms. Too late he felt the rocky knuckles smashing across his chest, his face. Pain sliced through him and as he tilted back, off balance, he saw Tom East struggling to hold Tharp.

But Murdo had torn free. He was rushing in, bull's head lowered, the short, stocky arms swinging. Tharp had thrust his long frame in front of Bowdre and the deputy

was punching violently to break through to Murdo.

Abruptly, Murdo's face was blurred, close in, the sweaty body smell strong. Wes twisted and shot a fist along the sloping line of the bearded jaw. There was a choppy thunk. Murdo's head canted up, surprise springing across the eyes. Around Wes was the shouting and stamping of the pushing-in crowd. He saw Murdo, wild-eyed and grunting, boring in recklessly. Then Bowdre's gun barrel was slashing downward. It cut a short, wicked arc. Metal cracked on bone and Murdo sagged to his knees.

Something sick turned over in Wes. It flashed through him that the Trawlers would blame him for this, too. He watched Murdo wilt like an axed steer, his stubby-fingered hands gripping the long-haired head that ran red. Now Bowdre and East were slapping on handcuffs and hurrying the Trawlers through the crowd. A moment later, Wes heard Murdo's high-pitched, furious voice, almost a scream, "We'll be back!"

AFTER three years, flashes of the courtroom fight still wandered through his mind. Lately, in his low moments, he had found himself studying ahead to the time when the Trawlers would return, studying about guns—the worn Colt he'd put away when he quit the lawdog game and the old Winchester coyote gun. He was frowning, thinking of Murdo and Tharp, as he saddled up the following evening.

Silent, he and Lily rode toward Sol Beeson's ranch. They were angling across hill-rolled country under a star-scattered night. It reminded Wes of other nights last year, when they had first married, when the smell of the coming-on fall was strong and bracing. Only there was a dryness now on the wind, and the horses kicked up dust that gritted between the teeth.

Lily hadn't mentioned the school job again. Yet Wes knew it hung in her mind. He sensed it in the silence as she waited for him to cinch up. He caught it in the cool surface of her eyes, the voiceless reproach, the unspoken bitterness. When she took the reins and slipped her boot in the stirrup, Wes moved to give her a hand. Swiftly, Lily was in the saddle before he could more than touch her. For a second, while his hand fell away, he felt the brushing lightness of her and her woman's softness. She turned her

face from him and she beat him out of the corral. He swung up, letting the gelding foot alongside.

"You're quick," he said.

"Quick," she asked, "for a town girl?" and rode ahead.

Bundled behind her was an extra skirt. She'd change to it soon as they got to Beeson's, and he remembered last year the pride he'd felt in her when they'd gone to their first dance there. Later, the realization of his own untractable boots and how, after two dances, he'd left her to the waiting, more sure-footed cowboys, while he talked weather and cows and markets with the older ranchers.

Wes heard the violins before he could make out the shapes of the drawn-up wagons and the horses bunched around the brightly lighted ranch house. The music came high and scraping, thin on the wind. It gave Wes a quick-running warm feeling, a feeling of belonging to these people. To the leather-faced men and the uncomplaining women. It struck him as a sort of half-wild defiance to bad weather and lean times.

When they dismounted among a chattering cluster of ranch kids, he saw an expression of eagerness on Lily's face in the streaky light. Leading the horses off, he heard a small girl's voice, pleased and astonished.

"It's Mis' Lily!"

There was a stampede of feet rushing across the hard-packed earth, the sound of young, excited voices. He saw Lily go inside, trailed by the kid bunch.

Coming back from the corral, Wes stood a moment in the lantern light off the long porch. A tall man walked over from the shadows, brushing back his thicket of stringy white hair.

"'Bout time," chided Sol Beeson, looking uncomfortable in his fresh shirt. "Now I get to dance with Lily."

"You'll have to hurry," Wes laughed. "I aim to stomp some myself tonight."

"There'll be a speakin' first," Beeson drawled. "Before we bed the kids down in the wagons. John Farley's little girl, Della."

Beeson drifted inside and Wes heard the fiddlers break off. When Beeson announced the reading, Wes moved upon the porch. Looking in from the crowded doorway stood John Farley, a mild man running to heft who liked his ease. He turned and grunted.

Wes said, "Howdy."

Farley looked at him questioningly. "You and Lily make up your minds?"

"Guess so," Wes nodded, surprised at the regret he felt. "Lily's goin' to stay on the ranch, John. She'd like to help, though."

"Why, sure," said the big man too quickly. "Don't blame you." But Wes caught the disappointment. "We'll miss her. The kids like her."

Inside, a girl's clear voice was reaching out and Farley turned to listen. In a few minutes, the recitation was over. There was a following outbreak of clapping and voices murmuring, and then Wes saw Lily standing with Mrs. Farley and the Farley girl running across to take Lily's hand.

Farley swung on Wes, chuckling. "See—what'd I tell you? Lily's got a way with kids. That's the piece Della learned from Lily a year ago. She remembered every word," he said proudly.

Beeson waved at the fiddlers. Boots tapped the rough floor and the music commenced, loud and catching and stirring. Women folks began streaming from the house, herding the children to the wagons. Wes saw a grinning puncher from the LX outfit stop and face Lily. Her arms came up and she was smiling as they swung out to join the forming circle of dancers. Wes stepped back in the shadows, hearing the caller's hoarse voice bawling the rapid changes. After a while Beeson came up, and then Farley eased over.

Listening to their talk of poor grass and scarce water, Wes found himself only half attentive. Somehow it all seemed unimportant tonight. His mind was inside with Lily. When another rancher joined them, Wes left and went inside.

He heard the music stop and he searched out Lily and moved toward her. Just then the music started again and he hurried. Her eyes were fully upon him, and he thought she was going to wait for him. Then, with a cool smile, she turned deliberately to the LX man. Suddenly, Wes stood alone with the dancers circling, with the clumsiness dragging through him. Walking stiffly to the porch, he knew it was her way of hurting him.

He avoided the knot of huddled ranchers and tapered up a cigarette. Shoulders hard-angled against a porch brace, he stood watching the bright, glittering pattern of the dry-

winded night. Men's voices drifted across to him. From the wagons he heard the whispering of the bedded-down ranch kids, restless on their quilt-pallets. It struck him that the children liked Lily. He'd seen that and he'd been proud in an unshowing way. Slowly, he felt something like regret, something like the first ravel of doubt. The thought came to him swiftly now, changing him. Maybe he ought to let Lily go.

HE STAYED outside till the music slowed and snapped off, till the sky turned milky gray, till Lily came out and the men and the women walked tiredly to their wagons and horses.

Riding home, he said, "You had a good time," thinking of the LX man and the flush of pleasure on her face as he swung her. "Those kids, too."

Her voice, at first drowsy, became alert, sharp. "The children made it good, Wes," she said with a kind of bluntness, and he knew she meant it.

They rode home in the thinning half-light. She went at once to the house while he unsaddled. He took his time, lingering over the chore, pitching extra hay to the horses. His mind was made up when he finished.

He went slow-footed to the house. Lily came in from the back room and crossed to the stove to start coffee. Abruptly, he wanted to get it over with.

"I been thinkin'," Wes began, trying to make his tone easy. "I think we better take Farley's offer. Not much time left and he might find somebody else. I'll ride over this afternoon, tell him to pick you up in a buggy."

A thickening silence followed—save for the quick rush of Lily's breathing—that Wes broke by saying, "Guess you'll want to take most of your things."

She stared at him in astonishment, and he tried to smile. He failed miserably, watching the bewilderment in her heat-drawn face.

"Why," she demanded, "why'd you change your mind?"

Wes shrugged. "We're burned out. I figure this is the best way. No place for a woman here."

Looking at her, he had the odd and unreasonable impression that she didn't believe him. That she didn't want to go. He thought she was going to come to him and he felt a

hard, pent-up pounding deep in his chest.

But she said tonelessly, "I'll start getting ready," and walked away from him. In that moment she looked very straight and dark, with a pride and composure he'd never fully noticed before. He heard her moving in the other room, heard her light step on the rough flooring as she went about her packing.

Her image kept jumping in his mind during the ride to Farley's ranch. He was thinking of the solitary days to come, of the house dark and silent when he rode late.

Wes found Farley cooling under the cottonwoods. "You're pushin' that hoss hard," Farley grinned, hoisting up his huge bulk. Wes saw the flicker of interest in his eyes. "Lily change her mind?"

Wes nodded. "If it ain't too late."

"There's others," Farley said with a shake of his head. "But I been holdin' out for Lily. The kids are set on her. You saw that last night."

"She'll be ready early tomorrow. You'll need a buggy. There's a light trunk and some other things."

"I'll be there before noon. Now, you're gonna light an' eat."

"Much obliged," Wes said, turning his horse. "It's late."

Farley gave him a close look. "No trouble is there?" he asked. "You know, Wes, you oughta carry a gun again. The Trawlers'll be back one of these days. You don't want to get caught empty-handed."

"I know," Wes said wearily. "But they still got time to serve."

He was gone before Farley could go on, leaving him standing there with a troubled frown on his round face.

He was cutting the Mesa road when he noticed the rider coming from town. Wes pulled up when the man waved frantically and kicked his horse to a run. Wes recognized Sol Beeson's lank shape in the saddle. Watching him push the horse, Wes wondered at the hurry. Beeson's eyes were excited when he came up.

"Wes!" he called out. "You heard?" And before Wes could answer, he blurted, "The Trawlers broke out at Concho! Shot up a guard, got clean away! Everybody in town's talkin' about it. Nobody's seen 'em yet, but you know damn well where they're headin'—they're lookin' for you!"

"I just came from Farley's," Wes said. "He hadn't heard."

"He will tonight. There's a school board meetin'."

Wes hadn't moved. He felt a sort of numbness crawling through him. Now that he knew it was coming, certain and soon, half the dread had gone. And something else stirred him. It was a kind of relief. At least Lily was leaving.

"I'll be watchin'," Wes said with a casualness he didn't feel. "If they're smart, they won't head back here. Not with the whole country lookin'. Maybe they'll just ride on."

"The hell they will! An' you know better. Now, look sharp. Start packin' a gun. Murdo's bull-headed and Tharp's crazy wild." Beeson slapped his saddle for emphasis. "They'll hit here."

"Damn fools if they do."

Beeson's mouth tightened cynically. "That's easy for Murdo," he snorted. "But he's after you. You—you want me to send a couple of hands over to your place?" Beeson's grin was grim. "Might need 'em."

For a second Wes was tempted. Call on your neighbors. They'd come loaded. But something told him that it wasn't their worry, and then Lily would know, too. "I'm obliged," he said. "But I'll make out."

Beeson's mouth tightened cynically then, muttering, and Wes rode on. Topping the last knuckled ridge, he saw the light from the house. In the purpling darkness, it thrust a yellow finger under the giant cottonwoods, black and towering and swaying against the skyline. Far off, where the wild hills massed in hunkering knots, a coyote lifted a lone-some howl. Shuddering, Wes rode down the slope. It came on him that a light was a simple and needed thing for a hungry man riding in after dark, with the wind just beginning to cool the faded grass.

Tonight he didn't pause at the door, for he knew that the time for such mooning foolishness was past. He came in quietly, into a house already showing signs of emptiness. She was folding dresses and aprons, placing them in a barrel-topped trunk.

"Farley will be here in the morning," he told her.

She turned a tense, expressionless face. "I'll be ready," she said, her hands busy.

AT DAYBREAK he paced stiffly to the corral, the wash of sleeplessness low and heavy in him. How, he thought, did you tell

a woman good-by—a woman who wanted to leave? A town woman? He walked back to the house and ate his breakfast, the food flat and dry in his mouth. He was buckling on the worn gunbelt when he remembered the old Winchester carbine.

Bleakly, he guessed he'd need it, too. Still loaded, it reared up in the corner where he'd left it last spring after calving time. He turned with the saddle gun in his hands. He caught Lily's eyes on him, straight and questioning.

"Something's worrying you," she said. She stared at the pistol, at the Winchester. "What—?"

"Coyotes," Wes snapped.

"First time you've mentioned any since last spring."

It stabbed through his mind that he should have taken the carbine out first thing when he got up. Now there were questions—questions he couldn't rightfully answer.

"Spotted a big one early this morning," he said, the sound of his voice flat, unconvincing. "You keep it handy. Use it if you see one around the place. Save me the trouble later."

She stepped back, the wide-set eyes narrowing on the gun.

"It's loaded—ready to go." He levered in a shell, the click sharp in the room, and he pushed the gun toward her. "You've shot it a couple of times."

But she held her hands back, tense and tight against her, doubt and confusion drawing on her face. He saw revulsion, too, and her hands fluttered nervously. Shuffling and clumsy, he leaned the carbine against the table.

A moment later, he stood at the door.

"I'll be back before you leave," he said in a loud voice. He wondered if his cramped face gave him away. For he'd thought it all out. He wouldn't be here when Farley came for her. Easier that way.

He saw her lips move. He thought she was about to speak and he hung back, waiting. Instead, she grew slowly rigid, shutting him out, and her mouth turned firm, stubborn, proud.

Almost blindly, he heeled around and outside. The knotted feeling was balled up inside him. Afterward, he took his look from the slope north of the house. He couldn't be sure—but, for the briefest instant, he thought he saw a flutter of movement at a window, a

face. Swinging back, he knew that John Farley would be on time.

Late morning caught Wes angling through a thick stand of jackoaks above the Trawler place. It was a thin chance, he realized, that Murdo and Tharp would dodge back here. First glance showed the corrals empty. Nothing stirred around the weed-grown cabin and sheds.

Looking at the tangled pole corrals, he figured Farley would be there now. He'd be grunting and laughing, full of good humor. And Lily—well, he guessed she'd be glad to go. That was what really hurt. She wanted to go, and the sign said she wouldn't be back.

After half an hour of watching, Wes' restlessness drove him out of the hot timber. There was a recklessness sawing at him as he rode up to the cabin. He had the Colt out when he slid down and kicked open the door. The place was a littered nest of old clothes, dishes, broken rope and leather pieces. A black rat padded swiftly across the dirt floor. With the closed-up, musty smell strong in his nostrils, he swung up and headed south, killing time now. Past noon he crossed the rock-bottomed Pretty Water again.

He'd delayed long enough. He saw that coming on the road to Farley's ranch. There were narrow-rimmed tracks—Farley's buggy—going and coming back. Something slipped away from Wes then, all the harshness and blame for her that he'd held deep in his mind.

It seemed a long time before he rode down the slope and saw the cottonwoods weaving. He reined up, his glance touching the out-scattered sheds, windmill and single corral this side of the silent-looking house. It ran through him that he was mooning again, that a solitary man ought to hold himself in. With a dull aimlessness, he walked the gelding forward. He felt the animal's muscles bunch and the gait quicken as they approached the corral.

Inside, Wes stepped down. He was moving flat-footed toward the horse shed when he heard it. A clicking sound sharply cutting across the dismal clank of the windmill's gears. But he took another step before he wheeled. Before it flashed coldly on him that he was too late.

"Turn around, Crawford!"

It was a hoarse, hating voice, one that Wes

knew even as he heeled back, his hand dragging down. Murdo and Tharp Trawler stood posted behind him at the edge of a shed wall. Wes saw the hard shine on Murdo's bushy face, saw the leveled Colts, and his own hand froze.

"We're back," Murdo mocked savagely. "Only sooner. Good behavior, by God!"

Wes raked in a long ragged breath. "You're damned fools to show up here. Everybody's lookin' for you."

"Plenty o' time," Murdo sneered, "an' we won't be here long. You're easier'n I ever expected. Why, you rode up here daydreamin'—not even lookin'." His rough, arrogant voice shaded off, pleased. "You didn't spot our horses 'cause they're outa sight in a shed. . . All right, Tharp, he's yours. You been wantin' 'im!"

Tharp's lips flattened. His glance slid briefly to Wes, back to Murdo. But the yellow was showing through. It flicked in his jumpy, almost begging eyes, in the uncertain droop of his bony shoulders.

"Go on—damn you!" Murdo bawled at Tharp.

It fanned out fast. For a moment the Trawlers stood rooted. Then Tharp was spinning, driven by Murdo's voice, and Wes saw his chance. It hit him that he'd have to choose. That Murdo was the waspish one. Wes swung the gun up. He heard his bullet strike the half-turned Murdo. He saw Murdo stumble, desperation straining in him before he buckled and fell. Pivoting on Tharp, Wes knew there wasn't time.

There was a sharp crack in Wes' ears. All at once Tharp doubled up. His pistol raveled down, kicking up a whiff of dust as it hit. Dimly, Wes knew it wasn't his bullet. He seemed to stand in a thin, unreal mist. He heard the windmill still grinding. He stood spraddle-legged and his own Colt was heavy in his hand. Murdo lay sprawled forward. His square body was very still. Tharp had quit moving.

Something tore into Wes, a sudden knowledge. He whipped his glance around. Almost before he knew it, he was running toward the house. He saw the door swung open, black, empty. And, for a second, he had his doubt. But when his boots struck the steps, he saw Lily standing back in the room.

She was holding the Winchester uncertainly, like some strange thing. She looked

at him, not moving. Then her slim fingers loosened and the saddle gun clattered on the floor. She was coming to him, saying in a dim voice, "Wes. . . I couldn't leave. . . You didn't come back and then those men came up to the shed."

"Farley tell you?" he heard himself asking.

She was hard and shaking against him, her voice lost, muffled, and he felt the held-in feeling inside him go. But he knew—and it was running through his mind that the bad year was beginning to turn. ★★★

This was showdown for Bartell. Would he hide behind his law badge, or would he tear it off and—alone—face the . . .

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Nobody moved . . . as the boy stood there with his arm proudly draped around Jennie Haldana.

By
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BRISTER**

ONE MAN'S RANCH....

Old Man Larsen had promised a big ranch to the nephew who worked the hardest, and Carl and Ralph were breaking their backs . . . till bewitching Jennie arrived in town.

OLD MAN LARSEN hadn't come by his easy. He had the calluses to show for the tidy few dollars he'd garnered, and now, standing behind the worn counter of his mercantile store in the small town of Sand Butte, Montana, with the years

beginning to pile up on his wide, muscular shoulders, he was inclined to be righteous.

"Ain't no magic to making money," he'd say, if anybody should ask how he'd done it. "Hard work's the answer. And plenty of it."

Of course, he'd had advantages, he had

to admit that. His good wife, Hilda—God rest her—had stood by his side, steady as iron, through several times of bad trouble. Then, too, he and Hilda had never had children, and Old Man Larsen, while he'd wanted children, could not deny that a big family at home, to an ambitious man, was a mixed blessing. "One of them Arbuckle Coffee drum-beaters give me a saying for that: 'The man that hath children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to enterprise,' it went somethin' like that. Truth in that, by golly. Now, you take Olaf, for instance . . ."

Olaf was Old Man Larsen's brother. Had been, that is, for he was gone now. Olaf had been going along all right, working steady in Zimmerman's Hardware, putting a little something away against the future, and then Clara, out of the blue sky, had presented Olaf with twin boys, killing herself in the process. Olaf had never been quite dependable, after that. Raising the boys just seemed to take all the ginger out of him. And now Olaf was dead, and Old Man Larsen was holding the bag, you might say, because here were the boys, fine, big, blond, blue-eyed young fellows, without a red cent in their pockets to help them feel their way into the future, and Old Man Larsen the boys' only living relative in this country.

"Boys," Old Man Larsen said one night, a month after Olaf had been laid to rest in the Sand Butte cemetery, underneath a modest headstone paid for out of Old Man Larsen's pocket, "I been doing a lot of thinking about you two fellers. Now you been working out there at the JP ranch a good while already, and from what John Peckinhill tells me, you're pretty good workers."

The twins glanced at each other. Ralph, Old Man Larsen noticed, was a little pink in the face, but then he'd always been overly modest. Carl just sat there, grinning into the teeth of this compliment, taking his pleasure openly from it. Carl was a good hard worker, and he knew it. Like me, Old Man Larsen thought, and of the two, he'd pick Carl to cut the widest swath in the world, he decided.

"I guess you fellers like the ranch business," Old Man Larsen suggested. "Judgin' by the way you've stuck at it, that is."

"That's right, Uncle Lars," Carl said nodding hopefully.

OLD MAN LARSEN looked toward his other nephew. "That includes you, does it, Ralph?"

"Yes, sir," Ralph said in his quiet way. "This is cattle country, Uncle Lars. A man that can work out of doors is naturally going to, if you give him his choice in the matter. It's hard work, but it's healthy."

"All right, I got no quarrel with that. Now I got a few dollars saved up that ain't bringing me in much, and I'm of a mind to help you fellers get started in something that'll build toward a real future. I'm holdin' the mortgage on Charlie McSpaden's Double Link spread, and it appears like Charlie's about to chuck the whole business over for a bad job. He just ain't there with the goods, when it comes to runnin' a cow spread. So I got a nice little ranch on my hands, as you might say. There's nothing wrong out there at the Double Link that hard work and some real cow savvy shouldn't be able to set right in jig time."

"I see, Uncle Lars," said Carl, and Old Man Larsen did not fail to notice the acquisitive gleam in the young fellow's eyes. Well, and that was all right, too. A man that don't perk up at the mention of money, don't often wind up with any. He'd been pretty much like Carl, at the same age.

Ralph, though, he just sat there quietly waiting. Old Man Larsen frowned slightly.

"Now, not to get your hopes up too high and then dash 'em, I want you boys to understand right off, this ain't no dishout party I'm workin' up to. Here's what I'm proposin'. I'm proposin' to split the Double Link square in half, takin' care while I'm at it to see that the one half ain't no better nor worse than the other. You boys can pull straws to see which of you gets which half, so there won't be on whisper of favoritism.

"My mortgage covered everything McSpaden had out there, ranch, stock, and equipment. He had a fair herd of cattle. We'll split the herd, even. McSpaden's ranch buildin's, the house, corral, bunkhouse and so forth, makes a problem. One of you's going to have to build onto that line camp shanty out in the north-east section, and set up the best kind of quarters he knows how to in a hurry. We'll work that out fair when we come to it. Now, I'm chargin' each of you three hundred dollars, at the end of your first year out there, for

the privilege of takin' that land and them cattle and seein' what you can do with 'em in a year's time."

"Ain't that kind of a stiff rental, Uncle Lars?" Carl promptly objected, while his quieter brother sat there without facial expression.

"Glad to see you're willin' to speak out on the subject of money," Old Man Larsen nodded approvingly. "False shame about money has robbed many a man of his chance to pile up any, young feller. My mortgage on McSpaden come to ten thousand. Ten thousand at six percent comes to six hundred dollars. Now if I was a different sort, I'd say, 'Boys, here's a little spread for each of you. Go to it and see what you can make of yourselves.' But I seen too many fellers started off easy in this life, and end up the worse for it. I'm chargin' you boys interest, same as I charged McSpaden."

"That's fair enough," Ralph put in, and Old Man Larsen looked at him, feeling the thin edge of annoyance. Ralph took things too easy. Carl had more scratch in his make-up.

"What happens after the year's up?" Carl asked shrewdly, and Old Man Larsen smiled thinly at the way the young fellow's mind had gone right to the nub of the matter.

"I'm comin' out there and inspect them two ranches. I'm gonna take inventory, as you might say. I'm gonna figure which of you boys has made the most of the opportunity out there. Whichever one of you has the most assets after one year, accordin' to my own personal judgment, can have his half of the land rent-free for the next five years. The other feller's gonna go right on payin' me three hundred dollars per annum . . . You boys beginning to get my drift, are you?"

"Sure," Carl said, grinning. "Trying to teach us a lesson in practical economics, Uncle Lars, isn't that it?"

"I reckon," Old Man Larsen nodded to Carl, "you got the idea." His eye fell on Ralph, who was sitting there quietly nodding, and he sighed, realizing it was going to be hard to be absolutely impartial when the time came to make the decision. . . .

In the draw, Ralph, the quieter, seemingly less aggressive twin, won the half of the Double Link spread which contained the ranch house with its outbulidings. Carl just grinned in the face of his brother's good fortune. "All right, so I'll have to build my

own living quarters, and a corral and stables," he said. "This is a chance to show you what I can do with my back to the wall, Uncle Lars."

In his first six weeks out there, that boy worked like a beaver, from sunup to sundown, wielding a saw, a T-square and a hammer until his big hands were composed largely of blisters. Those buildings seemed to fairly sprout up, and Old Man Larsen had to admit the boy had turned what appeared like a bad stroke of luck around to his advantage.

He went over the following Sunday to visit young Ralph, and discovered to his surprise that Ralph had not been sitting on his hands, either. He'd dug himself a new well, closer by a quarter mile to the ranch house than the old one used by McSpaden, and had put in a tall windmill.

Old Man Larsen chewed on a toothpick, listening to the clanking and grinding of the windmill, as the prevailing westerly wind drove the blades around up above there. Water spilled out steadily from the rusting, but still functional end of a galvanized iron pipe. It splashed into a huge wooden trough from which cattle took turns sucking up the cool water. And these cows were in good flesh, Old Man Larsen noticed, fifty pounds heavier, on the average, than they'd been under McSpaden's slapdash care.

"Boy," Old Man Larsen said, "where'd you get hold of that windmill?"

"Doesn't look like much, does it?" Ralph smiled. "I sold my two hogs, and got it second hand from Charlie Teachee over in Two Trees. Took me a solid week to patch the pump up and put a pair of new blades on. But she's pumping some water."

"Them cows look sassy."

"They're putting weight on," Ralph admitted. "You see my alfalfa, Uncle Lars, on your way in here?"

"I seen it, young feller," Old Man Larsen admitted. "I also seen where you patched all that fence up, down there alongside the lane, and put in that outsized truck patch. Got enough truck a-growing in there to feed George Washington's own army through six zero winters. You farmin' out here, or ranchin'?"

"I'll sell most of that truck, Uncle Lars. Turn a nice penny on it. Truck's scare hereabouts, and expensive. Mean to buy in some more cattle with my truck profit. I can graze

a few more head if the grass holds up this summer. The market's holdin' up strong, so I'm gamblin' on it."

"Um," Old Man Larsen said. "Gamblin's all right, young feller, when you've calculated your risk, and figured it's worth it. I notice you wasn't up in town to church service this mornin'. Keyney give us a fine, hell-an'-brimstone haranguein'."

"I couldn't see my way clear to get up there this morning, Uncle Lars."

"That'd be your affair," Old Man Larsen conceded. "I'll be goin' . . ."

RALPH missed several church meetings, in the months that followed, whereas Carl never failed, no matter how hard-pressed by ranch duties, to occupy a pew with Old Man Larsen.

"He's shrewd," Old Man Larsen realized. "Could be curryin' favor. Smart feller like Carl's be willing to do that, but Ralph, he's too modest, his pride'd stand in the way of it."

There was a new family in town, the Haldanas. Father, mother and pretty, brown-eyed, chestnut-haired daughter, they occupied the next pew over from Old Man Larsen's. Carl and Ralph gave the girl a good goggling over, Old Man Larsen noticed, that first Sunday morning she came marching in with her father and mother. So did every young buck in the congregation, for that matter, and some that weren't so young and had their wives with them.

The girl was that good to look at, and while there were still one or two decent young girls in the town that hadn't caught husbands, they couldn't come close to comparing with this Jennie Haldana.

Outside, a bunch of the young blades minced up to the girl to make her acquaintance, here where it was proper, and sparred for the privilege of walking her home. Old Man Larsen and his two nephews stood off and watched the girl tactfully refuse every suitor, and Old Man Larsen said, approving, "Sensible girl. Ain't goin' to hurt anyone's feelings. Pears to be almost as smart as she is good to look at . . . What's got in you, Ralph, all of a sudden? One of them little arrows?"

The boy was standing there, moonstruck, his mouth hanging open. He blushed and said, "She sure is pretty."

His brother looked long and contempla-

tively at the girl, and Old Man Larsen noticed a gleam in Carl's eye for a second time, a gleam that had nothing to do with Carl's desire for money. But then Carl shook his big shoulders, and the gleam died out of his blue eyes, and he said, "She's pretty, all right. You can moon after her if you want, Ralph. I got work waiting for me."

He walked away. Old Man Larsen nodded with the self-satisfied air of a man who had guessed that would be Carl's reaction. All business, that boy was.

Ralph was still staring, goggle-eyed, at the girl. "Where'd she come from, Uncle Lars?"

"Missouri. They're farmin' folks. Takin' over the old Harmiston homestead, out there by Solley's. Goin' to have to scratch some to make a go out there, but I reckon they're used to scratchin' pretty hard for a livin'."

"Do you know them?" Ralph said.

"Sure. They been in the store."

"Could you—introduce me?"

"Kind of took with the girl, ain't you?"

"I'm human," the boy said.

He was more than just human, he was bashful as a young colt when Old Man Larsen led him over there and made introductions. The boy's face turned every color of the rainbow as he took off his hat and how-deyed the girl and her father and mother, but he made himself go through the motions of small talk, and all in all he carried himself through fairly well. Old Man Larsen nearly swallowed his Adam's Apple when the boy finally cranked himself up to the point of asking if he could come calling on Jennie, one night real soon, and the girl hesitated, looking him over, and then said she guessed she reckoned.

"Never figured you was a ladies' man," Old Man Larsen said, when the Haldanas were half a block down the street.

"Don't guess I am, much, Uncle Lars."

"You done better than some of these slick, fancy-pants town bucks."

"She sure looks like a real fine girl," Ralph said parenthetically, and he walked away, leaving Old Man Larsen standing with his gray head wagging.

The following Wednesday, just around suppertime, Ralph came into the store, put two dollars down on the counter in front of Old Man Larsen, and tucked a big box of commercial-made candy under his arm. He was dressed pretty dandy.

"Courtin'?" said Old Man Larsen.

"That's right, Uncle Lars."

"A man don't come by two dollars easy, young feller."

"I know."

Old Man Larsen waited.

"She sure is a fine, down-to-earth sensible girl," the boy finally offered. "We're gettin' acquainted. I saw her Monday and Tuesday, and—"

"Wednesday, by the look of it. Ranch chores must be gettin' short shirft from you these days, young feller."

The boy flushed. "She's so all-fired pretty, Uncle Lars. The man that manages to dab a loop on her is goin' to have to work for it. All the young fellas are moonin' around her, and—"

"Carl ain't, you'll notice."

"That's true, but—"

"Carl puts his business ahead of his pleasure, appears like."

The boy looked right at him and said, "This is business with me, Uncle Lars," and walked out. Old Man Larsen tried to make sense out of that, but he couldn't. The boy'd gone lovesick; his head was addled, the old man decided.

A month later, there was a dance at the church. Ralph came in and bought himself a new black suit and a pair of new boots and a fancy cravat.

"Selling some of that truck out of your garden?" Old Man Larsen suggested.

"That's right, Uncle Lars."

"You was going to buy in some more stock, you was saying."

The boy just stood there, staring at his uncle.

"Takin' Jennie Haldana to the church dance, are you, Ralph?"

"No. Bud Reibel's taking her. He's been after her about it for weeks, and she couldn't refuse him. I'm going alone, Uncle Lars, and try to snag a few dances."

"Good luck to you," the old man said dryly.

The boy was obviously head-over-heels now, and he was neglecting his ranch in his frantic effort to fight off the young blades up here in town and win the girl's favor. Carl was shrewd enough to see the wind blowing his way, and he was a cocky young rooster, not above crowing a little over a worsted opponent.

"There's only a month and a half of the

year left, Uncle Lars, and aside from fixing up his fences a little, and putting in that new well and that rattly old windmill, and the truck patch, he's right about where he started. I've got my buildings, that I put up my ownself, and a good big herd fattened up for the market, and then there's the horses, and—"

"Leave off it, Carl. I'll do my own deciding. I don't need no help from you in that department."

"Why, sure, Uncle Lars," Carl said quickly. "I'm not trying to put any notions into your head. I—"

"Don't, then," the old man suggested. He had a dull headache. It had seemed like a good plan at the start; he didn't like the way it was panning out, no real contest.

He just couldn't understand Ralph's attitude. During the final week, the boy had apparently given up his chances against Carl completely. He spent every night over at the Haldana farmhouse, according to Old Man Larsen's information, and continued to woo the girl as if his young life fairly depended upon it.

Nobody, except perhaps the girl herself and her immediate family, knew what kind of headway Ralph was making, if any. But the whole town was privy to Old Man Larsen's plan for the boys, and he was aware that people were quietly laughing up their sleeves at him.

Ralph came into the store on an errand for Jennie, to buy some pink ribbon, the next-to-last night, and Old Man Larsen finally lit into the boy, let him have both barrels.

"How's things out there on the ranch, Ralph?"

"Fair to middling."

The old man snorted. "How was you figuring to beat out your brother, with him workin' his head off while you been fritterin' valuable time and energy away up here in town? You realize you made a joke out of this whole thing, young feller? You realize everybody's horse-laughin' at me?"

Again the boy stared steadily at him, met his bitter glance without flinching. "I haven't been frittering my time and energy away, Uncle Lars."

"Haven't you now? What have you been doin', for tarnation?"

"Courtin'," the boy said.

"Get out of here!" Old Man Larsen hol-

lered. "'Fore I take my foot to your britches."

The boy looked quietly at him, and walked out of the store, carrying the short length of pink ribbon to the girl who'd bewitched him. All in all, Old Man Larsen reflected, it was not a bad exit. Dignity in it. And poise.

"Funny thing is," Old Man Larsen murmured, "I still can't help likin' the boy. Just might be, he's more man than Carl is."

WHEN the big day came, he closed the store up tight as a beer keg and took off for Carl's half of the spread in a buckboard. A good percentage of the town's able-bodied moseyed along out there with him, "to see the fun," as they said. There was no getting rid of them, so Old Man Larsen threw up his hands, and tried to give Carl's handiwork a cool and absolutely unbiased appraisal, despite the jocular comments of his self-appointed fellow appraisers.

Carl's chest came up as he heard the comments. Old Man Larsen took his inventory of the improvements, nodded non-committally at the boy, and climbed up onto the seat of his buckboard.

"Shall I ride along over to Ralph's place?" Carl said eagerly.

"Best you stayed here. You'll know quick enough, once I've decided," the old man said. Actually, he had already decided. Carl was so far out in front, on the basis of what he had just seen, that the trip to Ralph's place was unnecessary.

He got over to Ralph's place and it was pitiful. Ralph had buckled down, there at the start, and made some real improvements, but then, with that girl in the picture, he had merely marked time here.

"Well, Ralph," he said uncomfortably, "I'm afraid what I've seen so far isn't much, not compared with what your brother's accomplished. Any more assets you'd like to show me, before I sort of tot things up and make my decision?"

This was in the living room of the house, and Ralph, standing gravely in front of the fire place with his hands in his pockets, said, "Yes, Uncle Lars." The crowd stirred with surprise, everybody stared at Ralph, who was blushing, as usual.

"Well, out with it, boy. Out with it. Don't

(Please continue on page 112)

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 39)

1. If the ranch boss sent you out for some grizzlies, you should return with a pair of chaps.

2. True. A greasy sack outfit is one which carries its commissary pack on a mule—that is, doesn't use a chuck wagon.

3. The Western slang term "flag his kite" means to get out of the country in a hurry.

4. The expression "getting ready for high riding" means "preparing to leave on the run." The term is also used in reference to one who is doing something which will get him into trouble.

5. True. Westerners sometimes apply the term "dump" to the bunkhouse.

6. True. A dudolo is a Westerner who parasites off of dudes.

7. The term "hell in his neck" is used in reference to one who is very determined.

8. True. "Curled up" means dead.

9. The rangeland term "cow savvy" is used in reference to one who has sound knowledge of the cattle country and its ways.

14. "Coyoting around the rim" means talking all around a certain subject, but never really getting to the point.

11. If the ranch boss sent you out for a concha, you should return with a shell-shaped piece of metal.

12. True. A white patch on a horse's face which includes part of the lower lip is sometimes called a chin spot.

13. True. The Western term, "chivarras," comes from the Spanish word, "chiva."

14. Yes. A "brush whacker" is a "brush hand."

15. You would be more likely to hear the word "buckaroo" in the Northwest.

16. If the ranch boss sent you out for a bronc tree, you should return with a bronc saddle.

17. The most famous brush country is located in Southwest Texas.

18. If the ranch boss sent you out for a buckboard driver, you should return with a mail carrier.

19. If a cowpoke acquaintance of yours referred to "blue lightning," you should know he was talking about a sixgun.

20. True. A blocker loop is an extra-large loop.



He was just in time to see half his crop go under the hoofs of Raines' cattle . . .

STRING HIM UP!

*What earthly good was one timid
he-schoolmarm, when Devers
needed a gun-fisted sheriff and a
crew of rawhide-tough deputies?*

By BART CASSIDY

THE evening breezes off Main Street sluggishly stirred the cigar and whisky odors in the bar of Wade Devers' Two Fork Hotel, but it offered a man little relief in his breathing. The night air was sultry and heavy with the day's dying heat, heavier still with the temper building up in Two Fork. It was a night made to order for a lynching, Wade Devers thought.

Devers leaned against the end of his bar, a slender man with disgust evident even in his stance. His gray eyes measured the crowd, and his ears missed few undertones

in the half-heard conversations about him. He knew these men, and he was not slow in gauging their mood. There were twice as many here as on an ordinary mid-week night, all waiting for the Raines brothers to arrive.

There was something uncivilized loose in town tonight, and it was all directed at a nineteen-year-old nester in the jail down the street. All this against a nineteen-year-old kid, Devers thought, and with no one to look out for him but a pot-bellied sheriff who was probably scared half to death.

Devers shrugged and bent his finger at the bar man. He took his whisky neat, shrugged again, and muttered, "And for what?" His finger traced a faint pattern on the damp bar. "For shooting Tate Raines," he muttered, "a man at least a dozen others would have liked to shoot."

Young Dade Martin, the nester had come in from a ride in the high timber for a chance at some fresh meat just in time to see half his crop go under the hoofs of Raines' cattle. What else could a man do but try to stop it, even if Tate Raines was doing the driving?

Raines had fired first, the boy claimed. The nester had tried to turn the cattle off his land and Tate had opened up from the timber. They had exchanged shots, and the boy had been lucky. Or unlucky. His second shot had killed Raines, and there could be only one answer for that from Tate's brothers. The boy left Tate where he lay and rode to town to give himself up to the sheriff.

The sheriff had been smart enough to put him in jail, but he hadn't been smart enough to keep his mouth shut. The story had left town within an hour, and now half the men on the range were here—all of the hell raisers and the nester haters, talking of a lynching.

Sid and Morg Raines hadn't arrived yet, but they must have had the news long ago. They were shrewd enough to delay their arrival for sheer effect. There was enough deliberate malice in their make-up so they might wait until an evening of whisky and talk had done half their work for them with this crowd.

Devers' gray eyes turned bleak as he heard the sound of hoofs at the edge of town. His mouth loosened and he again stood at ease only when he heard Johnny

Barber's yells split the night with the familiar names of his team. Barber had gotten in with the stage from Black Mountain.

He knew Johnny would be in for his dust-cutter after he took on a new team, and while he waited for the stage driver he bent his finger at the barman once more. In ten minutes he saw Barber enter the room. Johnny saw him at the end of the bar and made his way through the crowd. Men moved aside readily, partially because of the odor of horses and trail dust Barber carried, but more because of his broad swinging shoulders and the demand of his cool blue eyes.

JOHNNY greeted Devers and picked up the waiting drink. "Looks like a tough night for an honest man," he said.

"Johnny," Devers said, "why aren't you still wearing the badge in this town? We could use a man behind that thing tonight."

"I wish I was," Barber said. "They'll sure take him away from Ladd Watson."

"As soon as Sid and Morg come in to touch them off," Devers nodded. "Look at the pack of wolves in my place."

Barber gripped his glass tightly. "And I almost brought a U. S. Marshal along this trip. He was waiting in Black Mountain, but when he found out I wasn't carrying anything he stayed there." Barber swore softly.

"You've still got trouble too?" Devers said.

Barber nodded. "Wade, this one is the damndest one we've run up against. He's smart and he's fast. They say he stepped out into the road in front of one on the westbound run yesterday without even lifting his gun. He's that sure of himself. The shotgun man tried for him, and he got winged before he could get his gun up.

"He's a tough one, not just another bushwhacker. He likes to take on the toughest looking passengers and just dare them to do anything about it. He don't even take their guns away from them while he's taking their money."

"No idea who he is yet?" Devers said.

"None at all. He wears a bandana over his face, and he's built just like any cowpoke. I'm telling you, Wade, he's getting a rep in this part of the country like Billy the Kid."

A humorless smile lifted the corners of Devers' mouth. "Too bad he isn't related

to that nester kid. Maybe he could cool off some of the brave ones in here."

"He could that," Barber said. He set his empty glass on the bar. "Oh, yeah," he said softly, "a tip. There's ten thousand coming in on the next stage, and they're afraid the word is out about it. I'd hold that money you were going to ship if I were you."

Devers frowned. "I will. It's a payment on the place, but it can wait."

Barber looked past Devers, smiling suddenly in spite of what had passed between them. "When you get up your nerve," he said, "turn around. I didn't bring a marshal, but I did bring what's coming in now. He's a school teacher, on his way to the coast." Still smiling, Barber walked away through the crowd.

Devers turned about slowly, and he easily located Barber's man. He was standing in the doorway, as if wondering if he should enter. He was lanky, almost skinny, and he stood spraddle-legged, his head tipped forward in birdlike curiosity.

His black broadcloth suit was powdered with trail dust, and the round hat on his head had been crushed getting on or off the stage. His face was dirty, but clean-shaven, and his long nose supported round, steel-rimmed glasses. In one hand he carried a small carpet cloth valise, and under his arm he carried several hard covered books.

Finally, as if making a decision, he entered the room and walked quickly to the bar. The barman nodded at Devers, and the newcomer turned toward him. He blinked behind his thick-lensed glasses and said, "I am Robert Sparks. You are Mr. Devers, the proprietor?"

Devers nodded. "I'm Wade Devers."

"Mr. Barber, the driver of the stage just in, suggested that I see you. He said you would see that I got safely aboard the next westbound stage."

Devers mentally swore at Barber. "That I certainly will," he said. "Could I buy you a drink?"

The eyes behind the thick glasses blinked again. "Perhaps a glass of beer."

Devers ordered the beer, whisky for himself, and they moved to a table by the wall. Sparks lowered his voice and said, "Mr. Barber said if I stayed around long enough I might see a hanging. What did he mean?"

"He meant a lynching," Devers said.

"There's a boy down in the jail who killed a man. He did it in self-defense, but he's a nester and the other man was a cattleman. When the dead man's brothers get here, they'll probably take the nester out and hang him."

"Without a trial?" the teacher exclaimed. "Did the dead man have many friends?"

"Not more than you could count on one hand," Devers said. "It's just—it's just a damned fool thing, that's all." He stopped suddenly, wondering if the whisky had made him say so much.

"I'm sorry," Sparks said. "Is this nester a friend of yours?"

Devers was suddenly very irritated. "Does a man have to be a friend to deserve a square shake?" he said.

"Not at all," Sparks said quickly. "Any man should get a fair deal." He glanced about the saloon and spoke still softer. "This is a bad-looking crowd, isn't it?"

"Like a keg of powder," Devers said. He stopped himself again. "Your stage will be in within half an hour," he said. "Now I have some things to attend to."

He left the bar, again cursing Johnny Barber. Another night, this little man might have been a joke, but not tonight. He walked through the front of the hotel and out onto the street. There were idle and talking men here, too, but still no sign of the Raines brothers.

On the porch of the jail up the street the cigarette of a deputy glowed dully, and Devers frowned at its dim spark. It would be just like Sheriff Ladd Watson, he thought, to pull some stunt like trying to get the boy out on the westbound stage.

HE WAS still standing on the porch fifteen minutes later, when he heard the hard and rapid drumming of hoofs and saw two riders pass through the yellow bands of light thrown out onto the street from town windows.

Sid and Morg Raines dismounted a dozen feet from Devers and he tried to read their hard faces in the half-light. Sid, the oldest brother, turned his head and caught him in this study. His long-lipped mouth moved as he said some slurring thing to Morg, and both brothers faced Devers. Two pairs of flat-hard eyes, two stiffly-crooked arms, and two sets of boots shifting in the dust all put their ungiving pressure upon him.

Then, as if knowing that this moment would remain in Devers' mind, the two men turned and walked into the hotel. Devers did not move immediately, and he cursed himself for feeling such a sudden pulse of fear. He turned about at last and walked into the hotel, past the front desk and up the stairs.

He let himself into his room, and from the top drawer of his bureau he took a holstered .44 and gunbelt. He buckled the belt about his waist and checked the gun in the dark, listening to the rising murmur of voices in the bar below him. "Not in my place," he said aloud. "The whole lot of them* can clear out first."

As he stood quietly in the dark, he heard the sounds of the stage just drawing up in town. This sound hardly registered with him as he wondered how far he could get trying to close his place tonight. He knew he would try. He left his room and went back downstairs.

For a moment he stood in the doorway of the bar, and he saw that Sid and Morg Raines were not here. He walked quickly to the bar. "Jim," he said, "What's up?"

The barman shook his head. "I don't know, Mr. Devers. Somebody came in and slipped them a note, and they left just before you came in. Nobody else has moved."

Devers wheeled away from the bar. He reached the street and looked immediately toward the jail. Nothing moved there, and the dim shape of the deputy was still in place on the porch. For a moment Devers could not think, and then he started forward as the stage up the street started into motion.

Watson was going to try for the stage with the nester. Devers was sure of it.

The deputy on the porch of the jail suddenly moved, and the stagecoach lost its first false speed and slowed before the jail. Devers was running now, trying to scan the mouths of alleys on the street, the dark doorways and shadowed walls from which he expected to see a red lance of flame reach toward the jail.

Three men were on the jail porch now, Watson and the deputy and the nester boy. To Devers' eyes, the nester's blond hair was as bad as making the boy carry a lantern. He ran on, and he watched with utter surprise as the three men boarded the stage without drawing a shot from anywhere on the street.

He dug his heels into the dirt and stopped, putting his back flat against a building for a full view of the street. The stage rumbled into full motion, and somewhere up the street a man who had realized what had happened raised a shout. This loose and ineffective sound was the only resisting noise along the street. It was over now, Devers knew, and he breathed freely again.

He walked back to the hotel, and he heard the rising yammer inside as the news reached the bar. He watched men pour into the street, and he laughed at them. He looked at the Raines brothers' two horses still in front of the hotel, and suddenly he shared in the puzzle which troubled the crowd.

He wasn't surprised when the shouting for Sid and Morg began. He swore he wouldn't go along when someone suggested a search, but he lifted his head in interest when from up the street a man shouted, "My horse is gone!"

Soon two other men had echoed this complaint, and Devers now moved up the street with the crowd. He walked to the spot where the three stolen horses had stood, then worked his way back to the hotel, searching every doorway, even looking beneath the board sidewalk.

Half a block from the hotel he made his discovery, but he made no announcement of what he had seen beneath the boardwalk. He walked on to the hotel, left the bar in the barman's hands, and went upstairs. There were puzzled voices in the street until late into the night, but they did not keep him from sleeping.

Sid and Morg Raines were found the next day, far out on the range, tied securely across two stolen horses, as they had been all night. Morg had not been handled badly, but Sid looked as if someone had fought him to a standstill. There was a note pinned to the band of Sid's hat, addressed to Devers.

Mr. Devers, it said, tell Mr. Barber his friend missed the stage. Bracing these two cost me ten thousand dollars, but it would have cost the nester more.

Devers kept the note for Johnny Barber, putting it inside the article he had pulled from beneath the board sidewalk on Main Street that morning. The carpet cloth valise now contained the note, a pair of thick glasses, and two hard-covered books. It also smelled much as if it had recently held well-oiled leather and a gun.

TALES of the

by LEE

SILVER KING TABOR

OF ALL THE RAGS-TO-RICHES SAGAS OF THE GREAT BONANZA DAYS, NONE IS MORE SPECTACULAR—AND TRAGIC—THAN THAT OF HAW TABOR, WHO PARLAYED \$65 WORTH OF GROCERIES INTO WEALTH BEYOND HIS WILDEST DREAMS.

A VERMONT FARMBOY, HAW—HIS FULL NAME WAS HORACE AUSTIN WARNER TABOR, BUT HE UNDERSTANDABLY PREFERRED THE INITIALS—CUT STONE FOR EIGHT YEARS, FARMED UNSUCCESSFULLY IN KANSAS, THEN RODE INTO COLORADO ON THE TAIL OF THE GOLD RUSH OF '59. BUT HIS WIFE MADE MORE MONEY FROM HER BOARDING HOUSE THAN HAW DID FROM HIS CLAIM.

THEY SPENT ALMOST 20 YEARS WATCHING ONE DIGGINGS AFTER ANOTHER PETER OUT, ENDING UP WITH A LITTLE GROCERY STORE IN LEADVILLE. A PAIR OF PROSPECTORS NAMED RISCH AND HOOK DRIFTED IN BROKE AND DISCOURAGED. HAW GRUBSTAKED THEM TO \$65 IN SUPPLIES ON THE USUAL SHARE-AND-SHARE-ALIKE BASIS—AND THEY STRUCK A SILVER VEIN THAT BECAME THE FABULOUS LITTLE PITTSBURGH MINE.

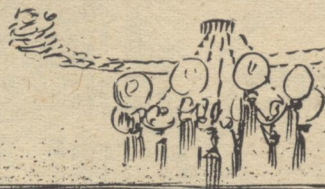
GROCERIES & SUPPLIES



TABOR BOUGHT OUT HIS PARTNERS FOR \$250,000, ACQUIRED OTHER MINING PROPERTIES INCLUDING THE MATCHLESS MINE, AND THE SILVER FLOOD ROLLED IN. EVERYTHING HE TOUCHED TURNED TO MONEY. HE EVEN BOUGHT A SALTED MINE FOR \$1,000—AND BROUGHT IN ANOTHER BONANZA.

— OLD WEST

HAW BUILT MANSIONS, BUSINESS BLOCKS, OPERA HOUSES AND GAVE WITH A LAVISH HAND. HE WAS ELECTED LIEUTENANT- GOVERNOR, THEN APPOINTED U.S. SENATOR. IN 1883 A SPECIAL TRAIN TOOK 53-YEAR-OLD HAW TABOR TO WASHINGTON TO BE MARRIED TO HIS SECOND WIFE, YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL MRS. HARVEY DOE, "BABY DOE" THEY CALLED HER, WITH PRESIDENT ARTHUR AS A GUEST. HAW'S WEDDING GIFT TO HIS WIFE WAS A SET OF CROWN JEWELS.



TEN YEARS LATER HIS MINES GAVE OUT, THE PRICE OF SILVER COLLAPSED, INVESTMENTS FAILED —AND HE WAS BROKE AGAIN AT 63. SOMEHOW HE AND BABY DOE MANAGED TO KEEP THE MATCHLESS, HOPING SILVER WOULD COME BACK.

"HOLD ONTO THE MATCHLESS," HE TOLD HER WHEN HE DIED IN '99. BABY DOE DID, LIVING IN POVERTY IN A SHACK BESIDE THE DESERTED WORKINGS, FORGOTTEN, ALONE. THEY FOUND HER FROZEN BODY THERE ONE MORNING 35 YEARS LATER. THERE WERE ONLY TWO DOLLARS IN HER SHABBY PURSE, AND PAPER DOLLARS — NOT SILVER — AT THAT!



By MILES OVERHOLT

Bill Charters and
Tamarack Jones took
care of the engineer
and fireman.



Old Outlaws Never Die....

*Out of the past they rode, the old owlhooters who had one last
chore to perform for their dying chief. . . .*

FOR a greenhorn in that high Nevada cattle country, Jerome Wilkes, the lunger, was a likeable youngster and managed to make out by acting as correspondent for a number of San Francisco and Coast papers. With some pride he had

shown Sheriff Mark Travis several of his items which had been picked up by other newspapers and had been published as far away as Arizona.

And now, old Mark Travis' faded gaze followed the youngster as he stirred dust to

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the little railway station. There he would send a story over the wires, and, watching him, the lawdog's mild blue eyes crinkled as if at some secret joke.

The message that Jerome Wilkes sent was this:

El Monte, Nev., March 25. Johnny Gilroy, colorful old-time bandit leader who operated throughout the West twenty-five years ago as chief of the Gilroy Bunch, was located here today by Sheriff Mark Travis, in an old prospector's shack a mile north of this town. Penniless, deserted by his former partners, the old outlaw, who is no longer wanted by the law, is ill and only awaits the call of Death before taking his last ride along the dim trails into the Unknown without his boots on.

Returning to the sheriff's office after sending his message, young Wilkes sought out old Mark Travis.

"Say," he said enthusiastically, "I could get a swell feature story out of that old gunthrower if I could interview him. Why not let me see him?"

"Several reasons why you can't see him," the lawman explained gently. "Mainly, if you'd go see him he'd pull out. Y'see, he doesn't know he has been recognized. And I gave you that item purposely. I want to lure his old pals up here. There's four of 'em and they're still wanted. I don't know where they are, but I figger that loyalty to their old leader will draw 'em back to him. You savvy?"

"Pretty slick!" grinned the reporter. "You mean to say, though, that those wanted men would risk capture to visit their old partner?"

"I sure do. There was plenty of loyalty in those old-time owlhooters, feller. If they're alive, they'll be here. You can see Gilroy after I ketch 'em. But just now, you keep your promise and stay away from that cabin."

Wilkes agreed. "And I won't breathe a word to anybody in town," he promised. "Nobody here reads the city papers, anyway. But that story will be sent out over the wires to all parts of the country."

"That's what I figgered," grunted old Mark Travis.

Wilkes left and Clem Reynolds, Travis' chief deputy strolled in. "Hi-ya, Mark," he said. "How you feelin'?"

"Finer'n frawg hair," grumbled the old lawman. "Clem, dang it, I wish you'd quit

worryin' about my health, I'm as chipper as I ever was."

But Clem knew better. He had just come from paying a brief visit to Doc Clayburn, who had said, "I give Mark three months to live—perhaps not that long. High blood pressure, weak heart. Too much excitement will kill him any day. Better keep a close watch on the old coot."

"Heck, watching him doesn't do a speck of good," Clem complained. "He swears he's as well as ever, and gets sore at any suggestions to taper off work. Wants to get into the thick of everything. But I'll keep an eye on him. He's been sheriffin' here for close to twenty-five years now, and I reckon there isn't a better-loved man than he is. I—I'd sure hate to see him go."

"So would everybody, Clem," the doctor said.

But the deputy was too busy to keep an eye on his old boss.

TWO days later, the sheriff's office received word that two men had been shot and killed in a cattle war at the other end of the country. It would take a week to straighten that out. Oddly enough, Sheriff Travis let Clem ride out without protest. Ordinarily, he would either accompany his chief deputy or go alone.

But just now the old lawman was hugging a secret to his emaciated old breast—he had pulled a fast one on Gilroy's Hellions, who should be heading into El Monte within the next day or two.

As soon as Clem had ridden away, Travis saddled his horse and rode out to the prospector's cabin above town. There he unlocked the creaky old door and went inside.

He dusted off the table and stove, saw that the cupboard which had been empty of canned goods for twenty years, was now well-stocked. He swept the dirt floor and made the shack as habitable as possible.

Then he rode back to his office and left a note for Ab Kenton, second deputy:

Just got news that a new outfit of long-riders is heading into this county. I'm riding out to do some scouting. Take care of things. Clem has gone over to Jackass Crick. I may be gone a week or more.

Mark

Then he took a bundle from the rear room, tied it onto his saddle and headed back to-

ward the old cabin. There he stabled his horse and fed it some of the baled hay he had recently carried out there after dark.

It was shortly after dusk that his first visitor arrived. He stood in the doorway as a tall rider loomed out of the evening and halloed the shack.

"Light and rest your saddle," he called in reply.

"That you, Johnny?" a voice inquired.

"Sure is, and you can ride up. Nobody else here."

The rider approached the doorway, and the sheriff went to meet his outthrust hand. "It—it's Tamarack, ain't it?" he asked gently.

"You guessed it—and it's been a long time," the man said, dismounting. "I read about you in a Salt Lake paper."

"We'll put up your hoss and have some chuck," Johnny Gilroy—who had been Sheriff Mark Travis for twenty-five years—said.

But before they had finished their chore another rider appeared.

"That you, Johnny?" he called out of the darkness.

"Yeah, me and Tamarack Jones," Johnny replied. "Ride down here."

"It's Bill Charters!" Tamarack ejaculated. "Didn't know you were still alive, Bill."

"Same here, but it's great to see you boys again. You been having a tough time, I hear."

"Not so bad," Johnny Gilroy chuckled. "Wonder if the other boys are alive?"

"I haven't heard from them for years," Bill Charters answered. "But if they read that item in the newspapers, they'll be here."

They had read it, all right, for at daylight Two-gun Jack Keller appeared, and an hour later Clayt Gannet rode in.

It was a joyous though subdued reunion, and after a belated breakfast, Johnny Gilroy unfolded a scheme.

"Boys," he began, "when we split up that time I came to this town and got the job of marshal. Liked it, too, although it was kinda hard on old clothes right at first. After the town was tamed down some, why, they elected me sheriff, and I've been at it ever since."

"So you're Mark Travis?" cried Bill Charters. "You've got a fine reputation as a lawman."

"Yeah, it happens to be my real name," the old outlaw-lawman grinned. "But, lem-

me tell you something—I haven't been happy for more'n ten years. I been wrasslin' my conscience and it's got me licked. Mebbe that's why my health is all shot to pieces. The doc says it's something else, but I know."

"What's causin' all this conscience upheaval?" asked Clayt Gannet quietly. "Ghosts out of the past, eh?"

Old Johnny nodded solemnly. "Yeh, I reckon. Boys—" his voice quavered a little—"I've been pretty tough, as you know. Nothing much bothered me, not sentiment, leastwise. But when Doc Clayburn said I'm due to kick off most any day, it sort of set me to thinking about the past, I reckon. So I just had to send for you boys."

He paused and swallowed. Bill Charters coughed. Keller growled, "So what do we do now?"

"As I say, this has been bothering me for several years, but it was only the last few weeks—since Doc tole me—that—well, I'd kinda like to make up for a couple of things we did, square up as much as we can at this late date, with three or four people we made suffer."

"Only three or four?" mumbled Keller.

"So far as I remember, only two of our robberies ever hurt anybody, that wasn't entitled to get hurt. Indirectly, we practically ruined the lives of a woman and the families of three men. All the other stickups only hit those who could afford it, and they soon got it back by being slick one way or another."

"I don't remember—" Gannet began, but Johnny was continuing his explanation.

"When we hit the Midland bank there in Sunset Glen in—gosh! It was about ninety-three, wasn't it? We took the payroll of the Sunset mine. The property had been owned by Sam Kirkland, but he'd died and left it to his daughter, Sally. The girl was trying to make a success of the mine, and when we took that payroll and the bank went bust, she lost the mine and everything she owned. Last I heard of her she was working as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant. That's one life we messed up. I'd sorta like to give her back that ten-fifteen thousand dollars we stole—or whatever it was."

Tamarack Jones eyed his old leader closely, started to speak, then checked himself with a cough.

"Using what for money?" wondered Jack Keller.

"I'm coming to that," Gilroy replied. "It's why I sent for you boys. I haven't any money to speak of—never saved any, somehow. I figgered we might go out and get it like—like—we used to."

"And what will that do to an already-overworked conscience?" wondered Clayt Gannet. "You are a lawman, you know!"

"Shouldn't hurt it a mite," Johnny answered stoutly. "Taking from the rich to help the poor—that wouldn't bother me."

"You say there are others?" asked Bill Charters softly.

"Yes. When we robbed that jerkwater railroad that ran into Ora Fina that time—Lord, how long ago was it? After we got away with all that money, the dang road defaulted and three wealthy ranchers down in the Richlands basin who had invested near every cent they could get lost their spreads and had to start all over again. That dang railroad did that."

"You know the names of those three men?" asked Clayt Gannet.

"Sure; wrote 'em down soon's I heard about them. But they're burning in my memory right now—Tobe Walker, Jim Turner and Heck Bayard."

"When did you hear about them last?" Gannet wondered.

"More'n twenty years ago, I reckon," said Johnny.

The other four ex-outlaws exchanged glances. "And you figger it'll make you happy to get those people off your mind by robbing a bank or two and giving them—uh—pensions, eh?" asked Keller.

"Boys," said Johnny pleadingly, "I'll die plumb miserable if I have to take that kinda memory with me to the grave. Mebbe it sounds foolish, and mebbe it is foolish, but I've got so I can't sleep any more from thinking about it. Getting old, I guess."

TAMARACK JONES was first to speak, following a brief silence. In a husky voice, he said: "In the old days you were our leader and we followed you without question. You never led us in the wrong direction." Johnny's eyes were downcast. Tamarack winked soberly at the three other men. "So—I'm siding you wherever and whenever you want to ride."

Johnny's head came up. "Thanks, Tamarack," he said gruffly. "I dunno how the rest of you boys are fixed. Mebbe you're too

much on the side of the law; mebbe you got relatives that would bar you from this loco idea of mine. Well, that's all right. I just thought I'd—kinda—put it up to you. There won't be no hard feelings if you turn it down, you betcha."

"Count me in," said Clayt Gannet.

"And me," grunted Bill Charters.

"Hell, I'm half way there," said Two-gun Keller.

"I admit it's a kinda risky thing to do," old Johnny Gilroy said then. "We can't get money quickly any other way that I know of. I can't, anyway. And now who'll volunteer to see that these folks are located and paid? I don't figger I could stand the riding and all. At least, the Doc seems to think I gotta be careful."

Clayt Gannet cleared his throat. "I'll see that those three ranchers are found and taken care of," he said. "I know where they are, as a matter of fact."

"I'm acquainted with the Sally Kirkland gal, who worked in the Chinese restaurant," Tamarack Jones volunteered. "I'll take on the job of reimbursing her for what she lost."

"Gosh, that's fine," exulted Gilroy, shoulders straightening. "Danged if I don't feel better already. Mebbe I'll fool Doc Clayburn yet."

"Let's get goin'," urged Charters.

They rode out that night, made camp two days later in a bosque on a mountain river in the adjoining county. There Tamarack Jones offered, "There's a bank in the town of Bolinas, about ten miles south of here, that usually carries quite a sum of money on deposit at all times. And by a curious coincidence the man who owned the Midland bank started this one. You know—he made no effort to see that the depositors got a nickel back after we took that forty thousand dollars from him in 'ninety-three. Shall we tackle it first?"

"Yes. Let's get into action," Johnny Gilroy replied eagerly. "I want to get this here chore done and get back home."

"The town's pretty quiet about noon," Tamarack went on. "I know the streets fairly well, and can lead the way out if we get into a tight."

They made their plans as they rode. Johnny was to throw down on the cashier and carry the money-sack. Gannet and Charters were to side him. Tamarack was to hold the horses, and Keller was to be the

lookout in front of the building. They were to ride down the alley at the rear of the bank, dismount and don their masks, then steal around to the front before the townspeople could be aware of anything untoward happening.

Old Johnny was thrilled. Even the other four felt some of the old-time excitement returning to them as they cantered down the deserted alley.

WHEN Johnny led the way into the bank, he walked with a firm tread and a fierce, wild light in his old eyes. There were no customers.

Before the cashier quite realized their presence, he heard Johnny's order, "Stick 'em up, feller, and keep scratchin' the rafters! You—back there! Step up here and lift them hands!"

The cashier and the bookkeeper, frightened, quickly raised their hands. Three deadly-looking guns were menacing them. And, although there was a signal system that would set off an alarm, if pressed with the foot, the cashier forgot all about it.

Johnny stepped closer to the grill. "That dinero," he said indicating the pile of currency on the counter with his gun-muzzle, "Shove it under the wicket. And watch your hands. These here boys are nervous, and if you make one false move, they're apt to squeeze the triggers."

The bookkeeper, who was standing closer to the money, pushed it across the counter as directed. Calmly and leisurely, as if enjoying the sensation, Johnny shoved it into the canvas bag he carried under his coat.

"There's some more in that drawer—we want it all!" he barked. The trembling bookkeeper obligingly passed it out.

"All right now—keep your hands high and mighty," Johnny told the two men. "We're bidding you a kind farewell."

The trio then backed to the doorway, removed their masks and strolled nonchalantly around the corner and into the alley where Tamarack Jones waited with the horses.

They mounted swiftly and rode out, Jack Keller bringing up to the rear to stop anyone who'd become too inquisitive. It took the cashier a minute or two to get back sufficient nerve to press the signal button.

The five old long-riders heard the clanging of the bell and spurred their mounts. Came then the crack of a rifle and Keller's

horse flinched but did not break its stride. Other bullets chugged into the ground—perhaps half a dozen of them. The hardware dealer across the street from the bank, first to hear the alarm and seeing the five men racing away, was shooting at them as they turned into the street that paralleled the main drag.

A bullet had seared the rump of Keller's mount, but it was not a serious wound. Then a slug tore through Clayt Gannet's right arm; another thudded into the sack of currency Johnny Gilroy was carrying.

But now the five men were out of range and they poured the leather into the frightened horses and disappeared over the hill that sits at the head of the main street of Bolinas.

They tore down through the shrubbery and onto a trail Tamarack Jones in the lead, and into a narrow valley and out, over another ridge, through a stream and onto a shale slide and, finally, into the next county.

Old hands at disguising their trail, they were soon as safe from a sheriff's posse as if they had never appeared in town. This they knew, and Johnny Gilroy chuckled with delight.

They made camp, and Jack Keller, who was always prepared for emergencies, brought forth a small medical kit and patched up the flesh-wound in Gannet's arm.

After supper that night, Johnny Gilroy said, "Now we got to hit another bank or mebbe a railroad, and get some dinero for those three ranchers. It better be an express car, I reckon, so's there'll be plenty. What say, boys?"

"Why not tackle that branch line that threw the investors down when we robbed it before. It's the one that ought to pay," suggested Bill Charters gravely.

"Sure—why not?" said Gannet.

"It usually carries the mines' payroll up on Friday—that's two days from now—and the Ora Fina mines are running full blast," Charters said.

"Sounds fine to me," nodded Johnny Gilroy.

Later, as they sat smoking around the campfire, Gannet explained, "Ora Fina, as you all know, is in Eldorado county, two counties removed from Alpine, which is Johnny's home range. Half way from the Sharon Well junction is a station called Jackson Hill. Nothing there but the depot and

a house in which the station agent batches it. It's almost at the top of a stiff grade. That ought to be a good spot for the hold-up, eh?"

"Best in the world," Johnny Gilroy grinned. The others merely grunted an assent. But then, they'd already talked it over out of Johnny's hearing.

THEY rode hard all day Wednesday, let up a little on Thursday, and by Friday noon were camped a mile below Jackson Hill, out of sight of the station. The mixed train was due at three o'clock.

At two o'clock the five old bandits made their way on foot to the little depot, donned their masks before they showed themselves and, Johnny leading the way, went inside.

"Step away from that telegraph machine!" the leader ordered. The startled agent obeyed. "Lift your dewclaws, and back over here!"

Bill Charters and Tamarack Jones deftly bound and gagged the agent and placed him in a closet.

"The train always stops here to take on water after that long uphill grind," Clayt Gannet explained.

He went over and placed an ear to the rails. "Coming," he said laconically.

They disappeared when they heard the whistle. The train shortly groaned to a panting stop directly in front of the station, and Bill Charters and Tamarack Jones stepped out from behind a clump of bushes and took charge of the engineer and fireman.

Johnny Gilroy, Gannet and Keller grabbed the conductor and rear brakeman and marched them up to the express car. At Johnny's orders, the conductor called to the lone express messenger, "Open 'er up, Charlie. There's three guns on me and Bud. If you don't open that door, they'll kill us. No use risking your life, anyway. Open the door."

The messenger slid back the door an inch and peered out. He withdrew the muzzle of his shotgun and shoved the door wide.

Johnny's gun swung to the young man. "Unless you got some notions of using that scattergun, you better set it down in that corner," he said dryly. "Gimme a leg, Jack."

Keller boosted Johnny's creaky old bones into the car. The messenger stood with hands lifted as ordered.

Johnny took charge of the shotgun. He found the big safe was locked and motioned to the messenger. "Likely you want to live, being young and all," he said. "So you better not stall about opening that tin box. Get busy. We're kinda shy on time."

The trembling messenger went over to the safe, got down on his knees and twisted the dials.

"Don't try to tell me you forgot the combination, or that it's a timeclock, or something," Johnny grated. "I been opening them safes for years. Get 'er tore apart, feller!"

The messenger awkwardly fumbled the knobs, but at last the big door swung back, and the youth got up and stepped hurriedly aside.

Johnny dragged out the currency and gold, stuffed it into the canvas sack along with the bank loot, leaving the silver. When the compartments had been thoroughly cleaned, he tossed the sack to the ground. Keller had taken the messenger in charge.

Then Johnny climbed laboriously out of the car, and Keller helped him down.

"Hell, the dang cowards never offered to put up a fight," growled Johnny Gilroy, as Keller herded the conductor and brakeman back to the passenger coach. As if to echo his words, a gun roared nearby and a bullet glanced off the car by the side of which Johnny was standing.

He leaped aside, sought the bushwhacker who was the head brakeman, as brave as he was foolish. He saw a hat showing above the embankment alongside the right-of-way, and sent five bullets crashing into the mound of dirt. The hat disappeared.

Then came another roar, and this time a slug tore through Johnny Gilroy's hat. The brakeman had sought cover and was firing from behind a tree. Johnny, who had reloaded, fired at the tree and cursed the gunman.

But the conductor was now giving the engineer the signal to pull out. The fireman let down the spout and turned water into the thirsty tank. Tamarack and Charters eyed him until the tank sloshed over, then ordered them to proceed. The train groaned and grunted and got underway. The five old outlaws, still wearing masks, watched with guns in hand as the wheels began to revolve more rapidly.

The three or four passengers in the coach

had not shown their heads after they realized a robbery was taking place. Now they peered out of the windows. Johnny waved a careless hand at them and they returned the gesture.

The head brakeman ran from his hiding place unhurt and caught the rear end of the train. Johnny sent a bullet in his direction, and the man squawked and kicked his way into the vestibule. Johnny thumbed his nose at him as he flashed past. The brakeman grinned.

Tamarack Jones loosed the agent's bonds so that he would be able to free himself within an hour or less. Then they went down to their mounts, tightened cinches and headed into the mountains.

AT THEIR camp that night, Tamarack Jones said, "Boys, I've counted the money. Looks like about forty thousand dollars. That ought to set all our busted friends up in business, eh, Johnny?"

The old sheriff's eyes were moist and his voice was husky when he replied, "Yes; that ought to kinda repay those people for some of the suffering we wished on them. Tamarack, you and Clayt will see they get the money, eh?"

"Of course," both men replied.

"Then I—I guess we've finished the job. Funny, but I don't feel a dang bit guilty, even if I did swear to uphold the law. I figger righting a wrong is better than to be so dang pure sometimes. And I owe you boys a lot of thanks and anything else you can use. I'll sleep better now, I'm sure of it. By golly, I feel like a new man already."

Clayt Gannet cleared his throat. "I was just thinking," he said, "that it wouldn't hurt anything if Tamarack and I let these people know that you, while conducting your office as sheriff of Alpine county, discovered after all the years how they had been made the victims of a gang of robbers, and that you had managed to make them square accounts to the best of your knowledge and ability. What say, Johnny?"

A pleased expression passed over Johnny's face. "Why, I—I—I reckon it wouldn't hurt anything—unless they try to make me prove it," he replied huskily.

"We'll take care of that," Tamarack said.

Johnny got up. "If you boys don't mind I think I'll hit out for home," he said. "I—danged if I ain't homesick. Know what? I'm going back there and resign, and move out to my little spread. I'm not worried about living alone, now that my conscience is cleared up."

And despite all arguments against it, the old sheriff mounted his rested horse and headed homeward.

The others remained in camp all night, for they were to go their separate ways from that point, now that Johnny had finally gone.

Said Tamarack Jones to Clayt Gannet, "Are you going to have any trouble locating those three ranchers, Walker, Turner and Bayard?"

Gannet laughed. "Not much," he answered. "Not if Jim Turner and Heck Bayard are on the job. You see, Bayard is the superintendent of that railroad we robbed yesterday, and Turner is the freight agent. Tobe Walker owns a big cow-spread down the valley a ways. I'll get them to send a joint letter to Johnny next week. I can make them understand. You see, they all got their money out of the railroad when it was re-organized."

He stopped to chuckle again. "But I'm afraid they're not going to see any of this money. They don't need it anyway, and besides, I happen to be the principal stockholder in the line."

Tamarack Jones then laughed. "Now, let me tell one," he said. "That bank we robbed at Bolinas belongs to me. That's why I suggested robbing it. I'm using the name of Charles W. Tremont. And I'd like to have you boys come and visit me sometimes—now that we have renewed our nefarious business."

(Please continue to page 113)

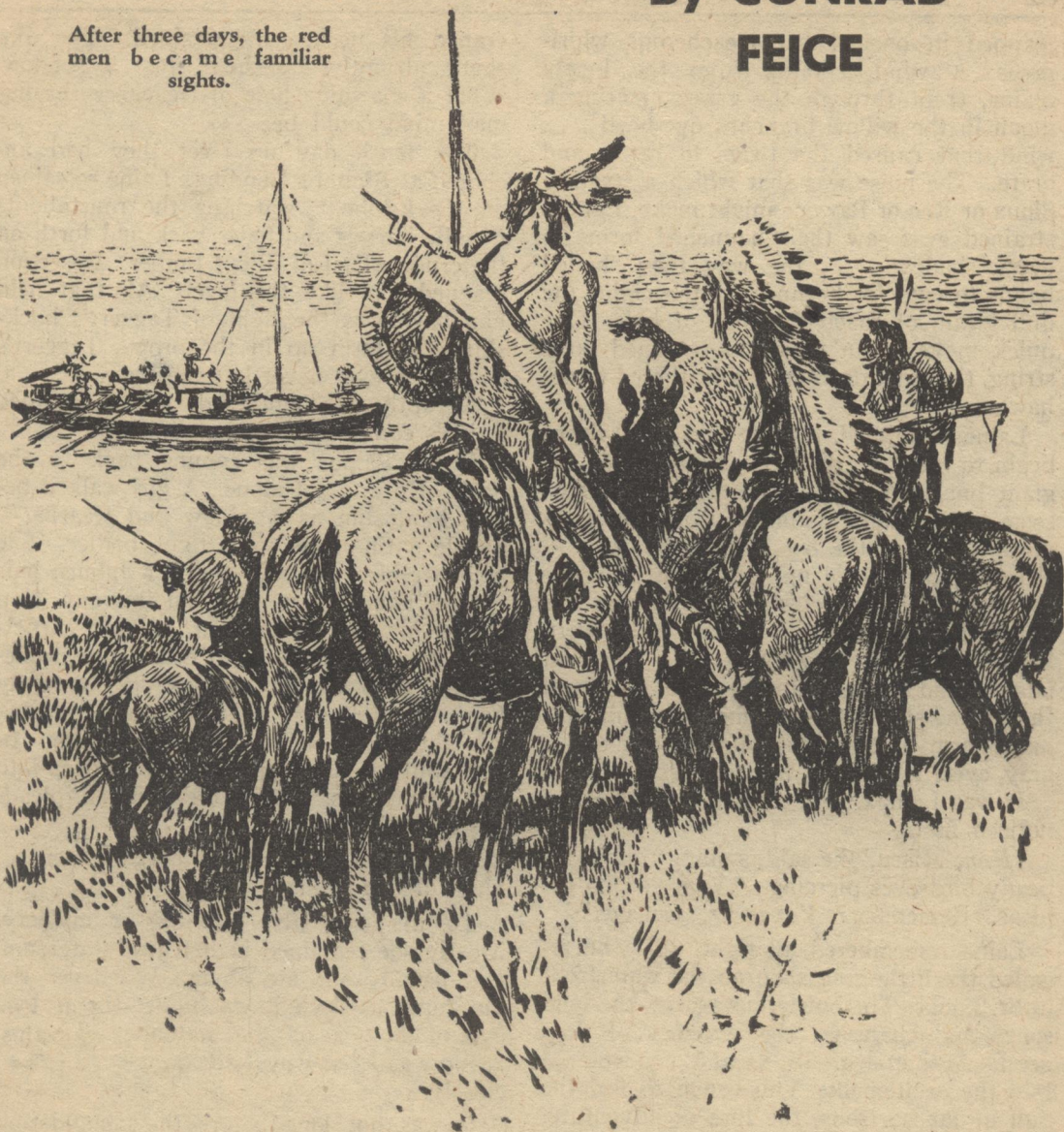
Beef on Wheels

Cattle rustling today is streamlined and mechanized. Modern rustlers use speedy trucks. Working at night, they load the trucks, then streak away for distant butcher shops. On the way the cattle are butchered and dressed, and are ready for delivery when the sun comes up.

—J. W. Q.

After three days, the red
men became familiar
sights.

By **CONRAD
FEIGE**



Gun River Crossing

●
*“Run with me,” the dark river
whispered. “Die for me and you’ll
never regret it, but I’ll side any
man who—fights!”*
●

THE GIRL was not with Laine Saunders. He had left her behind. Now he wished that she was here beside him, listening as he listened. She might have helped to push back the blackness of the night.

Below him the Missouri breathed heavily as her wet fingers plucked greedily at the clay bank. Now and then, she gushed noisily when occasional mud slides became

trapped in one of her treacherous whirlpools. A wind, coming from the lonely plains, crept through the grass, creating a moan in the willow branches overhead . . . wind that caused the twigs to rattle and grate. The noise was that which a stealthy Sioux or Ree or Pawnee might make. Laine's strained eyes saw their haunched forms in every shadow . . . the way they shaded hands to eyes for keenness in the night, the dull gleam of roached combs of hair. One quick move of an arrow in tautened bowstring, the swift descent of a feathered tomahawk. . . .

Laine shuddered, felt the cold sweat drops begin to break. These things made even the giant buckskin-clad figure of Pierre Lamox seem tame. Laine Saunders would have almost welcomed the big keelboat man.

Icy needles raced up and down his spine as he felt danger closing in. It was the loneliness that got him. Every inch, every hard fought-for foot that the keelboat labored and pushed into the roiled bosom of the yellow stream left its marks on him. It had shown first in the haunted look of his gray eyes, a growing nervousness.

It was Lamox, that shrewd one, who had noticed first.

"*Non*, Miseu," he said, smiling thinly, his beady bird eyes piercing. "*Non*, you no get ideas. Remember? *Voyageur*. Engage."

Laine remembered all right. Also he recalled the little grog shop on the waterfront in St. Louis. The boisterous voices, the loud songs and chanteys, the snatches of doggerel. A couple of drinks and you entered into the excitement. You began to feel the pull of far horizons, the lure of adventure. Then Lamox's beckoning riches of the fur trade clinched things. Quite willingly you signed up for the long trip.

It didn't take long to find out what you'd done, though. About the third day you realized. It was in the burned flesh of your hand where the towrope and the cordelle had taken hold, in the grinding ache of the pushpole in your shoulder. First it started with your aches, then it entered your mind.

Laine heard a rustle, watched a vague shape to his left. It seemed to move, to have a pair of eyes. If only the massed clouds would break so the moon could shine. He remembered trappers' tales of the huge Rocky Mountain bear—ferocious beasts that would maul and tear a man to bits. Laine

craned his neck, eyes strained. The dim shape abruptly vanished. Just a shadow. What a spawning hole of treachery the human mind could be.

The tenth day up river they had anchored at Blount's Landing. Laine remained on the keelboat, watching the roustabouts trundle barrels and bales back and forth on the crude wharf of ill-cut timber. Desertion plagued him like the fever. All that held him back was the sight of Taggart's buckskin clad form up in the prow. Taggart's pokeberry eyes never left the crew.

Abruptly a smothered sound escaped Laine's compressed lips.

Pierre Lamox was coming back to the dock. He was not alone. A girl walked beside him, slim as a willow and wearing a purple satin dress with tight bodice. She held her head proudly and her auburn hair blazed like fire in the hot midday sun. Pierre himself carried her bulging carpetbag. Next to the keelboat near Laine, something caused the girl to look up. Instantly her step faltered, then she was staring straight ahead again. It was enough. In that split second, Laine had looked deep into her brown eyes. They were troubled, pleading for help.

Immediately Laine Saunders cast away all ideas of desertion.

To the crew the girl was a mystery. Mostly she remained in her own stateroom, and usually she ate alone. Whenever she did come on deck it was under the jealous eye of Lamox or the watchdog Taggart. Laine wondered why Lamox guarded her so closely.

It was not long before the smouldering fires of loneliness flamed anew. Maybe if he could have talked to the girl, things might have been different. As it was the country daily became more bleak, more desolate. The trees got scantier, the bluffs lower, until you could see the barren hills running off into the distance.

THEN had come the day when they first sighted the Indians. The keelboat halted then, startled at their sudden appearance. There were twelve of them astride unkempt ponies on the bluff. Laine felt the keelboat start to slip back downstream. Lamox's bawled orders caused the men to jam their shoulders anew into the pushpoles. After three days the red men be-

came familiar sights. They had a habit of materializing without warning. In groups of six to twelve, they would remain immovable, eerily silent as they watched the far off progress of the boat. Hourly, the unease of the Creoles increased. Their big eyes became pools of fear when they stared at the distant redskins. They forgot their sing-song chant, and gave everything to the pushpoles.

That evening the sun turned the troubled sky to blood as it sank behind the plains. Here the river was narrow, and their pushpoles failed to hit bottom. Pierre Lamox swung the keelboat next to shore. He turned to Laine, tendered him the towrope. He motioned toward the thick willow undergrowth.

"Here, Miseu, you take the rope, go through the brush. Up there where the river is wide, we make anchor. The arrow of the red man and his gun not reach us there."

Laine took the towrope willingly, started out. He meant to forge on through the thicket. What fired fear in his mind, he didn't know. He left the others and was halfway through the entangling creepers and saplings when a slithering noise caught his ear . . . something that sounded like a Sioux body slipping through the underbrush. He halted, senses keyed to danger. He thought he detected a moving feather. All at once he bolted.

He came crashing out of the willows with the towrope in his hands and rammed head on into Lamox who was gathering stray firewood. Lamox caught him with a grunt.

"Miseu, what is?" he asked quickly.

"There could be a hundred Sioux hiding in there. I'm not going through."

Lamox's first edginess to danger faded. For a while he stood there, a towering box-crate of a man, eyeing Laine up and down. Suddenly he hissed it. "*Poltron!* Coward!" And with that, his hand, big as a stove lid and as hard, lashed out. That clubbing blow caught Laine square on the chin, caused the whole landscape to heave up. He felt his knees buckle, tried to still the roar of the hornet's nest in his head. Yet, even as he was falling, he heard Lamox hiss again, "*Poltron.*" Then he felt the big man grasp the rope from him.

The faint smell of honeysuckle stirred Laine—that and cool fingers caressing his brow. It was the girl and she was talking.

"It is in your high forehead, Miseu. The

looks of a scholar. This wildness—this is not for you. Maybe some day you will escape downriver—take Annette with you."

Laine opened his eyes. The girl was bending over him, her soft face close. He caught her look of tenderness, saw it change to wide-eyed concern.

"You are better, *non?*"

Laine managed a wry grin. "My head feels like an Indian tom-tom."

"I go now—quick."

Dazedly Laine heard the hasty retreat of her footsteps on deck. He managed to sit up and found that the men were dropping anchor, making the keelboat fast for the night. Lamox's bawled orders rang over the clink of chains and jarred packing crates. Through bleary eyes, Laine discovered that they were now in the wide part of the river.

Laine leaned against the side of the hatch, dizzy and sick inside. He watched the crew work, conscious of the scudding clouds blackening the night sky. Something slowly began to pound within him. The girl's words: "*Escape downriver. Escape downriver. . . .*" They became a monotonous chant.

NOW, listening to the night noises, watching the creeping Indians swiftly come and go, Laine knew he had acted not wisely. A Green River skinning knife, some lyed corn, a few roasted acorns and several dried strips of pemmican were not enough. As for the horse pistol he clutched so fiercely, it would never do to supply him with meat. He had lost the long rifle when he was lowering himself over the side of the keelboat. The splintered planking had ripped the flintlock out of his hand, tossed it to the ravenous stream below. Approaching footsteps on deck warned him that it was too late to clamber back.

Upriver, an owl began to hoot mournfully. The call of a Sioux? Laine wasn't certain. His head still ached and now, to top all things, he had to fight sleep from the day's fatigue. Drowsily he realized that it was the vastness, the loneliness of the land that made him like he was. A coward? No. It was just that he yearned for oak forests, the smell of settlers' fires. He was a hill and a tree man. Not a lonesome speck of dust isolated in eternity.

Downriver another owl began to hoot. Laine strained his ears. Maybe it was best that the girl hadn't come with him after all.

Why had he deserted her? He had read the plea aright in her eyes that day at Blount's Landing. Early this evening she had voiced it into his ear, her own lonesomeness, her desire to return to the land of men and homes. All at once Laine was berating himself for having left her behind.

"I've certainly messed this thing," he stated hoarsely.

Crashing brush behind Laine bounced him to his feet. He whipped about, glimpsed a black form leaping at him, got a blurred vision of a descending gun barrel. Vainly he tried to bring the horse pistol up, but too late. The rifle barrel cracked smartly against his wrist, sent the pistol flying. Taggart's mirthless chuckle smote Laine's ear.

"Hold it, bucko," Taggart intoned softly. "You ain't going no place."

Laine felt neither shaken nor ashamed for having been caught so unawares. Instead a great sense of relief swelled over him. He was going back to the keelboat. It was not a little thing to desert a keelboat bound for the upper Missouri. Men had been killed for it. Nevertheless Laine Saunders just reckoned fate was giving him another chance to save the girl.

There were lights on the keelboat when Laine rowed the canoe alongside under Taggart's keen vigilance. Taggart called out a "hallo" and the planked side of the boat swarmed with life. The Creole's faces were wide and oily with fright when they saw Laine grasp the short Jacob's ladder. This would be a killing, or maybe a hanging. All Laine saw when he hove up was the giant form of Pierre Lamox. The flickering lantern light shone on the man's great hairy chest, his bulldog neck.

Pierre Lamox stepped back as Laine clambered on board.

"So—you come back?"

Pierre said the words like a woman speaking gently to her child. It was this very gentleness that warned Laine, alerted his senses. Even at that he failed to note the tensing of the Frenchman's corded limbs. The girl's gasp of horror in the background saved him. That frozen cry slewed him to one side, and not a split second too soon. Lamox's fist raked his cheek, tearing the flesh as it passed.

Pierre Lamox had figured on that first blow to do the trick. He was thrown off balance. Laine took quick advantage. He

lowered his shoulders, rammed head first into the keelboat man's middle. Air gushed out of Lamox and he staggered back. Again Laine charged and this time the Frenchman reeled, then slammed against the cubby as his feet tangled in a coil of towrope. Laine pressed savagely on, flailing his fists at the great face while the other was falling. He used them like clubs, felt the knuckles split wide. A faint clucking from the crew told him he was scoring.

Lamox was down, shielding his face, trying to roll away. Laine rushed in for the kill. With a running jump he charged at the Frenchman, heels coming down on the other's face. The next happened quickly. Laine's legs were whipped to one side, then the deck was rising up to meet him in the weird lantern light.

He came to with a ringing ache in his head and the taste of blood in his mouth. It was morning and the crew were all working in rhythmic unison at the pushpoles. Laine stirred on his bedding of sacks and sat up. He wiped the back of his hand across his lips, expecting the scrape of dried blood. The hand came away smooth and clean. Then he saw the small pan of water and strips of cloth beside him.

Gratefully he thought of the girl, that she had done this for him. He got groggily to his feet.

Pierre Lamox emerged from the cubby and stopped before Laine in straddle-legged triumph.

"Hah, *poltron*, you can fight," he cried, and his lips were smiling. "Last night you fight like the wildcat. You surprise Pierre Lamox."

Laine silently studied the big Frenchman. The lips were smiling, but it was hard to decipher what was going on behind those black eyes. Sullenly, Laine guessed that he had never been meant to be a fighter. He preferred peace. And a slow hate for the big man began to fill him. Lamox must have understood, for his smile became frozen. Laine had his own little triumph then. Wordlessly he turned on his heel, went over and grabbed up a pushpole.

THE sun rose and set. Four times since the fight. They were days during which Laine Saunders both planned and worked. This time he would take the girl along. Already he had emptied the bolt

cloth out of the wooden crate in the prow of the keelboat. Now it was nearly full again. His mind enumerated the items as he plied his shoulder to the pushpole. Two heavy blankets, a couple of small pots, a sack of beans, some parched corn, a powder horn and a pouch full of shot. Too, there was a generous chunk of salt pork, some dried squash, a small sack of flour and a canister of salt. With the addition of game to this larder, he and the girl could fare quite well. All that was needed was an opportune moment for escape.

That night they anchored the keelboat beside the bank and ate supper on shore. The disappearance of the Indians had lessened the tension of the past days and a sense of relief enveloped the crew. The Creoles even sang a couple of songs after the meal. Shortly thereafter the flames died down and everyone retired.

Laine watched as the men settled down beside the fire, their shadowy forms reminding him of cattle bedding in a field. Overhead a nighthawk whimpered as it passed. Somewhere a frog croaked monotonously. River mists began to gather and before long nothing was heard save the heavy breathing of the sleepers.

Through narrowed slits, Laine studied Pierre Lamox nearby. Even in slumber the big man suggested latent strength. His barrel chest heaved up and down regularly. Laine tried to analyze his feelings toward the Frenchman. Not exactly hate, definitely not fear. It was more like revulsion, dislike for the brute force with which Lamox rodded the crew. Laine cautiously raised up on an elbow, silently appraised the rest of the keelboat members. They were all breathing hard. The day's exhaustion had taken its toll.

He eased out of his blankets, rose to his haunches. Deliberately he began treading toward the outer fringe of the small glade. He passed Taggart, noted the man's sharp shoulder blades, how even in sleep one hand lay carelessly across his rifle barrel alongside. Without warning Taggart stopped snoring and Laine became rooted in his tracks. Hours later it seemed the other man's breathing turned regular again. Foot by foot, Laine worked his way toward the inviting darkness of the scrub willows.

He reached the last sleeper and crouched down. Somewhere over here was the guard.

Then he spotted him, a dark shadow leaning against a tree with sagging chin propped on the end of his flintlock. The man's head jerked spasmodically erect and panic gripped Laine. That moment he had a notion to run for it. Forcefully he grasped hold of himself, watched until the guard's head sagged again. Laine slowly eased forward and this time the friendly willow brush swallowed him up.

In the shelter of the willows, Laine halted and looked back. The camp was a mass of blurred shapes, the fire a dull red eye in the center. Now it was up to him to make his plan work. He leaned his rifle against a tree, carefully let his hands grovel on the ground until he found several fair sized stones.

Laine Saunders threw the first stone downriver from the camp with all his strength. It lit with a loud crash in some thickets. The other stones followed in quick succession, crashing and bouncing in the underbrush. Laine saw the guard snap erect. His head whipped wildly about, then firing his gun recklessly into the night air, he ran leaping and shouting toward the alarmed sleepers. Laine grinned mirthlessly as he viewed the camp's pandemonium in the ghost rays of the misty moon.

It was Pierre Lamox's voice that finally made itself heard.

"The *poltron*," he cried. "Quick! Get him!"

Lamox headed downriver in the direction of the crashing noises, the Creoles yelping and shouting close behind. The clearing emptied like magic. Silently Laine stepped out from behind his tree and ran swiftly toward the dim hulk of the keelboat on the river's silvered surface.

His moccasined feet made hardly a sound when he jumped onto the deck. Noiselessly he wended his way in and out of the crates. The sight of the girl's dark form emerging through the cubby door drew Laine up.

"Annette," he called softly. "It's Laine Saunders. I have come to take you away."

"Oh, yes," she said huskily.

Laine went over to her, grasped her by the shoulders. "You do wish to go back down river?"

"Yes, yes," she said quickly.

"Good," Laine said. "Get your things. Meantime I'll ready the canoe."

A minute later Laine gave the girl his

hand, helped her into the canoe. The frail craft tipped dangerously. Black water gurgled and slapped against the gunwales. Annette caught herself expertly, stooped and picked up the paddle to steady the boat. Laine grunted in approval, eased the packing crate down into the prow of the canoe.

"Here's food," he informed, securing the box. "Enough to last us a good many days."

They listened to the cries, the shouts and calls, the faint crackling of underbrush downriver. Every now and then Pierre Lamox's bull voice bugled back, encouraging the others. Once Laine thought he made out Taggart's harsh reply. The Creoles themselves were yapping and yipping like foxes pursuing a hare.

IT HAPPENED without warning.

A single shot rang out, then several in a rapid succession. There followed a momentary lull, and then a long high-pitched cry. The shrill scream of the Sioux war-whoop! Laine shuddered at its hideous fierceness. The echo of it was still rattling amongst the hollows of the bluffs when rifle fire splatted into volume. Pierre Lamox's voice pierced the din. Now Laine heard the deeper reports of the keelboat's long rifles, the duller snap of horse pistols.

"The Sioux!" Laine got out. "Ambush!"

"What shall we do now?" the girl asked, and Laine heard the tremor of her voice.

Laine said, "We ought to hit down river—only I got a score to settle."

He stood up in the canoe, grasped the side of the keelboat and leaped back on deck. Two turns of the light rope about a snubbing post anchored the canoe; then he was darting in and out amongst the bales and crates on the keelboat. He made for the door of the cubby. Arriving there he took one great leap and hit the bottom of the narrow companionway. A ship's lantern flickered yellowly at the far end. He headed in that direction, passed the galley and ran toward an oak-timbered brassbound door. Behind this was the gun and powder hold.

Some time later Laine was hunkered by the edge of the river bank. He was breathing hard and beside him he had an extra rifle and a brace of horse pistols. All were loaded and ready. Queerly, even above the stir of excitement, Laine was conscious of the girl near him. His nostrils distended when he got the scent of honeysuckle

again. Narrowly he noted the readiness with which she held a ramrod, prepared to load and powder each gun as soon as it was fired. She was a prize package, well worth fighting for.

Downstream the high war cries of the Sioux had died. Things were earnest there. Only the sporadic shouts and cries of the keelboat men was to be heard—that and the splatting of flintlock and horse pistol shots rapidly coming closer. The crew was making a running fight of it.

Suddenly Laine cried, "Look! Yonder by that dead cottonwood near the edge of the clearing."

It was one of the Creoles coming across the glade on feet of wings. Two others burst out of the brush, nipping at his heels. A fourth man, limping badly, stumbled into view by the river bank. Momentarily he seemed confused, cast his head about. Then he sighted the keelboat and took great hobbling strides in its direction. Laine heard Lamox's hoarse cry, the sharp slap of his gun. Another yell pealed out and he saw Taggart leap into the clearing. He was a wild looking sight, black head whipping over his shoulder, his elkskin hunting coat ripped to tatters.

Laine waved the Creoles ahead.

"Hurry," he cried, "Up onto the keelboat and prepare the breastworks. Here, you." This to the man with the limp. "Take this gun and help me mow them down."

He tossed the flintlock to the Creole. The man expertly caught it, swiftly squatted down and crotched the gun to readiness. Shrill cries and catcalls burst out in the thicket as the Sioux sensed that their prey was temporarily escaping. At the same time Pierre Lamox and the rest of the men came tumbling out of the willow brush.

Now Laine saw his first redskin. A Sioux with shaven scalp lock and dully gleaming brass bands on his arms and ankles. This was what his imagination had conjured up that first night he had tried to escape from the keelboat.

"Only this is real," he breathed softly and raised his gun.

Laine got the rifle bead on the flashing form bouncing across the glade in the treacherous moonlight. His finger squeezed. The flint-lock bucked in his hands. Faint pan smoke clouded his target, but he knew he had hit. The blood curdling death

screech signified that. Lamox gave a startled leap as the Sioux plunged writhing at his feet.

"Lamox! Taggart!" Laine cried. "Make for the keelboat. I'll cover you."

The great Lamox and the keen-nosed watchdog Taggart reared at Laine's voice. This was a new angle. No time to figure it out now. They came leaping and jumping toward the keelboat. The Creole beside Laine squinted, pulled trigger. A howl of pain in the thickets was his reward. Laine had counted the crew members as they came into sight. Miraculously, to a man, they were all accounted for.

Pierre Lamox came up, plowed to a stop beside Laine.

"*Non!* But it is you," he cried.

Laine swore savagely, wanting to beat the man down. He said, "Get on the keelboat and behind the breastworks. I've got a plan."

Taggart said, "Get on the keelboat yourself. They's twenty or thirty of them heathen behind us. There—see for yourself."

Laine followed the black outline of Taggart's pointing finger. The frontiersman was right. Already the clearing was filling with hideously painted red bodies. They came howling out of the river brush. They catapulted into the glade, leaping and screeching, brandishing tomahawks and long barreled rifles and bows and arrows.

"Annette, you go with Lamox and Taggart," Laine ordered.

"*Non*, you are the crazy one," Lamox declared. "On the keelboat we have hard enough time to withstand the red man."

Laine looked at the Frenchman with eyes of scorn. But this was no time to settle scores. He had to do what he had to do. He turned on his heel, ran swiftly across the clearing toward the glowing remains of the campfire.

Lamox's faint cry followed him: "Come back before they kill you."

L AINE SAUNDERS hadn't meant to play the hero so brazenly. He had not counted on the wolf pack being quite so close behind the crew. The two powder kegs were where he had planted them, right in pathway of the howling bedlam charging at him. It was only luck that he had strewn the black powder fusing so close to the fire. If only he could reach it, heave one lone ember onto the black powder trail.

A Sioux, grotesquely daubed with ocher and vermilion, crouched down and raised a flintlock. Laine saw a red spurt of flame, felt something tug at his buckskin shirt sleeve.

And at the same instant he tripped on a branch and went sprawling. He lit hard, air whooshing out of him. No time to get up. Just roll toward the fire.

Another rifle shot spanged out and dirt and twigs peppered into his face. He gritted his teeth, slitted his eyes and gave a final fateful lunge. Laine hit the campfire with flailing hands, heaving and scattering live coals in the direction of the loosely spilled black powder.

It happened without warning. Blue fire that spewed up into the night, caught hold and went sputtering and sizzling right at the scalp-hungry savages. The Sioux saw, gave a startled yell of surprise and plowed to a halt. A live snake with a bluish head was advancing directly at them. It bounded forward with the speed of the streaks of light coming from the great thunder god. And like a snake it hypnotized them. Held them so they could only stand and stare. Suddenly the snake gave a giant hiss and leaped angrily at a small stump standing in the clearing before them.

Laine saw the burning powder hit the nearest keg. He turned, shielded his face with his arms. The thunderous roar and concussion mingled into one. Air and dirt and sticks blasted past him. Screams of pain and terror rent the throats of the Sioux. The first crimson glare was still fading when Laine saw the flash of the second powder keg. This time the earth itself erupted beneath the Sioux. The Indians were hurtled bodily upward, squirming and twisting and screaming. The crimson-hued picture faded, blackness took its place.

A hushed stillness settled down after those two booming explosions. Laine could hear nothing but the sound of rustling brush. Bodies crashed off in headlong flight. Deeper and farther and fainter they went, howling off into the distance.

Pierre Lamox greeted Laine when he stepped aboard the keelboat.

"Hah, *poltron!*" he cried.

He was standing spraddle-legged in the light of the brass lantern. The same way he had stood over Laine that day after the fight. There was the same grin on his face,

the same glitter in his eyes. Laine felt like swinging his rifle butt first and smashing that rock face to a pulp. Then he saw the girl and he suddenly knew exactly what he had to do.

He clicked the rifle hammer to full cock, pointed the barrel dead center at Lamox's flat muscled stomach.

"Everybody drop their guns," Laine snapped. "The first false move anybody makes and I'll drill Lamox deader than a polecat."

Taggart swore. "What's the matter with you, Saunders?" he said harshly. "You gone loco on us?"

Laine heard the guns drop onto the deck, saw the black outlines of arms reaching toward the cloud-mottled sky.

"Annette, you can get into the canoe," he said softly. "We'll be shoving off down river now."

Pierre Lamox expelled a great breath. "*Non!*" he shouted again. "For this I shall kill you."

Slowly he began stepping toward Laine. Not even a bullet would stop the big Frenchman this time. Laine sensed that. He could not shoot the man down in cold blood. Laine deliberately began lowering the gun muzzle. He'd have to fight this out with his hands. Claw and tooth and nail. No rules, no help. Just fight and hope and pray.

"Papa Lamox. Stop!"

Laine raised his eyes, dumfounded, not at all sure. The girl Annette had flung herself between him and Pierre Lamox. And she actually had called the huge Frenchman father.

"Papa Lamox, don't you dare," the girl cried, and the crew members sucked in thin air when they saw Pierre stop before her. "He risked his life to save you. You should be ashamed."

Lamox rolled his head back and forth. "But he is going to take you downriver, away from me," he rumbled darkly.

"I asked him to do that," Annette said firmly.

"You asked him? You would leave without a word?"

"*Non*. I have written a note. I go with him."

"*Non!* You do not go," Pierre said stubbornly.

The girl stamped her foot. "All my life, Papa Lamox, you hover over me like the

great hawk. You send Taggart after me like the watchdog. Never am I left alone. You think that I turn out bad. *Non!* I am good. Laine Saunders is good."

A long time Pierre Lamox stood towering over the girl, not saying a word. He just continued to look at Laine. Then slowly his shoulders drooped. He seemed to age, to grow smaller that second. At last he lifted his head and spoke to Laine.

"You there, Laine Saunders, you like my girl?"

The hate within Laine spilled out, rolled away. Pity for the great man before him began to take its place.

"Ever since I first saw Annette I have been dreaming," Laine said. "I keep thinking of people. Of church bells. Some place where there are houses, and friends, and trees."

None of the crew moved. Laine discerned their rapt attention, the fathomless depths of the Creole's liquid eyes, the wolfish way Taggart leaned forward, head cocked in expectancy. Even the Missouri seemed more hushed, gently tapped the gunwales of the keelboat as she waited.

Pierre Lamox abruptly drew in a deep breath. He swore. "All my life I have lived to please Annette. It shall be as she wishes. *Dieu vous garde*."

God protect you. Laine liked that. He liked it immensely.

Suddenly Laine was grinning. He knew he shouldn't do it, but he did. He held out his hand. Pierre Lamox took it. Laine felt his fingers being ground to a pulp. He managed to get his hand back, tried to hide the pain shooting up his arm. It would hinder his rowing for days to come. Nevertheless he was glad. And now Annette was kissing her father. Then she was returning towards him, hands outstretched.

Laine took her hand, said: "St. Louis, Lamox. You'll find us in St. Louis. We'll be looking for you."

Laine helped Annette into the canoe. He got in, took the paddle and held it aloft. One second he looked up at the outline of Pierre Lamox's great figure on the keelboat. Then he waved the paddle and dug in deep. Annette's soft figure was in the prow, the river formed a smooth pathway ahead. Behind was the emptiness, the vastness, the loneliness.

Laine Saunders didn't look back. ***

● ON THE TRAIL ●



HI, FOLKS. We've got quite a yarn scheduled for the next issue of FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES, and we figured we'd pass the word on about it.

Giff Cheshire's "Stampede on Roaring River" is an action-packed tale of a water-starved basin threatened by Saul Ravel, captain of the riverboat *Chief*. Ravel refused to deliver hay to the ranchers, hoping to take over their spreads. But two cowmen, Chris Truxton and Pike Newgard, join up with Lew Quade and his sister Miriam, in an attempt to break Ravel's stranglehold on the river.

The four are bringing a load of hay in on Quade's boat, the *Skipper*, when Ravel's steamboat catches up with them. All hell breaks loose. . . .

The *Skipper's* pounding vibration ceased. Chris could feel her lose weigh in the running current. He was racing aft on the upper deck when her paddles reversed, apparently with a wide open throttle.

Chris' admiration for Lew shot up a mile. Ravel's opening maneuver had been to make a dead-on run at the *Skipper*. It had failed to budge Lew a degree off his course. But Ravel had lacked the nerve to see if Lew would drive his little packet into a smashing, dead-on collision.

The *Chief* had heeled so hard it seemed the momentum would carry her into a belly-

tilted crash, anyhow. Lew apparently gave more orders, for the *Skipper's* paddles ceased their wild reverse. The *Chief*, twenty yards off her port, wheeled onto a forward tack. Again the rifle opened fire over there. Chris dropped flat and emptied his gun.

The packets kept peppering at each other. Chris wasn't sure when he grew aware of something new and alarming. The *Skipper* was careening! Alarm broke through him. He raced toward the wheelhouse.

Lew was stretched on the floor, a hand extended where he finally had let go of the wheel. The packet was whipping in the current, unsteered, helpless.

Chris put his mouth to the speaking tube and blew, as he had seen Lew do. "Miriam! Lew's hit. What do we do?"

He heard a shocked cry. "Line her out!" "How?"

"Try, Chris! I can't leave the engine!"

He shoved his hip against the racing wheel, felt heat as friction slowed it. He caught hold and nearly got an arm jerked off.

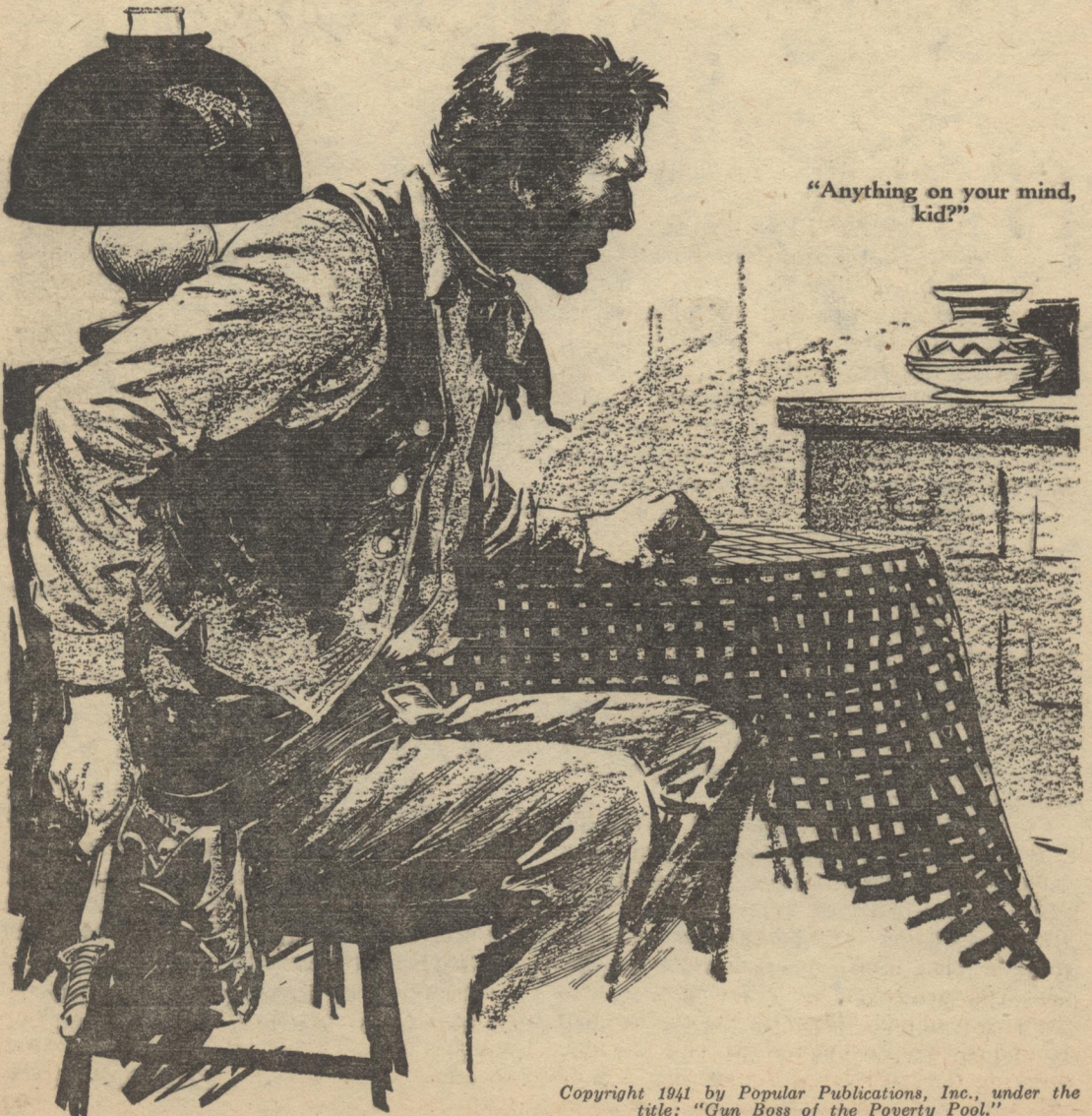
Something like the grinding of a grist mill shuddered up through the frame. Chris hit the wheel so hard he had time only to think, *Shoaled!* before everything went black. . . .

"Stampede on Roaring River" will be in the May issue. We think you won't want to miss it!

THE EDITOR

KING OF THE POVERTY

*Together the McCulloughs, father and son, could lick the world.
But how could young Tom hope to win alone against that roaring
lynch mob, when the old man was too busy with his own, strange,
private war to lend a hand?*



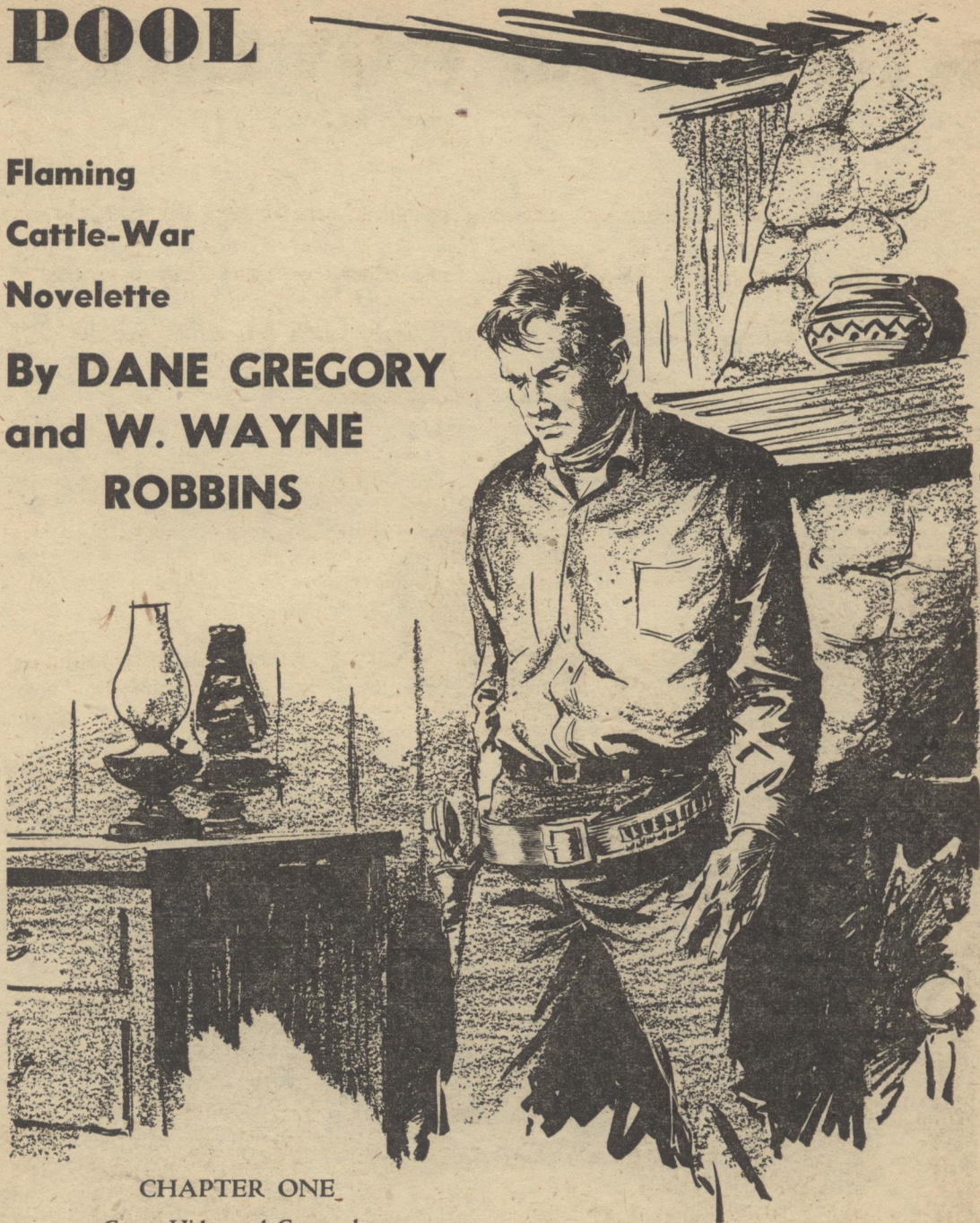
"Anything on your mind,
kid?"

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title: "Gun Boss of the Poverty Pool."

POOL

Flaming
Cattle-War
Novelette

By **DANE GREGORY**
and **W. WAYNE**
ROBBINS



CHAPTER ONE

Green Hides and Gunsmoke

THE dusk lay thick and dreamy that evening on Solana's main street. Young Cullough made a quarter turn and wheeled the spring-wagon to a stop in front of Dad McElroy's hide depot, where lamplight painted a flat yellow glow against the drawn blinds. Then he looped the reins around the whipsocket and sat for a moment, disliking the silence and rummaging around

in it for any hint of the trouble that all men knew was long overdue in these parts.

A few bottleflies hummed sleepily around the wet gunnysacks and tarp in the back of the wagon. One of the bays blew softly and moved her forefeet in a restive way, obviously hankering to go home, now that the long jaunt to Fort Tierney was over. There was no other sound until the doors of the Oasis

Saloon slapped open and a man came toward the wagon.

"Hello, kid," he said. "Back from the Fort, huh?"

The man was Billy Milo, ramrod of the Cullough Halved Circle outfit. He was a thin, slack-muscled, shambling hombre whose hat loafed on the back of his head. Knowing that surface ease for what it was—the garment that clothed a quick, hard competence—the kid was mighty pleased to see him.

"Hello, Billy," the kid said. "Any news?"

"Why, no. Can't say as there is. Your daddy and me rode in to listen to the tin can telegraph, but seems like the town's sort of gossiped out. How about me buyin' you a drink, and then you buyin' me one, and then maybe each of us havin' one on hisself?"

The kid went with him toward the Stockmen's, Milo being a drinker who shared his trade impartially among the three local saloons.

"Where's dad now?" the kid said.

"I can't rightly say, kid. 'Round about, I reckon, or maybe he got his horse and rode on back. Needn't worry about your daddy, Tom. He could set on a powder keg and hatch out doves."

The kid didn't know about that. He only knew that any unaccompanied Cullough—the young Tom or the old one—was as safe here as a sheep at a cattlemen's convention. Three shoestrung ranchers lounged at the long redwood bar, and the nod they tilted at young Tom was damned impersonal. The kid and these men had been friends once, but now they belonged to the Small Cattlemen's Pool, of which Jay Swalley was the power, the glory and the eloquent tongue. And the Pool was one angle of the triangular vendetta shaping itself hereabouts.

Young Tom had a stirrup-cup and then pushed his glass away. He rode careful herd on his appetite for drink, remembering always that the elder Cullough might have filled a drunkard's grave but for the fact that he had staggered past it. That day was buried in the dim years of his childhood, and now old Tom imbibed nothing stronger than studhorse coffee. But the object lesson remained.

"That's when, Billy," young Cullough said. "I'm going to market those hides and then scout around for dad." Then: "From the smell of the air in here, you better do your drinking elsewhere."

Milo looked sleepily at the kid. Then he grinned. "I can take care of myself in any company, kid. Have another drink."

"No, thanks."

The kid went out. He hated to leave the Halved Circle foreman in a nest of enemies, but he was worried about the old man. The street still drowsed, a canyon of blue silence in which the few scattered lights seemed as remote and impersonal as stars. He lit a cigarette and sauntered casually to the hide depot, but his spine was stiff as hell. His right hand was very near the holster on one flat hip.

He hunkered down in the wagon box and pushed aside the canvas tarp. Then when he saw the brand on the topmost hide he really realized the hardpan foundation for the uneasiness that had been building in him since he had first entered town. *Well, this is it!* he thought remotely, and was a little surprised at his calmness.

CULLOUGH senior had the contract to furnish dressed beef for the army post, fifteen miles out of Solana. It was a job entrusted to young Cullough, and these might have been the hides he had peeled off that morning and thrown into the rig with the new beef. They were wet and sticky and a joy to the blowflies, but there the similarity ended. The brands on them had undergone a startling transformation.

Several bore the iron of the Lazy Eleven. Others had been stripped from Double-H Connected stock. Still others carried the Bucksaw brand—all of them coffeepot outfits in the flats between the Halved Circle and the giant Mason spread. Not one of these hides had clothed a Cullough critter; and the whole situation was as smelly as a N'Orleans tide flat. It was a frame-up that had been neatly manipulated while he had been in the bar with Milo.

It meant that all holecards would shortly be face up on the board. A year ago the little men would have laughed themselves weak at the idea of the powerful Cullough spread peddling slow-elk by the pound. But those had been kinder times, and the kid knew that today it would take nothing more than this to spark the powder of suspicion. It wasn't a very good frame-up, maybe, but it was plenty good enough.

His hand dropped alongside the butt of his Colt and he straightened warily.

Down that dusty road, all but lifeless a few moments before, there was movement that broke into a series of quick, sharp impressions.

A girl's dress made a warm stir in the dusk, and her voice came from the shadows piled around Bixler's Emporium. Virginia Mason's distinct musical voice said, "Wait, Ben! Wait! What are you going to do?"

She had been Ginny Mason once, trim and pretty as a little red wagon, and the kid had kind of had his eye on her. Now she was co-owner of the Mason spread, the third angle of the triangle, and therefore a bitter enemy.

"Stay clear of it, sis!" A man swung away from her, strolled out into the street toward the wagon, hands free-swinging and ready. He was the girl's brother, Ben Mason, deputy sheriff under old Johnny Coe, who had worn his badge proudly and was oversure of its authority. The deputy stopped within shooting distance of the wagon and said sharply, "Cullough! I want to have a talk with you."

To either side of the kid the street broke on the gloom of an alley. Flanking him, shadows stood at brisk attention against the piney walls. The left-hand shadow was tall and wide and steeped with a black sombrero; the kid bet five it belonged to Jay Swalley, boss-man of the Small Cattlemen's Pool. The other shape looked something like a barrel set on rickety legs, and it also bore a likeness to Charlie Geller of the Mason crew.

Gun-trap! The trouble was revolving itself into its true values, clean and distinct: the Mason outfit had aligned itself with Swalley in a conspiracy to smash the Halved Circle. And they weren't going to give him any chance at all. The Culloughs were to be pinched out like mothmillers, briefly and bloodily.

Ben Mason said, "I hear you got some furs from them famous Cullough rabbit-cows in your rig, Tom. Been so much talk about 'em that I'd kinda like to see 'em."

Young Tom cocked his muscles and waited, his gray eyes tight and dangerous. The fury in him was a cold thing that weighed the odds and was ready for the gamble.

"Who'd know they were there except the bunch that put 'em there?" he said. "It's raw, Mason, but I reckon you figure that dead men don't holler."

The half light showed a thin smile on Mason's face. "Meaning?" he inquired.

"I mean you'd better not go for that gun, Mason. A star ain't worth any more than the man behind it, and in this case it wouldn't bring you a 'dobe dollar."

"You're resisting arrest?"

"Yeah."

That was the signal. Gunfire exploded and a bullet whined close to Tom's ear. He knew the purpose of that: he was supposed to swing sidewise and pour a shot into the darkness while Ben Mason popped him deliberately at point-blank range. And but for the fact that he had foreseen the play, that was how it would have worked out.

He went into a crouch and came up with the six-shooter steady in his hand. He threw his lead at the glint of Mason's gun-barrel, and the two shots rolled into each other and were on—thunderous, enduring. Ben Mason looked bleakly at the weapon in his fingers and shook it loose in a distasteful way. Then he leaned onto the rims of his heels and took three backward steps and lay down in the dust of the street.

Virginia was screaming.

Young Cullough turned lightly, ready now for the enemies who flanked him. He punched one shot into the spot where Jay Swalley had been, but no dark shape bulked there now. Nor on the left-hand wall where Charlie Geller had waited. They had appeared like shadows, and like shadows they had gone.

Tom looked down at the hot gun in his hand and then pushed it slowly into its cradle. The fire went out of him and only its soggy ash remained. He was of age now. He had faced the issue and shot his first man, and by all the rules and regulations he ought to feel cocky as a jay. Instead, he wanted to stretch out in the wagon bed and bawl for his yesterdays. He and Ben Mason had once thrown chalk at each other in school.

THE street stretched its thin, dusty length and woke up like a diamondback prodded by a bee. Doors clapped open and vomited light and people, and the crowd swung in an awkward loop around that little scene in the street. Young Cullough saw all this in broken pictures. He was really looking at Virginia Mason, who sat with Ben Mason's dark head in her lap and stared back at Tom out of wide, hot eyes.

"Damn you, Tom Cullough" she said quietly. "He was doing what he had to do—and you murdered him! You shot him down in front of me. . . ."

Doc Hooker came fussing and fretting through the crowd and bent over the fallen man, his professional warbag in hand. He touched the smear below Mason's collarbone.

"Help me get him up to my surgery, somebody," Hooker said. "He ain't dead yet, but it's a damned bad wound."

When they had carried Ben Mason away, the girl came to her feet and faced Cullough, hate bright in her eyes. "I saw it all—everything. Ben tried to arrest you. You shot at him twice, and the second time you hit him. You—you—" She broke off, almost choking.

Old Sheriff Johnny Coe fingered the star on his vest and chewed uneasily at the gray fringe of his mustache. "That right, son?" he asked.

"No," young Cullough said flatly. "That first shot came from Jay Swalley, who was standing yonderly against the wall. Geller was across the street from him. They started the ruckus, and Ben was supposed to kill me while I swapped lead with 'em. Our guns went off together, which oughta prove something."

"That's a lie!" the girl said fiercely. "Ben wouldn't stoop to such—"

The crowd stirred thoughtfully, and young Cullough felt the solid weight of its dislike. Jay Swalley moved to the girl's side. He stood there with one big hand on her arm; a giant of a man, dominant and assured. He wore the same black cattleman's special above his square olive face, but now his hips were conspicuously innocent of hardware.

"'Course it's a lie, Ginny," Swalley said. "I was up in my office when I heard the shots; don't even know where Charlie was." He talked to the banked faces around him, persuasive as a lightning-rod salesman. "We've all known the Cullough outfit was throwing a hundred-mile rope. We've all known what was happening to our herd—Mason herds and Pool herds, too. We've got—"

The kid said, "Talk for yourself, Swalley. I'll bet you do know, and I'll bet you also know why the Halved Circle has been shedding cattle. There wasn't any rustling hereabouts until you moved in like a tin god to

protect all the little men from rustlers."

Swalley ignored this, sure of his audience. "So it's your duty, Sheriff, to arrest this man for skinning the wrong critters. And resisting an officer. And maybe murder. If Ben dies. . . ."

"Yeah," old Johnny Coe said glumly. "Guess it's my duty, kid—though I'm damned if I see how Ben knew them hides was there. Come along."

"Sure," young Tom said, and scaled a tight, anxious glance through the crowd. "Where's dad? He'll bail me out as soon as he knows I'm—"

His words ran out into silence. Laughter made a small, soft ruffle in the crowd, and above that sound old Tom Cullough's voice lifted.

"Sure, Tom," he said. "Don't you worry about anything—not anything at all, see? Your old dad will take care of this li'l matter."

The crowd fanned outward so that young Tom could see his old man. Father and son stood face to face, and everything seemed to wither and die in young Cullough. His father's lank body swayed on legs as limber as a new-born colt's. His silver hair framed a face grown florid and strange, and his silver-gray eyes were dazed. His fingers curled tenderly around the neck of a whiskey bottle.

He burped mightily and said again, "Don't you worry, son."

A teetotaler for fifteen years, old Tom Cullough had toppled out of the saddle with a thud audible from the Sonora to the Saskatchewan. At this moment when the kid needed him most, he was as drunk as a Mexican sheepher at a tequila party.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder!

THE cell was a small, square pocket full of heat and flies and the scrawled comments of chuckliners who had meditated there. The strong afternoon sun reached through the bars to lay a striped pattern on the floor, and with it came a siesta hush deepened somehow by the steady clang of a blacksmith's anvil down the street. Sweating systematically, young Tom Cullough listened to the sound, piled smoke in the air and let his thoughts run their dreary course through his brain.

Mid-afternoon. The barred door swung inward and old Johnny Coe came in for the third time that day, chewing his mustache and looking at the kid out of friendly blue eyes. Tom Cullough swung his shanks over the edge of the bunk and said tiredly, "Well, now I know how dodger dough feels in a dutch oven."

"I reckon so, son," old Johnny said. "Sorry I had to throw you in, but I didn't seem to have no choice. That ain't saying I mistrust your story—it sounded pretty straight to me. And I been noticin' that Mason spent quite a lot of his time in Swalley's office."

The kid's eyes hardened. "Swalley," he said fiercely, "is the wide-loop artist in this scope of country, Johnny. Stealing from the little spreads and blaming it on the Halved Circle. I know it. Dad knew it—" his voice went very bitter—"or did when he used to be sober. Everybody else ought to know it, includin' the sheriff's office."

Coe pinched the veinous arch of his nose. "Knowin' and provin' is two different things," he said slowly. "Makes you feel any better, though, I see Swalley this morning and told him I did know it. Told him I was gonna holler for some range detectives that ain't on his payroll and bust the business wide open. Told him, among other things, that I'd gut-shoot him first and prove things later 'less he toned down some of this lynch-talk hereabouts." He paused a moment, then said softly, "I was a friend of the Culloughs a long time before I was totin' a star."

The kid said with equal softness, "I reckon I know that, Johnny. And what'd Swalley say?"

"Laughed a little bit, but men don't make that kind of sound when they hear something funny. Gonna be some sort of showdown soon—I feel it in the back of my neck. Swalley's likely to be kinda nervous, now that he ain't got any representation in the sheriff's office." The lawman stopped, looked at Tom. Then, quickly: "You can go now, kid. Fork a bronc and hive for home."

Young Cullough straightened slowly. "Huh?"

"Yeah. Preliminary hearing set for ten o'clock tomorrow, and—" old Johnny looked dismally at his toes—"the charge is gonna be murder, I'm afraid. Ben Mason died a couple hours ago."

Murder!

Against this word, flat and ugly, your defenses shattered and you had nothing left but the memory of a man walking blindly backward and folding like a gutted wheat sack into the dust. And of a girl saying quietly, "Damn you, Tom Cullough!" It was a word in which you could crawl around and lose yourself and all the things you had loved—the tang of winter and the smell of spring and the conscious joy of being young and alive. Murder!

"I guess I know how you feel, kid," the sheriff said. "Felt that way once myself. . . . Judge Turner set bond at five thousand dollars. Dunno why—bail ain't customary in a homicide case, but he's the Territorial judge and it's up to him. Anyhow, it's paid."

Young Cullough stared. "Paid? Who the hell would pay it? Wait! You—you s'pose maybe dad—"

"No, kid." Old Johnny shook his head. "Ain't seen your daddy around all day, and anyhow I doubt if he could lay hands on five thousand ready dollars. Be damned if I know who paid 'er, son, but if I was you I'd enjoy the air while I could. 'Less we can find some friendly witnesses fast, looks like it'll be the last fresh air you'll get for a spell. You better get goin'."

THE stairway was an outside one that angled along the side wall of the Gazette building to an upstairs door bearing the legend:

SMALL CATTLEMEN'S POOL

J. J. Swalley, Rep.

Young Cullough knuckled the door open and breasted into a roomful of blue cigar smoke. He tightened his eyes and said without affection, "Hello, boys."

Charlie Geller, the Mason ramrod, teetered his barrel body on the edge of a chair and let his thumbs curl into his cartridge belt. His eyes were wicked under the lazy droop of his lids. Long John Macklin, Swalley's segundo, spread legs that were as stiff and thin as a heron's and made a narrow shadow against the blinds. Swalley himself sat like a demi-god behind his redwood desk, his hands in plain sight and his eyes looking unconcerned.

"Hello, Cullough," he said casually. "Kinda figured you'd drop in or I'd have sent one of the boys over after you. Time

you and I had a little talk, *no es verdad?*”

“Yeah. By the way, Geller, my hardware is still at the sheriff’s office and it’d look kinda funny if you put lead in me here . . . I want to know who got dad drunk last night—and why. It happened too pat to be an accident. It happened too damned pat.”

Swalley received this thoughtfully, his eyes flat and still. “Seems that way to me, too,” he said. “But your old man ain’t in the habit of drinking with us, Cullough, so you brought your question to the wrong place. Anything else?”

The kid crossed the room and leveled his palms on the desk-top. “There’s something kinda funny about me being bailed out of the juzgado. I tried to get the answer from the court clerk, and he referred me to you. Well?”

“Nothing mysterious about it,” Swalley said around his cigar. “Turner fixed bail at my request, and I put up the five thousand.”

Cullough smiled thinly.

“I could show you the proof of it in my books,” Swalley said, “if I cared a good damn whether you believed me or not. There’s lynch-talk in the air, Cullough. Johnny Coe thinks I put it there, but he’s a doddering old man who ought to’ve lost his star years ago. I can’t afford to have a lynching chalked up against the Pool, and if a strong man blew on that calaboose it’d go to pieces like a mud-wasp’s nest. So I bailed you out.”

The kid’s lips held their skeptical smile. “If that was true, it’d mean one of two things. Which are you aiming to do—plant something else on me while I’m loose, or have me rimrocked to keep me from telling my story in court?”

Swalley’s laughter was a deep, rich sound in which Macklin and Geller joined heartily. “Who’d bother,” said Swalley, “to plant anything more on a man charged with murdering a deputy sheriff while being arrested for stealing other men’s cattle? And who—” his eye-corners wrinkled with the same easy laughter—“would want to rimrock a man that a jury will hang on the first verdict?”

“That,” young Tom Cullough said, “Sounds almost like you were inviting me to skip my bond and cost you five thousand dollars.”

“You can read it any way you want to,” Swalley said flatly. “If I was you, though, I’d read it aboard a bronc pointed somewhere else ‘nowhere contiguous to this neighborhood,’ as the fella says.”

They were still laughing at this witticism when young Cullough turned and sauntered out, his eyes thoughtful.

He hired a sorrel saddle pony at Fry’s and rode west toward the long blue shadows already flowing down through spill-gates in the hills. The puzzle clung to his mind like a burr, fretting him intolerably. He could not believe that Jay Swalley would hate to see his neck in a sling, and yet the man had tacitly urged him to jump bail. It was a development that gave the whole situation a crazy-quilt aspect, ragged and badly confused.

He had spent much of the night pondering Swalley’s motives, and for the most part they seemed to be clear. The rustling, young Cullough reckoned, was only one phase of a scheme extravagant in its scope. With that as a starting-point, the little outfits would be egged onto the bigger ones until bloodshed and bankruptcy followed in one-two sequence. Then Swalley would pick up the pieces and weld them into private empire. It had been done elsewhere by men wide in the britches and thin in the conscience. It could be done here.

The kid let his thoughts run out. From behind him came the sound of hoofbeats. He swung in the saddle and saw a dust pennon drifting toward him down the yellow-streaked wagon road. Young Cullough reined into the haunch of a cowbacked hill and waited for the rider to draw abreast.

It was Virginia Mason, pale and small, astride a buckskin. The sun gave its last fire to her hair, but there was no light in her eyes. They looked at each other across a deepening silence, and it seemed to Cullough that she had never been lovelier than at this moment.

He was the first to speak. “I guess there’s not much a man can say, Ginny. Except that I wish to God it hadn’t happened. What are we fighting for? This basin used to be big enough for all of us, and now it ain’t big enough for any two of us.”

He watched the girl’s fingers tighten on the pommel of her saddle, and he sensed that she was finding it difficult to speak the right words.

They came at last, flatly, lifelessly.

“I—I followed you out of town because I wanted to talk to you. I was with Ben when he died.”

He waited.

SHE looked at her clenched fingers and said dismally, "He told me the truth before he passed away. I don't think he was mixed up in any of this rustling—our herds have been shrinking like everyone else's—but—but that was a frame-up. And a death-trap. He'd been gambling with Swalley and Macklin and Geller—losing thousands of dollars to them. Swalley promised to give back his I.O.U.'s if he'd help with the frame-up. . . . I—I think Ben really believed you were guilty of rustling, though."

Young Cullough said softly, "Why are you telling me this?"

Her eyes lifted, and they were direct and gallant. "I loved Ben. Good or bad, he was my brother and I loved him. But a man has the right to protect his life, even against my—my brother."

His throat ached with a sudden tight pain. "Not many girls would be big enough to figure it that way, I guess. Does Swalley know you've found out about this?"

"No. When I went to him for the money, I only said that I was afraid the crowd would get out of hand and—and lynch you. I told him I wouldn't want anything like that to—"

"The money?" He bent forward in the saddle, his eyes narrowed.

"Why, yes." She studied him with a faint surprise. "I asked Judge Turner to set bail for you, and Swalley put up the money. There was so much talk of lynching, and I thought it was—the least I could do after

accusing you of murder in public. I wouldn't want—"

"You borrowed that money from Swalley?" His voice was level and hard.

"I know it sounds like a crazy thing to do. But—well, who else has any money? I borrowed it from Swalley—yes. And I put the ranch in escrow to him until one hour after your case comes up tomorrow."

Cullough got the idea then. "In other words," he said, "you'd lose your outfit to Swalley if I happened to get spooky and get out of the country?"

She was staring at him now. "It's a Mason's fault you're in this trouble, and I guess you've got the right to run if you want to." Then, quietly: "Is that the way it's going to be?"

He backed the sorrel and reined it around. "No."

"Where—"

"I—thanks for what you've done, Ginny. It's—well, I reckon it's more than a man could ask for. . . . Go home and stay there, and don't let anybody else know what you've learned. I'm riding back."

She threw a question after him, but young Cullough heeled the pony to a canter and her voice was lost in the dust of his going.

The long violent shadows ran ahead of him as he rode, and he found Solana town caught in sultry gloom that pressed all sounds to a muted flatness. He skirted Main Street and swung into the lee of the squat



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little jail building, where twin panes of light squared off at the dark. Old Johnny Coe still sat in the cluttered pigeonhole that served as his office, cogitating there under a Rochester lamp.

The kid told his story.

Old Johnny bonged the brass cuspidor with a hawker and then began to burrow in his desk. He took out the kid's cartridge belt, broke open the loading-gate of the Colt, and jacked fresh lead into the empty chamber.

"Never heard of an accused murderer reppin' for the law, Tom," he rasped. "But I hereby swear you in as deputy sheriff of this county."

Young Cullough adjusted the belt to his flat hips and tested the slide of the Colt. He said with a quiet satisfaction, "You mean we're having it out with 'em now?"

"Pronto as possible," Johnny Coe said, and put his boot to the panel. "I reckon maybe it shoulda been done a whole lot sooner, but I ain't as young as I used—"

It happened with a dreamlike suddenness. The crack of a gun sliced across his words, and the bullet made a brief, steely whine like somebody tightening an E-string. Old Johnny Coe sagged slowly and easily to the floor, as one who lies down to rest at the end of a long, hard day.

YOUNG Cullough was in the doorway before the last echo of that shot pinched out into silence. Not caring that the Rochester lamp back-lighted him there as it had back-lighted old Johnny Coe, he spread his legs and let his gray eyes roam through the darkness. The Colt was ready in his hand, and within him was passion tempered to that same lethal calm he had known the evening before. Johnny Coe was dead, a bullet in his heart. Tom Cullough had seen that in the endless, unreal moment when the old man was sinking gently to the floor of the office.

He waited there, deliberately making a target of himself. The street ran parallel to the side wall of the building, no more than a dusty footpath cut through the deep umbrage of a cottonwood motte. Its shadows concealed all movement and its dust muffled all sound, but the kid's gaze leveled on something that might just possibly be a face staring around the bole of a tree. The Cold slapped hard in young Cullough's palm

and he knew instantly his lead had contacted human flesh. It warmed him.

Somebody cried out in a thin, choked voice. Answering gunfire smashed in the flat darkness of the grove, and Cullough felt the quick, ghostly tug of a bullet at his left shirtsleeve. He vaulted the low stoop and leaned into the solid buck of the Colt, laying his fire across the vacuum where the face had been.

A single retort cracked back at him from the grove, and its flare gave substance to a tall slice of running shadow. Then the shadow had veered sidewise into the banked trees, and bootheels beat out an eager rhythm muted by the alley wall of the Chinaman's place.

Cullough lowered his gun and swore graphically, knowing that the bushwhacker had escaped him, with nothing more than a bullet-singe to set him apart from other men. But for purposes of identification, that might be enough.

He had no time to dwell on the thought. To his right, the silence walled in by Solana's main thoroughfare broken suddenly apart. Doors slammed open, shouts merged confusedly and hoofbeats made a dusty rataplan downstreet. A man's voice reached out of powerful lungs to declare authoritatively that the shooting had been over yonder near the jailhouse.

The young cattleman reckoned all this up and found that the sum was immediate danger. There was no law in the basin now, and any man could interpret and dispense justice. Already accused of slow-elking beef and murdering a deputy sheriff, Cullough would now be charged with shooting old Johnny Coe for some reason best known to himself.

For one uncertain moment he hesitated, knowing the tug of a loyalty that almost swung him away from caution. Old Johnny had gone down siding the Culloughs, and the Culloughs would be living on borrowed air until Jay Swalley's bunch had paid off for that. But there would be later opportunities to exact reprisals. Right now he was one man against a small army, and logic told him he had better fill these parts with his immediate absence.

He moved, Indian-wise, along the wall of the jail and cut from the corner to the hitching-post, where his sorrel loafed in slackhipped indifference. Aboard the pony, he

dug heels to her ribs and pointed her at a long, reaching gallop into the buckbrush westerly of those cottonwoods. He had swung wide of the town and was back on the wagon road when gunfire made a floating speck of racket behind him, obviously directed at some imaginary target. They had found old Johnny's body, but it was doubtful that they had seen either Cullough's entrance or departure.

For the moment, at least, he was safe. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Sixgun Sidewinder

BILLY MILO sat alone in the pine-walled living-room of the Halved Circle ranchhouse, apparently engrossed in the thin trail of smoke from a cigarette. He looked up when Tom came in. "Heard somebody pourin' hoof-thunder," Billy Milo said, "and I figured maybe it was you. Some one break you out of that fleatrap jail?"

"In a way," young Cullough said, and sketched the story in brief, bitter words. "Where the hell is dad?"

Billy Milo showed a close interest in the pattern of the age-thinned Navajo rug near his feet. "Your daddy wasn't home at all last night," he finally said. "Rode in this morning and had a couple drinks here—" Milo gestured toward a flat brown bottle on the table—"and then said something about not likin' store-bought liquor on account you can't hear the crude oil hit bottom in your belly. Rode away right after that, and I figure maybe he's soakin' up busthead 'shine over at Old Man Kintana's shack in Horse Heaven."

"He was drunk then?"

"He looked at his saddle nag," Milo said, "and asked me to cut it out of the cavvy."

The kid leaned against the fireplace and gave himself up to disillusionment so solid and complete that there was not room in him for anything else. He remembered stories of his father's past.

Young Cullough watched a tatter of smoke curl upward from the fat brown cigar-butt lying close to the fire-screen. His voice came flat and muffled. "Didn't see any light in the bunkhouse. Where are the boys?"

Milo said lazily, "Sent 'em to round up ladinos in that horned-over huisache country

northerly of here. Be there a spell, I reckon. Sent the chuckwagon along."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

There was silence then, a deep element under which ran a mutual wariness. Young Cullough felt the slatwise impact of Milo's glance, and heard the casual scrape of the bowie knife against the foreman's thumb-nail. The issue defined itself with hard clarity. Milo had seen Cullough's involuntary start when he had read the significance of that smoking sigar-butt.

The cigar didn't belong to Milo. It was just one of the made-to-order panatellas the kid had seen between Jay Swalley's lips that afternoon. It meant that he had interrupted the Pool man and the Halved Circle ramrod in a dark-of-the-moon conference. It explained Geller's place in the picture as well as Billy Milo's: the foremen of the two big spreads were paid to scatter their crews away from points where Swalley's raiders would strike. All this was written in the cigar smoke.

"Anything on your mind, kid?"

Young Cullough tilted a glance at the yellowed calendar above the fireplace, his muscles tense. "Why, yeah. I was wonderin' why cows always look so much different to an artist." He dropped hand to leather, moved sideways lightly and came around in a loose, supple turn.

Milo smiled cynically, not diverted by the stratagem. His wrist snapped downward and the bowie left his fingers in a wicked thin smear of light, cutting clean and sure across the flesh of young Cullough's left shoulder. The buckhorn handle quivered in the wall.

Tom Cullough swayed with the blinding pain of it. He rocked up against the wall and balanced himself there while his right hand fought to clear his gun.

Billy Milo got out of his chair, all his laziness dropping away. He moved with the lean, silken speed of a mountain cat. He laid the barrel of his six-shooter hard across the kid's right wrist, and young Cullough opened his fingers and gave up the Colt.

Jay Swalley stepped through the door, a gun in his hand. He said urgently, "Watch yourself, Billy! Don't kill him yet!" and a hungry shine fled from the foreman's eyes. He lifted the six-shooter again and planted its butt solidly alongside young Cullough's right temple.

The kid fell against the wall and sagged to the floor, his fingers searching for his gun.

Milo drawled. "You're hard to discourage, kid," and this time the downward swing of his arm brought darkness with it. . . .

THEY were talking quietly of murder when he opened his eyes. They were discussing it with the impersonal calm of men to whom murder is a simple matter of dollars and cents, a necessary means to an end.

"So you had one of the boys cut down old Johnny Coe," Milo said. "Ain't there liable to be a little trouble about that?"

Swalley said, "Not as much trouble as there might be had I let him live."

Their words carried dimly into the darkness where the kid lay helpless, spread-eagled against the bare slats of an old bunk that had been shoved into the fuel room for kindling-wood. It was a narrow room littered with many odds and ends, one of them the ancient Peacemaker with which Cullough senior had once sent three marauding Kiowas to a happier hunting ground. But the kid could not break the tough rawhide hogging-strings that bound his arms and legs to the posts. He could not even crowd a moan through the hard stricture of the bandanna knotted in his throat. He could only listen.

"All right, Jay," Billy Milo said. "What do you want me to do with the kid?"

"Take him up to the camp along about dawn. Have the boys keep him there for three or four days—long enough so his bail money will be forfeit—and then beef him and bring him down to Macklin, fresh-killed. The story will be that he forted up in a Halved Circle line camp and that Macklin trailed him there and shot it out with him." It seemed to Cullough that Swalley was smiling when he spoke again. "Macklin will be sheriff by then, I kind of think, and that ought to make him popular."

"Why wait till dawn?"

"Because," Swalley said, "the old man himself may drag in before then. And now that you've got your crew away it'd be a good time to get rid of both Culloughs—I want to buy in this outfit sooner than quick. Drunk or sober, don't take a chance with the old one. Shoot him down with his own gun if you can get your own hands on it. Leave it in his fingers so it'll look like he lost his nerve and blew his brains out while he was full of tanglefoot. That plain?"

"Plain as a lame mule's trail," the ramrod agreed mildly. "Still think you're crowding things a little, though, Jay."

"To hell with that," Swalley grated. "With the two big outfits under my iron, I'll fill this basin with battle-hands and play my game in the sunlight. I'll pick up the poverty spreads and shake the owners out of them like nits out of a horseblanket."

The voices retreated. A door closed over them and there was silence ruffled shortly by the fading roll of hoofbeats along the wagon road to Solana. Milo came into the house alone, whistling tunelessly through his teeth. A bottle chimed against glass. Then the hush came down again.

Tom wrestled his bonds with a futile desperation that opened the caked wound in his shoulder and wrung him dry of sweat. There were intervals of vagueness, long enduring, in which his muscles stayed at work without any conscious direction from his mind. The hall clock rolled out ten round, golden notes, juggled them smoothly on the quiet, and then let them drop into deeper quiet. It came to him that he had been here three hours, fighting ceaselessly at those rawhide thongs; and that not by any prodigy of effort could he warn old Tom Cullough of the death-trap set for him. It was too late now.

For Billy Milo's soft whistle had snapped off in mid-bar, and outside there was a jog of hoofs against the dry clay patio. Blind with liquor, childish and irresponsible, his father had come home to die.

"Noches, Bill," old Tom Cullough said. A chair creaked under his weight. "Where's all the boys?"

"Northerly," Milo drawled. "Roundin' up wild ones in the hujsaches . . . Have a drink, Tom. One last drink before you go to sleep."

"Don' mind," old Tom assured him. "Don' mind at all." The words ran together in a liquid slur. "Food for man or critter, I always say. Yuppee. Even knew a sidewinder that liked it once."

Glasses cliked. "Yeah?" Milo said.

It's coming now, young Cullough thought.

"Fac', Billy. This here sidewinder, now, he crawled into my line camp jus' plumb froze blue. Bein' awful lonesome and not hatin' snakes like some, I thawed 'm out with a spoonful o' busthead. Got to be good friends, we did. And, gen'l'men, hush!—

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you never seen anything that taken to liquor like that rattler."

"Yeah?" Milo said coldly.

"Fac', Billy," old man Cullough stuttered. "Yessir, he loved it jus' like me. Why, one day I come in an' that snake had pulled th' jug down off th' shelf an' busted it all over th' floor. Soaked up a week's supply of forty-rod whilst I was outside. An' this here sidewinder, now, he'd crawl into one corner an' rattle there, an' then he'd crawl into another corner an' rattle there. An' then—"

"And why was he doin' that, Tom?"

A flattened palm thwacked dusty jeans, and Tom Cullough's booming laugh rolled across the pause. "Had the whiskey horrors," he said, "an' that there snake was seein' men. . . . Yessir, that there snake was—"

There came a single blast of gunfire, abrupt and thunderous. The echoes dwindled slowly, chasing each other around the room. Metal thunked on the floor. Then someone sighed deep in his throat, and afterward there was the sound of a man's body sagging into the finality of death.

The kid thought: *Well, that was it. It's over now, and there was nothing in God's world I could do. . . .*

Then old Tom Cullough spoke in a flat, hard voice that had shed all trace of its alcoholic slur. "But I always watch a sidewinder's head, Billy, even when he's drinkin' my liquor. And especially if I know the sidewinder thinks I'm drunk. . . . Been kinda wonderin' about you for quite some time, Billy."

A sixgun scraped back into its sheath. The outer door slapped shut again, and hard on this sound there was a larrup of hoofs toward the broken hills. Young Cullough lay there, dumb and motionless.

Milo was dead, beaten to the draw. His father was alive and cold sober, riding north on some mysterious business of his own. And the kid was still in a tight. Nobody knew where to look for him—and Ginny Mason had bet her ranch he'd appear for the hearing tomorrow. . . .

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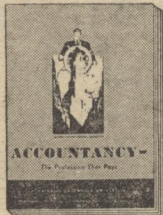
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tainty of a novice rider aboard a salty bronc. The present situation had him grabbing for leather, and something of his anxiety showed in his eyes as he faced Virginia Mason in his chamber.

He popped his knuckles and said fretfully, "This is most irregular, Virginia. Most. You have no right to come in here and attempt to influence my decision."

He got up and began to pace the floor, his robes swishing with a starchy dignity his round little body lacked. Virginia Mason looked at the clock.

"I'm not trying to influence your decision," she said levelly. "In the first place, you've never made one of your own—Jay Swalley seems to make them for you. I'm simply telling you that Tom Cullough has not jumped his bail. He—he wouldn't have done that."

"But it's almost eleven, Virginia! It's long past time for him to appear."

The girl's lips drew tight. She said uncompromisingly, "Then something has happened to him, and I have my own ideas as to who is responsible for that. Swalley! Are you going to go on playing his game for him?"

"I don't like your choice of words, Virginia. I don't like it at all," Turner said. "The whole thing was most irregular, and I'm sorry now that I ever fixed bond."

"You fixed bond for him," Ginny Mason said, "because Jay Swalley wanted you to. You'll declare the bond forfeit for the same reason—because you know Swalley wants my ranch. You'll appoint one of Swalley's men as sheriff, though you probably know damn well who was behind the murder of poor old Johnny Coe. You'll take his orders as long as you think he carries weight with the Territorial legislature." Then, bitterly: "You're not a judge—you're just a two-bit hand driving derrick-team for Swalley!"

Judge Turner said with a huffy severity, "You're overwrought, Miss Mason. Otherwise I should most certainly hold you in contempt of—"

"My contempt for your court," said Ginny Mason, "is exceeded only by my contempt for you."

She closed the door in his face and went out into the courtroom

Jay Swalley sat on the foremost of the raw pine benches, his square olive face tipped

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back with the conscious arrogance of one who has an ace in the hole and three on the oilcloth. Long John Macklin sat at his right, a slat-bodied man with a strip of court plaster tacked along his left cheekbone; Charlie Geller's squat bulk sagged the bench on his other side.

Behind these three, men whom they had come to accept as their champions, the middle-sized cattlemen and the starvation ranchers stirred restively and kept their eyes on the clock. They did not say much. They had left their women and children at home; and the courtroom in general lacked that carnival air it had worn on other occasions.

A spidery clerk called the court to order. Judge Alonzo Turner potted out of his cubicle, black skirts gossiping around his ankles, and looked faintly glum when none of the spectators rose to attention. He sat down and tapped peevisly with his gavel.

"This court is now in session," he said briskly. "There will be no demonstrations or loud noises of any kind, and I—h'm—I mean just that."

He made a toy teepee of his fingers and looked across it into the massed faces below. "Until the regular process of election has functioned, it is the court's duty to select a pro tem sheriff for this district. And I am—h'm—I am appointing in that capacity a man well known to you all. And one eminently qualified for the hazardous post—uh—vacated by the tragic death of Mr. Coe. The name of this man is John Macklin."

The ranchers applauded with a tepid enthusiasm, Turner's admonition forgotten. Long John Macklin pivoted toward them and made a stiff, jerky bow, as unsure of the proper formalities as Turner himself. The gavel racketed briefly.

Deep silence tailed the flurry. Judge Alonzo Turner lifted his water glass and took three dainty swallows, prolonging this interval before the headlong plunge into a decision.

"In the case of the Territory versus Thomas Cullough, junior. . . ."

Everybody waited.

"Under these rather extraordinary circumstances, the court reluctantly must conclude" He paused helplessly, lost in a malpais of verbiage. "Things being the way they are, it is this court's ruling that Sheriff John Macklin shall immediately dis-

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patch a posse in search of the defendant. And also that the bond established for said defendant—against my grave doubts as to the advisability of such a course, by the way—shall herewith be . . ."

He stopped again. A small adam's apple climbed out of the magisterial robes and slid back into hiding. Judge Turner straightened his round shoulders like a man who has shed some irksome weight, his eyes on the yonder door of the courtroom. "It is this court's pleasure," he said, "that the clerk immediately refund the bail on Thomas Cullough, junior, to the bondholder."

"Yeah," said Thomas Cullough, junior. "Here I am."

CHAPTER FOUR

Trial by Colt

HE LOOKED kind of tired, and was. A gray-green pallor underlay his tan, and the flesh of his face had shrunk close to the bone. Blood and dust matted his left shoulder. He ached. Of that man-breaking ride to town he could remember little, and still less could he remember of his interminable, semi-conscious fight with the strips of rawhide. The rawhide had not yielded but the old bunk had, and Billy Milo's bowie knife had done the rest.

He stood there, flat against the side wall of the courtroom, and let his right hand swing near the Colt he had chucked back into harness. Old Tom's Peacemaker.

"Don't figure this is any place for a girl, Ginny," he said, looking at her.

That comment broke the unbelieving hush that had come with him. Several of the ranchers made low, hostile noises in their throats. Jay Swalley's face shed its naked shock and tugged itself into a labored ease. Long John Macklin came to his feet and yawed around on them so that the platform rail braced his narrow body.

"As duly appointed pro tem sheriff of these parts, I hereby order you to surrender them guns!"

Young Cullough eyed the strip of court plaster across Macklin's cheekbone. He edged slowly along the wall and spoke through a sparse, unfriendly smile. "Don't hardly figure you're sheriff, Macklin."

The gavel banged. "Now, Tom," Judge

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Turner said plaintively, "let's—let's not have any trouble here. I just appointed Mr.—Mr. Macklin as—"

"Don't figure it was a legal appointment," young Cullough said. "Just before he was gulched last night, old Johnny Coe swore me in as deputy. That made me a kind of vice-sheriff, didn't it? Well, then, I'm sheriff now."

This brought a deep, down-bearing silence against which the clop of hoofbeats outside struck with a solid weight. "And just as soon as this hearing is over," young Cullough said flatly, "I aim to arrest John Macklin for the murder of Johnny Coe. Something tells me there's a bullet-crease under that court plaster. I put it there!"

In one smooth, concerted move, Swalley and Geller came to their feet. They ranged themselves against the railing on either side of Macklin, their gun-hands loose.

"That's a lie!" Macklin bawled. "Why, hell and dry powder, you're admitting you were there! You shot him yourself—"

The gavel chattered. Hanging desperately to the shreds of orderly process, Judge Turner wheedled, "Gentlemen—please! Mr.—Mr. Cullough, you are charged with the wanton and wilful murder of one Benjamin Mason, a deputy sheriff engaged in the performance of his legal duties. At this time you may enter a plea of guilty or not—"

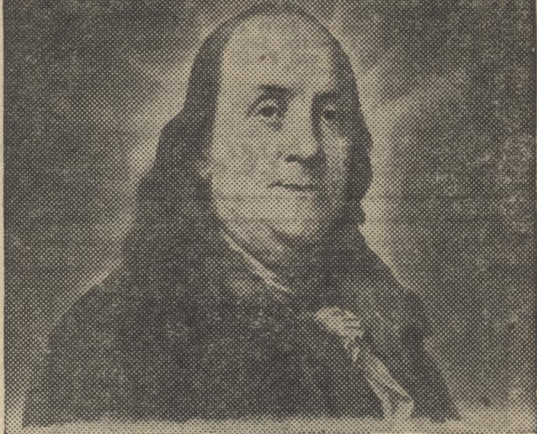
"Yeah," the kid said. His glance struck sideways, and in the hard-bitten faces to his right he read the confused run of their emotions—anger, surprise, uncertainty.

"I'm ready, judge," he said. "I'll have my say, and I'll be my own lawyer at this hearing. But my guns stay where they are, and I aim to stand right here with my back to the wall. I wouldn't want Macklin to grab for distance before I arrest him." His upper lip hardened against his teeth. "Try it, Swalley. Just try it. The three of you could get me easy at this range, but I wouldn't be the only one to die."

In the silence that followed this, Virginia Mason suddenly rose and swung around to face the courtroom. There was a stiff tension about her lips, but her voice rang clear and firm above the faltering peck of the gavel.

"There shouldn't be any hearing," she said. "Or any trial. Those hides were planted in Tom Cullough's wagon, and the whole thing was a deathtrap arranged by Swalley,

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Geller and—and my brother. Ben said so before he—died." Her chin lifted. "Why damn it all, you'd have guessed the truth if you had sense enough to pound sand in a rathole! Would anybody try to market slow-elk hides with a gossip like Dad McElroy."

Judge Turner put down his hammer, a moist and beaten little man. The three against the railing stood quite still, held there by the stiff shock of the unexpected. Below them, the silence sang.

It went on singing until old Tom Cullough thumped into the courtroom ahead of three Halved Circle riders, his thumbs hooked over the buckles of his belt.

"Gentlemen, hush!" said old Tom Cullough. "This looks like it might have growed up into quite a wingding."

NO ONE in that crowded courtroom was less prepared for his arrival than was young Cullough. The kid's swinging gun-arm stopped at his side like the pendulum of a run-down clock, and he was too much bemused to feel any emotion save that of surprise. He knew by now that old Tom's drunkenness was a guise assumed for the sole purpose of confounding his enemies, all of whom had heard those gray-haired yarns about Cullough senior's five-year whizzer. But his father's other doings had seemed pointless and pallid.

At this moment, Cullough senior had the look and the bearing of a man with some definite purpose. He stopped in the van of the tight little Halved Circle bunch and let a lank smile narrow his silver-gray eyes. Seeing that smile, the kid was sorry that Ginny Mason had elected to stay in the courtroom. He kind of figured there would be shooting.

"I've thrown a few man-sized drunks in my day," said old Tom Cullough, "but I guess I never had more of a time than I've had on the drunk I didn't throw."

Swalley held that stony silence, dazed as a man whose aces have suddenly broken out with spots. Long John Macklin, sheriff pro tem, had the peaked look of a sand-pouched steer.

Old Tom went on, aiming his words directly at Jay Swalley. "Billy Milo died last night, Jay. Before he died, though, he told me he'd sent my boys over on the north range. So I headed north and rounded 'em up, and we

KING OF THE POVERTY POOL

got to the south range in time to ketch some of your boys makin' a nice little gather. Milo bein' a Judas-hand, like Charlie Geller there, I sort of figured it might work out that way."

Swalley was trying desperately to regain his poise. "Speak your piece, old man. Comin' from a cow-thief that's stripped this basin naked, I don't reckon it'll mean a hell of a lot."

Old Tom said through his hard grin, "It'll mean a lot of hell when I've spoke it. So the boys and me, we just sort of dragged along behind to see where our critters was goin'. They wound up in a canyon corral near Horse Heaven that nothin' but a hawk with four eyes could ever have spotted, and then the riders shucked up close to there for a game of cards. It was what you might call a bob-tailed game. One of 'em swapped his left eye for a bullet-hole, but the other three decided to jump when we said frog."

Jay Swalley stood quite still, hands flat against his thighs. "It ain't such a new idea, Cullough. Other cow-thieves have rigged a glory play like that when they figured they were caught with the goods. You found any men there, it was because you knew where to look for your own hands."

Old Tom Cullough took three forward steps, slow and measured. "Hell of it is, Jay, they claim they're your hands. Claim you been doin' a hard-dollar business in wet beef just across the line. . . . Want to talk to 'em about that, Jay? Some of the boys have got 'em corked up in Tommy's old cell."

The thing broke open then. Though the crowd had been ready enough to believe old Tom Cullough a cow-thief, no one could believe him the kind of gambler who would make a play like this without the cards to back it. Reaching absentmindedly for the gun he'd shed in the corridor, one of the ranchers snapped to his feet and bawled five bitter words at Jay Swalley. It was the cue.

OILED by a common impulse, Swalley and his men went to work like the parts of a machine. Their hands slapped down empty and came up full, and father and son unleathered at the same time, and throughout the courtroom there was the tardy bustle of men taking to cover. Gunfire rolled.

The Culloughs were outnumbered three-to-two. Old Tom stood dead center in the

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gap between the benches, and it was a gap so narrow that none of his hands could side him now. Seeing their advantage, the Swalley bunch played it fast and smooth. Macklin and Geller poured noise at old Tom, and Jay Swalley sawed around on his heels to shoot at the kid.

Young Cullough got under that shot, hearing it splinter the well behind him.

As in most such impromptu gun-duels, the first volley had been only a wild preliminary to actual bloodshed. Old Tom stood erect and unscathed, his business hand swinging up for more of the same. But young Cullough had reckoned the odds against him and had seen at once that they would have to be evened not later than now. The old man was bucking a brace, and the next turn of the cards would probably cost him his life.

Young Cullough got into the scant protection of a beam and steadied his iron. Swalley's first shot plucked at the timber and then went away with a high, disappointed whine. Ignoring that, the kid threw down on Long John Macklin. The Colt pushed hard at the heel of his palm, and smoke curled thinly away from the muzzle, and through its drift he saw Johnny Coe's murderer straighten to a lank and rigid attention. Then he fell.

This was a development that broke the smooth timing of the play and tricked Charlie Geller into fatal recklessness. His glance hit sideways at Macklin's still body, and his wild shot chewed at the rafters high overhead. As calm and unhurried as a man playing checkers, old Tom buried a bullet between his eyes.

Meanwhile, the kid was having a little trouble with Jay Swalley. In that halved second when no gun was on him, Swalley had made his choice between fight and flight. He got under the railing and cleared the platform in three broad jumps.

The kid brought up the drag, remembering how old Johnny Coe had looked with the stamp of death upon him. Swalley's bootheels ticked briskly along the corridor and turned him left into the judge's private pigeonhole. A rusty bolt sang into its slot. Young Cullough's two quick shots tore it screaming out of the panel, and he followed Swalley in.

Jay Swalley sat on his heels in the open window, one story above Solana's main street,

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KING OF THE POVERTY POOL

his ivory-butted .44 at the ready, his eyes glassy with emotion. The gun threw thunder from his hand. Young Cullough came out of his crouch and fired only once.

Jay Swalley went backward out of the window and jackknifed across the balcony railing below. The drag of his heels took him away from there, and young Cullough reached the window-sill in time to see him collapse in the thick yellow dust of the street. He lay quite still, measuring himself off six feet of the country he had hoped to throw a bigger fence around.

Back in the courtroom, the two Culloughs grinned at each other across the startled faces of men who had been their enemies and were now their friends. Tom met Ginny in the street.

They met in the shadow of the steep staircase, and for a moment silence and constraint lay between them. Then young Cullough said, "I just wanted to thank you for well . . .

Her eyes left his and went to the knife-slash in his shoulder. "You ought to see Doc Hooker about that," she said quietly.

"Yeah." He fumbled with the brim of his hat and hunted around for words. "It's over now, Ginny. There'll be peace in the basin with Swalley gone, and it ought to be a nice neighborly place to live in again. But I reckon a—a war is never over for the ones that lost somebody in it." He looked directly into her eyes.

A shadow crossed her face. "I—I lied to you yesterday, Tom. Out of pride, I guess. Dad left the ranch in my name because he was afraid Ben would gamble it away. And Ben—Ben was mixed up in the rustling. He admitted to me that he'd been helping the bunch rob his own outfit.

"I—I guess he wasn't much of a brother, Tom," she finished weakly.

"Oh," young Cullough said. Then, slowly: "But even so, Ginny, if a man got mixed up in a gun-fight with a girl's brother, and—and a thing like that happened—well, I don't s'pose it'd do him much good to be crazy about the girl, would it? What I mean is, I guess it would take a whole lot of man to make her forget that he—that he—"

She smiled gently. "We won't talk about that for a while, Tom. But in the meantime I want you to know that I think you're a—a whole lot of man!"

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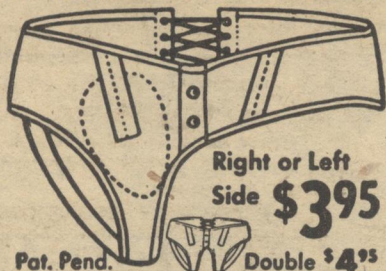
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 28)

when they came, he was standing sullen and aloof at a little distance from her.

Waring hit dust and took his wife into his arms as the other men swarmed by on the trail of the hard-running drovers. He was murmuring to her, giving her all of a man's awkward but earnest sympathy and reassurance, but over her shoulder he caught the boy's molten eyes.

The boy said with a choke he could not hide, "Well, there she is, safe and sound, Mr. Waring! I knew he'd be back, not for you and not for me, but for her for making a fool of him—but you wouldn't let me tell you!"

His lips compressed and he looked down at the carnage he had brought upon the man who had wrought so much sorrow. "See, I couldn't go wasting time on range and stuff, when I had to make and learn to use that whip," he muttered.

He gave a sudden weary, unhappy shrug of his thin, bony shoulders and turned toward his jenny. "Well, I ain't got nothing to leave for all the vittles I done et on you, but I won't eat no more. I'll be moving along now, Mr. Waring."

"Come here, boy," Waring growled huskily. "And let the king of this range eat humble pie for a better man than he is!"

The boy stopped but he didn't turn.

"Roger," the woman's voice called gently to him. "Don't let pride make you stubborn blind as he is! Come over here and give your hand to your . . ." She paused and looked at her husband's face.

"To your—well, from now on, to your pa!" she blurted.

The boy turned then and gave them both a look they would never forget—a boy's broken heart and mangled spirit mending.

He tried, but he couldn't reach them before he dropped. That twenty-four foot whip was a pretty wearing snake to handle. And now that Waring thought of it, it might have been something beside poor hunger that held the boy down on vittles.

He ran over and lifted the frail, wornout body in his arms, and he turned a face that was wet and unabashed at his tears and said thickly to his wife, "You smelled the breed, Abby, and you were right! He'll be a son to be proud of—a son with the guts of a ranglord!"

IF THE BADGE FITS—

(Continued from page 53)

wide and Charley saw the flat killer look in them. Kim Hardy was staring at Trig Peters with an awful concentration, seeing nobody else in the room. Val Grossman lifted his pistol, then lowered it helplessly.

"Trig!" Kim Hardy said flatly. "I aim to kill you. You lost Janet for me and I'll kill you for that. Pick up your gun!"

Charley yelled, "Kim! You're wearin' a lawman's badge!"

The flat look in Kim Hardy's eyes seemed to melt. "That's right, Charley. I'm a lawman, ain't I?" He looked more than a little dazed. "I guess I learned my lesson when I kilt Johnny McCloy." A haggard look came into his face. "I reckon a sheriff ought to take his prisoners alive. That's right, ain't it, Charley? Trig, you're under arrest for murder."

Trig Peters said, "And Janet's still gonna think you're a murderer!"

Sweat popped out on the back of Charley's wrinkled neck. "Don't believe him, Kim! Godalmighty! After the trial she'll know the truth. Johnny killed Marsh Walker and then resisted arrest!"

Kim Hardy took a short backward step, staring uncertainly at Charley. Trig Peters snatched up his gun and fired, and Kim looked down at his bleeding fingers and empty gun hand. Then another gun thundered and Trig Peters clutched wildly at his shoulder.

Val Grossman stared down at the smoking pistol in his hand. He whispered brokenly, "From now on play it any way you want. Kim, take his gun. I owed him plenty, but the interest on any debt has to end some place"

With Charley's help, Kim Hardy got the prisoner into a cell. Charley unpinning the deputy's badge fastened to his shirt. He was through now with being a lawman—through for good.

His judgment had proved correct. Kim Hardy was a good sheriff now, tempered so that he would think before he shot. And Janet—well, she would go ahead and marry Kim. She wouldn't let a mistake ruin her life the way it had hurt her ma's.

Charley grinned and said: "Godalmighty! It was quite a chore, Kim, buildin' you up to fit that badge!"



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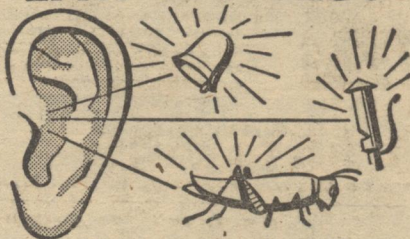
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 67)

stand there grinning at me like a schoolboy. Where is this asset?"

For an answer, the boy left his position in front of the fire place, and walked out of the room. He entered a bedroom, and emerged, precisely two second later, with one long arm draped around Jennie Haldana. "Right here, Uncle Lars," he said quietly.

The crowd tittered. Old Man Larsen's head jerked with sudden impatience.

"This is my wife, Uncle Lars. My greatest asset."

Nobody moved, nobody spoke as the boy stood there with his arm proudly draped around Jennie Haldana. Slowly, every pair of eyes in the crowd turned full onto Old Man Larsen, and he hastily swallowed. "You and Jennie are married? But—"

"Last night, Uncle Lars. I've had the devil's own time to convince her; the good ones are spunky to take to the harness without a lot of convincing. We got married in her house the night I was in to see you about a piece of pink ribbon. That was for Jennie to wear in her hair. Parson Keyney said the words for us, and promised to keep our little secret."

"Well . . ." Old Man Larsen said, and looking at the girl, rehearsing what he knew about her, he was bound to admit Ralph had done mighty handily for himself. She'd be first rate on a ranch and stick by through the hard times, if he read the clean, strong lines of her mouth and chin right. *Just like my Hilda stood by*, he thought, marveling a little at the clarity of Ralph's perception in describing the girl, his new bride, as his greatest asset.

"You figured on this all along, boy," he said strangely, and the boy nodded at him.

The crowd looked expectantly at Old Man Larsen, as the boy and the girl did.

"You win, boy," said Old Man Larsen.

A great shout went up at that, and the crowd milled around the happy young couple to congratulate them. Old Man Larsen watched the scene with misgivings. Carl wasn't going to understand about this. Carl was all work and hew to the line, without Ralph's quality of imagination.

"Like me," Old Man Larsen thought, a trifle sadly. "All the years I put in with Hilda, and never once thought of her that way." ***

OLD OUTLAWS NEVER DIE. . . .

(Continued from page 80)

Two-Gun Jack Keller grinned. "I'm running a hotel and bar at Beaver Creek," he said. "My name down there is John B. Wilkins. Drop in and have a feed, boys."

"And if you're over in Ozonia, Arizona, head for the L-7 spread. I run it," spoke up Bill Charters. "Biggest outfit in the northern part of the state. 'There'll always be a grand welcome for you boys."

"Say, Tamarack," said Clayt Gannet then, "are you going to be able to locate Sally Kirkland? She ought to write Johnny a letter, too."

And again Tamarack laughed. "Yes, I'll locate Sally," he said. "And she'll write that letter—a good one, too. If she doesn't, she won't get that new coat she's been asking me to get her. You see, I married Sally Kirkland."

Until late that night the four old ex-owlhooters sat around the fire, talking.

For a long time then nobody spoke. Finally, Keller said, "None of you fellers needed to risk anything but a few dollars to help Johnny out. Any one of you could have given him the money to pay those people. Why the hell didn't you— instead of taking such chances?"

"Shucks, that wouldn't have done a speck of good," Tamarack Jones replied. "Johnny had the notion that he, himself, must do this bit toward squaring what he thought was an account we owed. It had to be done his way, even if he is probably a little loco."

"But you took such a hell of a chance—you might have been killed."

"What of it!" barked Clayt Gannet. "Johnny's happy, isn't he?"

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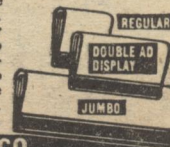


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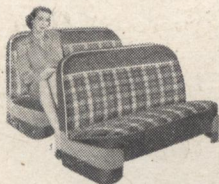
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