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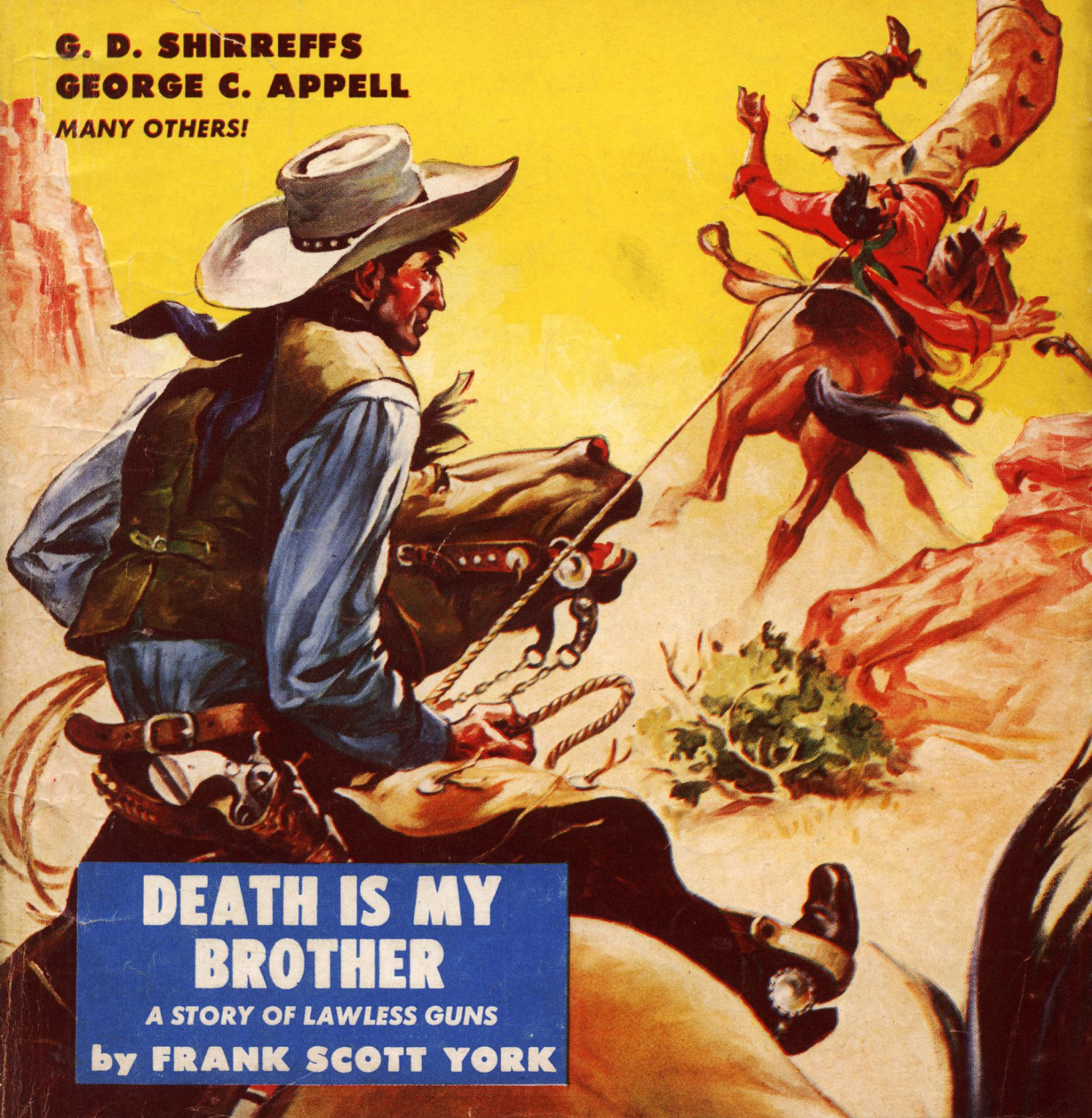
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I'll Put a "Shoe Store Business" in Your Pocket!

SHOE BUSINESS



You Don't Invest a Cent!
I Furnish Everything FREE!

Want to have lots of money in your pocket—always? Then rush the coupon below and start toward your own business. In many ways it's better than a retail store of your own! I plan to give it to you absolutely FREE. You don't invest a penny now or ever! Be in this highly profitable business QUICK.

HERE'S WHY IT'S BETTER!

As the Mason Shoe Counselor handling the quick-selling line of this 50-year old, million-dollar company you have a limitless market, because everybody wears shoes. Start by selling to relatives, friends, neighbors. That will prove the fine quality leathers—superb craftsmanship—money-saving value—and unequalled comfort-fit! Then branch out on a big scale.

It's easy to fit folks in the exact style they want—no need to substitute—you draw on our huge stock of over 200,000 pairs plus daily production.

Sales build up from friend to friend quickly, like a snowball. Recommendations, repeat orders and new customers build you a big income in a surprisingly short time. No wonder some of our top Shoe Counselors make from \$5 to \$10 every hour they spend taking orders!

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

People demand nationally advertised Mason Shoes because of their exclusive comfort features, up-to-the-minute styling. Foamy-soft exclusive Velvet-Eez Air Cushion innersole makes walking a real pleasure—like "walking on air!" Ten-second demonstration lets customer actually feel air cushion, brings quick sales!

These splendid shoes bear famous Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal.



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**BIG, STEADY PROFITS
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That's right! You have all the advantages of a profitable shoe store business without the expenses of rent, light, heat, etc. You are independent and invest nothing but your time. Your generous profit is ALL YOURS! No wonder Mason men are making more money than ever before. Even if you start in spare time, you will soon want to devote full time to this steady, repeat-order big-income business!

**No Experience Needed ...
Make Money First Hour!**

You need no experience to make money right away. Some men have made up to 20 sales their first day. You feature 160 styles of smart dress shoes; casual sport shoes, and practical work and service shoes for men and women, boots and fine leather jackets, too.

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SEND NOW!

I have a powerful Selling Outfit I'm going to send you absolutely FREE as soon as I receive your coupon. This outfit includes actual 10-second demonstrator, famous Automatic Selling Plan, and features exclusive Velvet-Eez Air-Cushion shoes, fine jackets—other fast-selling specialties. To take advantage of this opportunity of your life, rush me the coupon below NOW! You'll be glad you did!



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Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Please put a "Shoe Store Business" in my pocket by rushing FREE and postpaid your Powerful Selling Outfit—so I can start making Big Money my very first hour!

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Broadcast Engineer at WLPM
"I am Broadcast Engineer at WLPM. Another technician and I have opened a Radio-Television service shop in our spare time."—J. H. Bangley, Jr., Suffolk, Va.

Video Control Engineer
"My position with WNBT is video control engineer on the RCA color project. I owe a lot of my success to your textbooks."—Warren Deem, Malverne, N. Y.



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MARCH, 1954

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Dane York used silence as his weapon until massacre and a merciless sun demanded stronger testimony!
2. **RIDE THE WILD TRAIL**.....*Walt Coburn* 82
Before his father's lonely grave young Dan Wyeth swore: "Live fast Duke Harbison, for you won't live long."
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Action-Filled Short Stories

3. **DEATH IS MY BROTHER**.....*Frank Scott York* 14
Death could ride on the bullets of the posse that followed Thacher—or from the killer's guns of the man beside him!
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Bullets were Ed Gilcher's business and he reaped his bloody profits alone—until he gambled his life and profits on the guns of a faster man!
5. **SIX-GUNS SAY DIE!**.....*A. Kenneth Brent* 30
Satan was Ard Crandall's pard—until Clay Evers' guns screamed with revenge and aimed at hell!
6. **THE PREACHER TAKES A GUN**.....*Richard Ferber* 38
Bal Kincaid spoke with gunfire—until blood tempted the preacher's son—and a .44 cried Amen!
7. **RACE THE FIERCE WIND!**.....*Charley Niehuis* 51
The only way the flames of revenge could be quenched in Buckman's heart was by his son's death—or his own!
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THE PROSPECTOR

By VIC SHAW

Mr. Shaw is a well-known authority in the fields of mining and mineralogy, with nearly a half-century of practical prospecting behind him, and with numerous published works, as well as a lifetime of service as consultant on pertinent matters to his credit.

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES is both pleased and proud to add him to its roster of regular contributors—and hopes the additional service Mr. Shaw enables us to perform for our readers will result in profit to all concerned—in funds, fun and health!

Mr. Shaw will answer all queries gratis—simply enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with your letter. Address all queries to *FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES*, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

JUDGING BY inquiries received for some time by this department, most readers interested in mining want to hunt for gold deposits, especially pay gravels in placer form. They say they've always wanted to do this, but for various reasons have had to postpone the venture until now. They admit they are amateurs and want the know-how to discover a fortune.

Unfortunately, they're thinking of placer gold as it used to be many years ago, unaware that the situation has changed. Fact is gold placers always were the first hunted in all mining districts, since only a few cheap tools were needed to dig pay-gold from those numerous shallow gravels. But that went on for over a hundred years, so that today the finding of even a small pocket is difficult.

The value of gold itself has been changed. At first its price was raised from the standard \$20.67 a Troy ounce, to \$35.00 for the pure refined metal, where it remains fixed. Meanwhile costs of materials, labor, freights and transportation have increased severely.

There is no free market for gold now in the United States. That is, not only is private possession illegal, but a miner must sell to a U. S. Mint or a U. S. Assay Office, at our fixed price, which for some time has been far below that of all foreign countries.

Search for other ores and the reward for success may prove better than in the case of gold ores. Due to the ominous international situation, a new fast-growing prospecting field has recently opened, which will take care of all who tackle it and then some. It may not be generally realized,

but there are certain ores we don't produce and many others in which our production doesn't meet our demand.

Also in recent years the ore reserves of many mines have become exhausted, or nearly so, like the iron in the Mesabi Range. And on top of this, new inventions have created a need for a greater production of certain ores. Take the jet-plane. We had no metal with a high enough heat resistance until research men came up with a new alloy of cobalt and steel.

A partial list of strategic ores and minerals in short supply includes tungsten, nickel, copper, chromite, molybdenum, cobalt, tin, lead, antimony, cinnabar, the ore of mercury corundum bismuth, beryllium, lithium, fluorite, graphite, platinum, palladium iridium, sulphur talc, asbestos, mica, and optical quartz. Luckily, some new discoveries of manganese and aluminum about meet present demands.

But for the rest of the list, the fact is our imports in some cases are high enough to imperil national security if these vital supply sources are cut off.

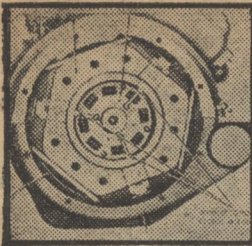
The effect of all this on metal prices is shown by ores of tungsten. Most of our imports came from China and Korea which were cut off by the recent "police-action." Price jumped from its former \$18 a unit (20 lbs.), to \$73 a unit almost over night. Also mercury prices jumped from \$78 a flask as of September, 1950, to \$220 a flask in February, 1951.

It is hardly necessary to point out that fulminate of mercury detonates all weapons using ordinary explosives, and if we had no cinnabar and could import none, we couldn't make war at all. Similarly, if we had no manganese all our steel mills would shut down.

This brief outline is given to explain our need for new deposits of these scarce ores with a lot more prospectors to find them. Most of them are known to exist in our unexplored public lands, and a big demand and high prices give a better chance than gold hunting. But note that this isn't a pastime hobby, but a business, and to be successful its methods and other essentials must be studied to gain competence in picking favorable fields, avoiding those that are barren.

However, the prospector really interested will find study not too tough, lengthy nor too hard to understand. Books covering necessary fundamentals are simple, non-technical, and easy to grasp in a relatively short time. One is the sight recognition of all the chief igneous host-rocks, in which the various ores and minerals are known to occur. Also there is the ability to identify the ores and minerals by their variable coloration, texture, structure, relative hardness by Mohs scale, their streak and/or type of crystallization.

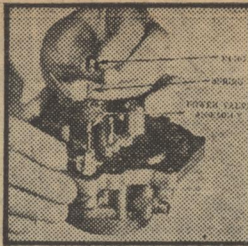
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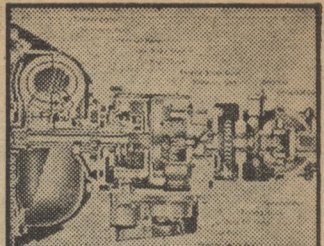
Out-away diagrams make every operation easy. Above — Ford clutch.



Diagrams, tables and text take the "mystery" out of all ignition systems.

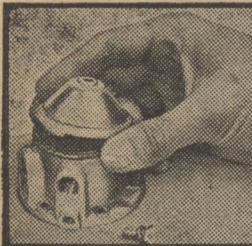


You get illustrated repair procedures for all types of carburetors.

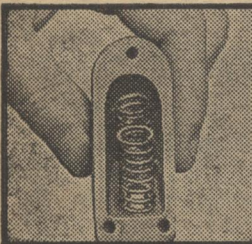


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CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 58)

SO YOU think you know something about cowpokes and the rangeland in general, eh? Then, pardner, lock horns with the twenty Western quiz questions listed below. Flip your rope over sixteen or more of them and you rate "excellent." Answer fourteen or fifteen and you're good. But fail to answer thirteen or more, and you're crowding in with the shorthorns. Good Luck.

1. True or false? The familiar rodeo cry, "Give him air!" is generally heard when a cowpoke has been thrown from his horse and other punchers crowd around him.

2. True or false? A "half-rigged saddle" may be said to have a triangle of leather fastened on for a seat.

3. When might a puncher be said to be in a "horn tossing mood"?

4. True or false? In the slangue of the Westerner, a "horseman" is one who is skilled in horsemanship.

5. True or false? "Ladinos" are outlaw cattle of the brush country.

6. Under what circumstances is a cowpoke said to be suffering from "lead poisoning"?

7. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "mail-order catalog on foot," which of the following items should you return with? A dressed up dude? A horse that has been heavily weighted down with ornaments? A school marm newly in from the East?

8. "Morral" is the Spanish word for which of the following items? A food bag for horses? An annoying form of cactus? A soldier?

9. True or false? The "outrider" is likely to be commissioned to ride anywhere in following out his duty to keep an eye on his employer's interests.

10. True or false? The rodeo "pickup man" has the duty of picking up the horse of a contestant after the ride is over.

11. What is the meaning of the cowpoke slang expression, "put the loop on"?

12. True or false? "Rawhide lumber" is a cowpoke term for unfinished slabs with the bark left on.

13. If the ranch boss sent you out for some "red disturbance," which of the following should you return with? A communist? Some whiskey? A red flag used to frighten livestock animals?

14. True or false? A "rosadero" is a sort of leather shield sewed to the back of the stirrup leather.

15. "Round-pen" is the slang expression for which of the following? A corral? Bunkhouse? Ranch house kitchen?

16. True or false? "Shorthorn" is a cowpoke slang term for tenderfoot.

17. True or false? Slip shooting is generally more accurate than fanning.

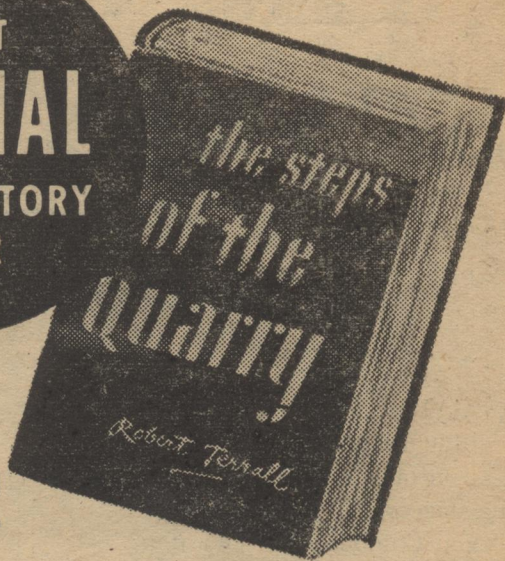
18. What is the meaning of the cowpoke slang term, "smoke wagon"?

19. In the slangue of the Westerner, a "sloper" is what sort of person?

20. True or false? In the old West, some camp cooks slept with their sourdough kegs as a possible means of hastening dough fermentation.



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THE GAMBLER STAKES HIS LIFE

By LAWRENCE JONES

A GAMBLER made friends, of course. But he made enemies, too. One of these enemies once accosted Gambling Bill on a stagecoach.

"You Gamblin' Bill Thornton?"

"I am, sir, and at your pleasure."

The man pulled out a knife. California sunlight glistened on the long blade. "You fleeced my brother out of his dust, man. I say you're crooked."

"Don't fight in here," a woman pleaded. "If you want to fight, go outside—don't endanger our lives!"

"Stop the stage, driver," Gambling Bill hollered.

The driver skidded his four horses to a stop, brake slapping down. Gambling Bill and the irate miner tumbled from the stage. The miner planted the knife in between two of Gambling Bill's ribs. Gambling Bill planted a pistol ball in the miner's shoulder. The fight left the miner. They loaded him on the stage and somebody pulled the knife out of Gambling Bill.

"He takes little matters rather seriously," the gambler said.

Despite his apparent disregard for his wound, Gambling Bill had a tough time with the knife wound—infection set in and almost claimed his life. But within a few months he was back at his old shell game again. Grinning, smiling, bowing—always the gentleman, always the well-dressed, courteous man of the world.

Sometimes he felt sorry for his "custom-

ers." After winning the poke of some man he would hand back his dust with the extraction of a promise that the victim would never gamble again.

"You can't beat a professional gambler," he would admonish. "If these games lost us money, we would not be operating them. Occasionally a sucker will win more than he loses, but this is the exception—not the rule. Never gamble, son."

Once he had his table set up along a street of a gold-mad town. He won two yokes of oxen from a man. Then, seeing the man's wife in tears, he gave back the oxen, first extracting the promise that the man would never again gamble.

The couple rolled away, oxen back in their possession. And the dark eyes of Gambling Bill Thornton followed them.

"A wonderful woman," he said, "but a weak man. Well, I made them happy." He turned to a miner. "Mister, six ounces of dust against one ounce of your dust that you can't name the shell that hides the pea."

Again, he was a gambler.

"There's a big strike over across the mountains in Nevady," a miner said. "Carson Valley way. Lots of gold, gamblin' man."

So, over the Sierras went Gambling Bill Thornton. Up the west slope, over Donner Pass, down into Nevada. There he ran into trouble. There they put him in a wagon, ran the wagon under an oak, and there they hanged him.

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CATTLE CASH

By

BESS RITTER

IF MODERN American cattlemen think their taxes are too high, let them be consoled, if possible, by the following. Around 1700 Spanish ranchers in New Mexico and Texas were required to pay to the viceroy a local tax of one out of every five heifers, a tax of ten per cent on all cattle sold, a tax of about four dollars per year for every ranchhand and two dollars for every house servant.

Additionally the crown received another ten per cent of one's "estimated" revenue plus a fixed tax of about three-fourths of a cent for every vara, about one square yard, of ground owned or rented, thus collecting twice on rented ground.

In parts of New Mexico there were also special taxes on every bull one owned, a tax on the number of rooms in one's house, a tax on wines, and a tax of about one dollar twenty per year for every animal owned.

There were also special taxes for such incidentals as marriages, births, and even funerals. Certain roads could be used only by paying a toll tax, and certain dwellings housing a particularized type of popular entertainment, then as now, could be built only upon payment of a lavish sum and entered by non-residents only if they owned a certain type of costly permit, renewable monthly.

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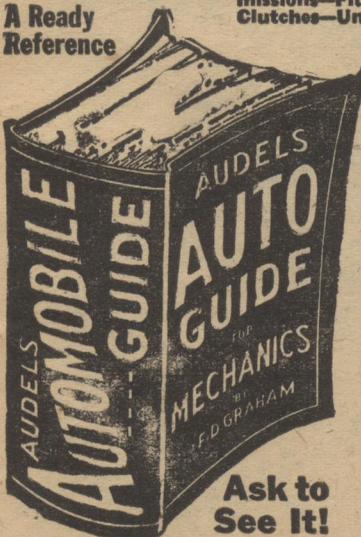
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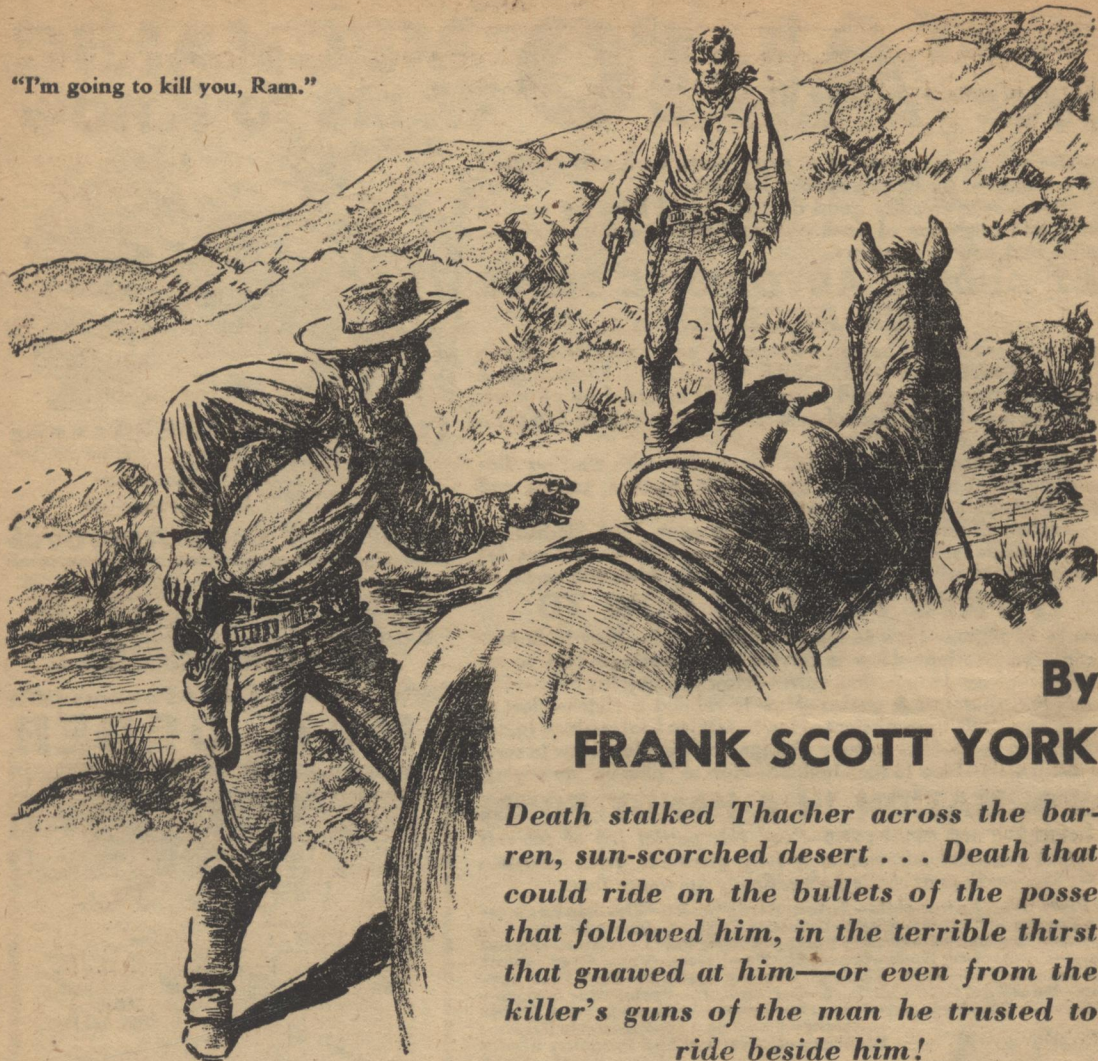
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"I'm going to kill you, Ram."



By

FRANK SCOTT YORK

Death stalked Thacher across the barren, sun-scorched desert . . . Death that could ride on the bullets of the posse that followed him, in the terrible thirst that gnawed at him—or even from the killer's guns of the man he trusted to ride beside him!

Death is my Brother

THE BROTHERS had ridden hard for days over the flat, burning prairie. Fear will shake a man of his appetite and he can go for days with an occasional handful of dried corn. He lives on his flesh, his fear and his fury.

But a man must have water. Thacher licked swollen lips with a heavy, wooden tongue.

"Ramsey," he croaked, the word burning his throat. "Ramsey, we got to have

water soon. The horses won't last beyond tonight and we'll be done tomorrow."

They were the first words since early morning when they'd climbed, stiff and weary from their bed of ground.

Ramsey turned in the saddle to face his younger brother. His powerful, dirt-creased face tightened under its scrub of whiskers.

"We go on," his voice rasped. "Whether we hit water or not, we go on. You understand, Thacher?"

DEATH IS MY BROTHER

"We can't even sweat anymore," Thacher said weakly. "Ain't no water to sweat or spit. I ain't never been this thirsty, Ram."

"I was," the older brother said. "Durin' the war I was. I'd have killed my best friend for a drink of water a few times when my canteen was dry."

The war again, Thacher thought wearily. He can't forget his medals and his war. Then he was angry with himself for the thought. Ram was his brother and brothers stuck together. Ram had always taken care of him and he still was.

"You think they'll catch up with us, Ram," he asked aloud.

"If they do we'll stand and fight," Ram said harshly. "We don't go back and hang. We fight."

Thacher's horse snorted and his pace faltered. His flanks, under Thacher's legs, were burning hot and stiff with dried lather. Thacher's hand automatically caressed the animal's straining neck. And he tried to remember the killing.

Because Thacher found it hard to believe—that other men hunted him as a killer. He'd considered himself a gentle man. Even now, with this terrible thirst he keenly felt the suffering of the horse beneath him.

But Ram said he had killed and Ram was taking him to safety.

I'm not a drinking man, Thacher thought angrily. Why did I get drunk? I've been loser before in poker games without seeking whiskey to make the losing easier. Why then did I get drunk and shoot Struthers when Ram caught him double dealing?

He knew the answer and it mocked him. Because you gambled away the wedding money, that's why. You felt good. You couldn't lose and you were going to add a little to the five hundred so you and Mary could start out with that nice piece of land down by the river.

Cursing savagely, he forced the image of Mary from his mind. He had lost her and

nothing would bring things back to where they were.

"Ram," he said suddenly. "You were sure, weren't you? I mean about Struthers' cheating? It's all so damned hazy because of the whiskey."

His brother's face twisted with anger. "Damn it, boy, will you stop askin' me? I've told you a hundred times what happened. He made his flush with a lady from the belly of the deck. I saw it plain. I called him, he threw the cards in my face and went for his gun. You shot him from under the table. You wanted to surrender to the sheriff and I dragged you out onto your horse. Can't you get it through your skull, Thacher?"

"I don't like to keep askin', Ram," Thacher frowned. "I know my gun killed him and I ain't even put a fresh cartridge in the cylinder to replace the bullet. But it happened so fast—and I was never so drunk, Ram."

The older brother chuckled and it was a dry rasp of sound. "You tellin' me! You was plumb crazy. I thought I'd have to flatten you to get you out of there."

"I wonder if Struthers had a family," Thacher said quietly, not realizing he'd spoken aloud.

Ramsey punched his thigh with irritation. "Boy, you rile me, damned if you don't. Who cares if he had a family? He was a tinhorn—not worth killin' but not worth livin'. You think too much—you always did. It's only you and me. You hear me? You and me. Nobody else in this whole rotten world matters. You die today and I'd bury you and you'd do the same for me. There'd be nobody to read words over either of us and nobody to care much if we died hard or easy."

"I know," Thacher said wearily. "You've said it all before, Ram. Only he was a man, Struthers was. I hope he died quick. I can't help it."

The sun beat down mercilessly, aiding the rising anger.

"I DON'T know why I bother with you, Thacher," Ramsey shouted, his neck thick with blood. "You allus had it easy. Too young to go to war and I don't recall you raisin' your hand in anger once, up to the other night. I don't know why I go to all this trouble. Hell, I could be back in town now, 'stead of babyin' you along, dyin' of thirst and waitin' for the posse to catch up."

"I know," Thacher whispered. "I'm sorry, Ram."

"Hit that damn horse," Ram ordered. "He's goin' in four directions at once."

"He's tired, Ram. And thirsty."

"Hit him! Hit him, I said. Damn it—do as I say!"

Thacher looked at his brother and saw the madness in his eye and knew that Ram meant it. He'd always obeyed Ram because Ram had been to war and he'd returned a hero. He was strong and he'd always given the orders. But hitting this poor damn horse . . .

"Ram," he said weakly. "Please—I don't want to . . ."

"You'll do it," Ramsey bawled furiously. "You'll do it or I'll turn around and go back. Don't face up to me, boy—you know I'll do what I say."

Thacher felt the hot tears in his eyes and hotter words on his lips. But after all, Ram was watching after him. He was just hot and thirsty and maybe a little out of his head with worry.

He leaned back, fighting the tears, and sharply slapped his horse's rump. The animal quivered tiredly and his gait steadied for a few yards. But he was tired close to not caring. Tired close to death.

"Hit him again," Ram ordered.

Thacher obeyed.

"Again."

Thacher lifted his arm but did not bring it down. Instead, he turned to Ramsey and said quietly, "No, Ram, I won't."

Ramsey started to speak sharply but something in the boy's face made him shrug

instead and face forward toward the flat horizon.

I never disobeyed him before, Thacher realized with surprise. *That was the first time.*

An hour before sundown, the horizon lost its flat, endless look. When Thacher spotted the first pucker and lift of rolling hill far in front of them, he snapped out of the listless, sun-dazed stupor that had cloaked the brothers for hours.

"Ram," he croaked. "You see that, ahead? Is it real?"

His brother's face had puffed and turned yellow-white. Thacher watched his eyes come to life exultantly in the tortured flesh.

"Yeah—yeah, kid, like I figgered—we'd be out of this by night."

"There's water there, Ram?"

"There's water."

Thacher began to laugh, weakly, with hysteria. "Water," he whispered finally. "I'm gonna float in it face down and let my whole body drink. I feel like every part of me has a dry throat."

"They expected to find our bones out here," Ramsey shouted, the cords in his neck standing out. "They knew we left without water and they probably laughed themselves sick thinkin' how we'd die out here."

"How far behind do you figger they are, Ram?"

"Makes no difference now—we've beat 'em. Once we hit the hill country, they'll never catch us. We'll be clean to California before they figger which way we headed."

Thacher nodded. Ram had done it. He'd saved their lives. He was still thinking of it when his horse gasped, faltered and went down.

Thacher jumped clear, rolled and hauled himself to his knees. Ramsey had already dismounted and was furiously kicking the fallen animal's belly, his face terrible with anger.

"Get up!" he screamed. "You damned bag of bones—get on your feet."

Thacher climbed to his feet and staggered to his brother.

"Ram," he said softly. "The horse is dead."

Ramsey turned on him. "You damned jinx—you drove him too hard—can't even tend a horse . . ." He began to babble and Thacher realized he was out of his head.

It frightened him. Ram was raving like a maniac, kicking again at the dead horse.

"Ram," he yelled desperately, "cut it out. What are we goin' to do?"

HE HEARD his own voice crying the question and for some reason it sickened him. *Always depending on Ram—if Ram can't give the orders, you give him the orders.*

"Ram," he soothed, "get on your horse. I'll walk."

His brother paused, blinked and began to laugh. "You'll walk? That's real great, that is—you'll walk! It's ten miles to those hills. How are you going to walk ten miles? You can hardly stand up."

"Get on your horse," Ramsey repeated quietly. "He can't carry two, or I'd get on with you. Ride ahead and when you reach water, wet yourself and the horse down good and come back for me. I'll be walkin'."

He knew it was the only possible solution but he found himself hoping Ram would tell him to go to hell and stick with him.

"You're crazy," Ram muttered, but he didn't look at Thacher and there was almost slyness in the set of his jaw.

"Do as I say," Thacher said shortly. "Don't stand around arguing in this heat."

"I guess you're right, at that." He climbed on his horse stiffly and looked straight ahead.

Thacher guessed his thoughts. "You don't have to come back at all if you don't want. I know that posse is behind us and this may give them the chance to catch up with us."

"I'll be back," Ram muttered hatefully.

Thacher watched his brother ride off and in that moment he grew up. *Why, he thought with amazement, Ram is scared crazy. He's been barkin' and bitin' at me all day because he's scared. Scared more than I am.*

The knowledge made him see Ram as others saw him, for the first time in his life. Watching his brother's figure receding in the distance, he thought about him coldly and realistically.

Ram had been in plenty of trouble. Jail once, for stealing a horse, and he bragged of plenty he'd gotten away with. He'd rode off to war and done fine but Ram was always braggin'. Had he done so well in the army? Or was the stories of big battles and skirmishes out of his head. Sure, he had a fistful of fancy ribbons and medals but that didn't prove anything.

And there was something else.

Everytime Ram had gotten in trouble—the time he got sick on bad whiskey and almost died—all those times, he'd come back to Thacher and the farm. Like a conquering hero, with stories of his deeds and how he'd made the world toe his mark.

Thacher started to walk unconsciously.

He lied, he realized sickly. Ram lied. He came back because I was the only person in the world who'd admire him and listen to him. Sure—sure, it was true. Even Mary had tried to tell him and he'd gotten mad. Nobody could say anything about Ram.

He didn't realize he spoke aloud. "Why, he's the weak one, and all the while I thought I needed him, he needed me."

The knowledge amazed and frightened him. He knew it was true. It had all been in Ram's face as he climbed on the horse and left him.

Would he come back?

Thacher's heart pounded and his legs carried him erratically. Heat from the ground was already starting to swell his ankles, and the hills—they were so far ahead. Ram was already out of sight.

If all I've been thinking is true, Ram won't come back! He'll be too scared to come back. Thacher's chest quivered from the quickened pounding of his heart.

"I'm heat-crazy," he sneered aloud. "Lord, the things a man thinks in all this emptiness." He lifted his head and shouted. "If that's true—if he's so much a coward, how come he ran off with me? How come he left everything just to come with me?"

Smiling now, he walked five more steps and the thought hit him with the power of a fist.

Maybe he came because he lied about how Struthers died.

Maybe it was Ram who'd killed Struthers. Because Ram had been sober; he didn't drink when he played poker, he had a terrible fear of being cheated. And they both had been cheated.

"I'm crazy," Thacher shouted, clutching his head with his hands. "Stop it—damn it, stop it."

But with each step, certainty grew and the voice in his head was mocking.

Ram had sat next to him. Thacher didn't remember drawing his gun. He remembered the gun being in his hand, yes, but after the shooting. It would have been easy for Ram to lift his gun under the cover of the table and shoot Struthers. Then push the gun into his hand.

But why?

BECAUSE Ram, even then, was afraid. It would be better if he, Thacher, thought he had done it. Then Thacher would run away with him. And be grateful, thinking Ram was doing it to save his neck!

"No," Thacher mumbled, "no . . ."

But the voice said, "Yes."

"He'll come back," he shouted. "Ram will come back for me!"

Thacher realized everything hinged on it . . . whether or not his brother came back for him.

The scorched, brown prairie lay vast and silent in front of him. His legs seemed boneless and his throat was as burning and dry as the earth. He stumbled on, eyes on the hills ahead.

The posse moved at a trot. Sheriff Randle, in the lead, uncapped his canteen and took a long thirsty swallow.

This, he thought, is what will beat them. Water. They'll be in agony now and by the time we catch up with them, they'd sell their souls for a swallow. He thought of the four full canteens in his saddlebag and took another swallow.

"Damn idiots," Malloy groaned, behind him. "They could have gone north, south or east. But, no, they had to follow the damned sun. Why do lawbreakers allus head west? That California must be quite a place."

"Because there ain't much chance of bein' caught once they hit the mountains," the sheriff replied. "Law hasn't reached that far yet. Leastways, not in number enough to count."

"You think we'll catch them soon, sheriff?"

"Yeah. I never heard of nobody crossin' this hell without water."

McCloud spoke up. "If anyone got across't with water, I'd be surprised."

"That Thacher," Malloy said sadly. "I don't understand what hit the boy. Him and Ramsey are as unlike as right and wrong. I don't mind Ram rope-dancin' but it won't set right with my stomach when Thacher swings."

"Maybe he won't," Sheriff Randle said thoughtfully. He could feel the men's eyes on his back and he smiled a little. The ride had been silent for the most part and he'd done a lot of thinking.

"He helped Ram escape, didn't he, Sheriff?" Malloy asked in amazement.

"Maybe. You saw the shootin', didn't you?"

"You know I did."

The sheriff turned to face him. "You told

me as the two of them left, Ram drew his gun and held everybody off."

"That's right, Sheriff."

"I can't figger it, then. If Ram shot Struther with his gun, how come he put it away to holster when he knew he'd have to maybe shoot his way out?"

Malloy blinked. "What have you got in mind, Lionel?"

"That maybe Ram borrowed Thacher's gun to do the killing. Thacher was dead drunk. He was next to his brother. They's a shot under the table and . . ."

"Wait!" Malloy shouted. "I think maybe you got somethin'! Right after the shot, Ramsey sort of leaned toward Thacher. He could have been handing him something. It might have been the gun. 'Cause Thacher had it in his hand when he stood up. He just looked down at it like he didn't know how it got there. Then Ram called him a crazy fool and started to push him to the batwings."

McCloud snorted his disbelief. "Ain't you overlookin' something, you two? How can you be sure Thacher didn't do the shooting?"

"I know that boy," the sheriff replied angrily. "I don't care what it looked like—I just know in my bones he's no killer."

"And I'm the witness to back you up, sheriff," Malloy grinned. "Because at the sound of the shot, Thacher was squeezin' his cards three inches away from his chest. He was so drunk, he couldn't see them any farther away than that."

"Ram killed Struthers," the sheriff nodded. "There was never any doubt in my mind of that. And I think the reason Thacher went with him was because he thought Ram was helpin' him to escape. That he done the shooting instead of Ram."

"That makes good sense," Malloy nodded.

"Yeah," McCloud admitted slowly. "I guess that poor kid got fooled again by Ram."

"I wonder if Thacher will be fooled

long," the sheriff muttered. "He's no fool. Maybe this will open his eyes."

"I know something that would," Malloy said. "I wonder if Thacher knows Ram grabbed hold of that two thousand dollar pot as he was backin' out? Three hundred of it was mine, too. Just leaned over the table and scooped it up like he'd won it."

Sheriff Randle wiped his steaming brow with a flicking motion of his fingers. He spoke so quietly the others didn't hear the words.

"I hope, for Thacher's sake he don't find out about the money—not till we catch up with them. Ram will kill him if he has to."

IT WAS almost sundown when the posse came upon the dead horse. Malloy spotted it, off to the left about a mile, and they rode hard for it, thinking the brothers would make their stand there.

But there was only the dead animal, already swelling in the slamming sun. They dismounted and stood around it silently.

"I don't believe one horse could carry both men—not after three days of no water," Sheriff Randle said finally.

"You think one is walkin'?" McCloud said softly. "Hell, maybe we got a chance then, after all. The hills are easy twelve miles away. . . ."

"Mount up," the sheriff ordered crisply. "I was about to think the brothers made it after all. This kind of changes it."

They galloped now, their eyes squinted and searching.

"Hurry," Sheriff Randle yelled. "Unless you want to chase them through another state." He loosened the guns on his thigh and sighed. *If Ram is on that last horse, he reflected sourly, we'll only catch up with the wrong brother. Because Ram is a coward first and a brother last. . . .*

He had long reached the point where he could not go any further. But still, his legs moved and when he fell, his arms pushed his body up again. Time didn't exist; he measured the life left in him only by the

fluttering, burning intake of each breath. His chest and stomach were a living bed of coals that turned each breath to fire.

Thacher's eyes moved unblinking in pools of blood and he licked at the blood on his cracked, swollen lips, grateful for even that moisture.

He had passed out once, back five miles, but the hate wouldn't let him die and he'd crawled, only barely conscious of it.

And hate got him back on his feet again.

Ram hadn't returned.

There'd been time enough for him to return, but he hadn't. And now, with the smell of trees, sage and water in his nostrils, he knew he had made it and he would get Ram.

Thacher tripped over a clump of green and he lay face down, chewing on the tough prairie grass for the little moisture it held.

Ahead of him, there was a gentle slope that gradually took on a cloak of vegetation near the crest. On the other side—maybe a foot, maybe a mile—there was water. He could feel it and smell it.

And somehow he also knew that Ram would be there. Because Ram would think him already dead, swelling in the sun, his tongue black and protruding. Ram would be there by the water, getting ready to ride on alone. His coward's heart already would have forgotten Thacher. Thacher had been the sacrifice necessary to get him across the prairie. Ram wouldn't have had the guts to try it alone.

Thacher nodded slowly. It was all true. If his horse hadn't died he might never have found it out. And he hated Ram and had to kill him.

He got to his feet and pulled the .44 from its holster. The butt was burning hot from the sun but he didn't even notice.

He climbed the slope.

And there, a hundred yards below, winding down from the next cragged foothill, was a narrow, tricky stream. It curled around the rocks in the ravine below.

Thacher's whole body quivered with eagerness and he had to fight the wild impulse to throw himself down the hill, wallow in the shallow, almost dried out stream.

Then he saw his brother, Ram, throwing the saddle over the horse. Below and off to the left, almost hidden in a screen of boulders.

Thacher watched him and forgot the water. Ram's body moved quickly now and his hair was still dripping from the stream.

While I was out there, Thacher thought, Ram was lying in the water, drinking till his gut couldn't hold any more, feeling the water all over his body, maybe laughing a little at being alive.

The horse snorted wearily and Thacher noted it too was glistening wet. He chuckled and the sound was a croak. Ram took better care of the horse than he did his brother.

Brother! The word brought bile to his mouth and he began to run down the slope, not caring if Ram saw him. His hand was a claw around the gun, an extension of himself and of his hate.

He was almost on Ram when the older man heard the slithering rocks and turned. His eyes widened and his mouth moved soundlessly. Thacher saw he was wearing his gun but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except killing Ram.

"Thacher," Ramsey shouted. "Thacher!"

HE STOPPED at the edge of the stream and the brothers faced each other, Thacher gaunt, weaving, terrible to look at in his rage.

"I was comin' back," Ramsey shouted. "Don't look at me like that—I was comin' back."

"Liar," Thacher croaked.

"I was—damn it, I was." Some of the old bravado appeared in Ramsey's face. "Don't tell me I wasn't, boy—you know I don't take backtalk."

"I'm going to kill you, Ram."

"You're crazy—god, look at you!" Ram's voice lifted. "All right—I thought

you were dead. Maybe you are dead . . .” His words hissed and revealed Ram for the true snake that he had always been.

Panting, Thacher put the gun back to holster. “Draw, Ram.” He’d meant to shoot him down, but found, even now, he couldn’t. “You killed Struthers, Ram. You, not me.”

“You’re crazy!”

“No—you did.”

And they weren’t brothers anymore. Ramsey’s face tightened and the eyes went cold.

“All right, Thach, what if I did! Don’t call me, boy. I’ll kill you. You can’t outdraw me and you know it.”

“Draw, Ram.”

“Listen, I’ll give you one chance. In the saddlebag—go look. Money, Thach, a couple of thousand. We can split it and go on to California.”

“Where did it come from, Ram?” Thacher whispered, knowing the answer only too well.

“I took it from the table, you damned fool! I was set to blow town any way. The shootin’ made it necessary and the money made it easy.”

“Ram—I think you killed Struthers just for the money. It was the other way around. The money made it necessary and the shootin’ made it easy. Especially with me thinkin’ I did it.”

In the long silence that followed, Thacher thought he was going to pass out. The sound of the water at his feet was almost too much to bear.

“Draw, Ramsey,” he screamed, his throat tearing. “I’ll kill you any way.” He meant business.

“You fool,” Ramsey said contemptuously. “You think you scare me? Why didn’t you die out there? You think I’d let you live so you could shoot off that honest mouth of yours, now that you know?” His eyes blazed.

Thacher watched his brother’s eyes and saw the decision. Both men went for their

guns at the same instant. Both were crazed with violent emotion.

Ram was faster, much faster. He’d known guns all his life and there were few men that could outdraw him. His brother was not one of them.

But the enemy, the sun, saved Thacher. He saw Ramsey’s face twist with pain and shock as the fiery-hot butt came in contact with hands. It didn’t prevent him from drawing, but it slowed him. The long, scorching day and its sun had made the gun-metal almost unbearable to the touch of the finger.

Thacher felt nothing except the hate. He emptied the gun and kept pulling the trigger long after the last bullet had slammed into Ram’s body.

Ramsey was on his back, his legs on the bank of the stream, his chest and head bobbing gently under the surface. The water turned orange, then crimson.

The face, under water, watched Thacher in amazed and frozen shock.

After a while, Thacher moved slowly up stream and drank. He drank for a long time and then he rolled into the water and drank more. He couldn’t hold it, but he drank anyway until it stayed down. He didn’t look at Ramsey once. He was a man now and on his own. Deep down, there would be a scar but it would go away. Ramsey had never existed—not the Ramsey that he thought had been his brother, his one-time friend.

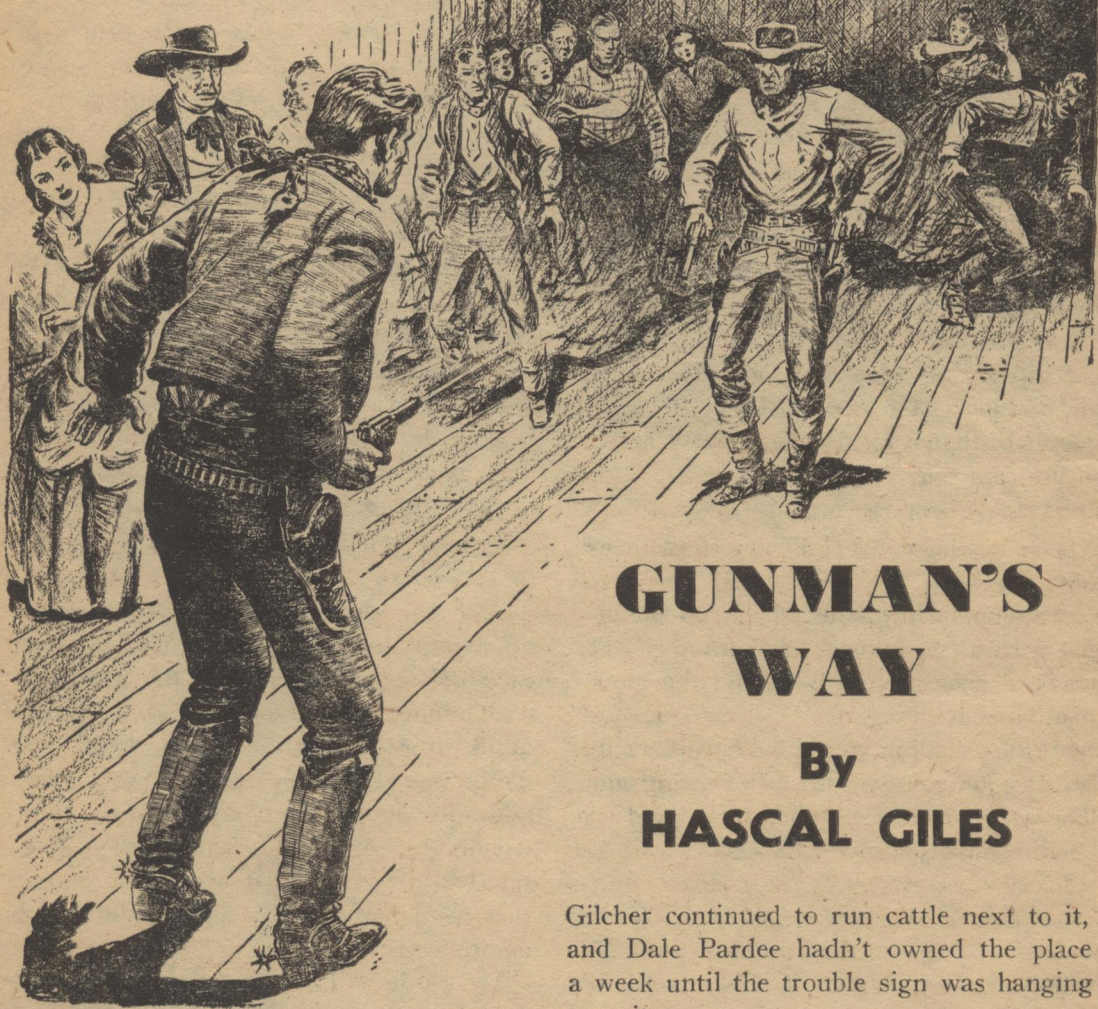
He was a man now and there was Mary.

He was thinking of Mary when he heard the hoofbeats from beyond the hill. He returned to reality.

He sat up in the stream and waited for the posse to appear. When he saw the sheriff in the lead top the rise and pull his horse to a stop, he waved.

The sheriff looked down for a long minute. He saw the body in the water, the color of the water near it. Then he looked at Thacher’s face. He waved back and started down the slope.

"By God, it's true! He's quicker 'n quicksand."



GUNMAN'S WAY

By
HASCAL GILES

Bullets were Ed Gilcher's business and he reaped his bloody profits alone—until he gambled his profits and his life on the guns of a faster man!

EVERYBODY ON the Singletree range said there'd never be any man big enough to hold down the piece of graze along Kildeer Creek as long as Ed

Gilcher continued to run cattle next to it, and Dale Pardee hadn't owned the place a week until the trouble sign was hanging over it.

Pardee, a quiet, unobtrusive man in his mid-twenties, had come in one day about dusk, and nobody had paid him much attention while he bought supplies at Jim Burke's General Store. But when he showed up on Saturday night for the weekly dance at Stacy's barn, folks began to realize he wasn't just another stranger passing through.

Appropriately, it was Ed Gilcher who

was the first to learn what Pardee was doing in Singletree. At the same time, Ed began to suspect what had brought the man to the quiet little Panhandle cowtown. The dance at Stacy's barn seldom got started until Ed Gilcher arrived, and this wasn't altogether out of respect to Ed, even though he was Singletree's most influential citizen. But the rancher usually escorted his daughter to the dance, and nobody risked selecting a partner until he'd exhausted his chances with Marie Gilcher.

While the fiddles were warming up inside and the women were fussing around a table piled high with sandwiches, most of the cowhands and town loafers were lounging around outside the doorway smoking and passing an occasional bottle of whiskey. Dale Pardee stood among them, yet apart from them, talking little while he ran his sky-blue eyes frequently down the dusty street toward the open range.

Soon somebody said, "Here comes Gilcher's rig now." Pardee threw down his cigarette and ran his thumbs along his sagging gunbelt as though he were trying to steady a quivering stomach.

Talk died among the cowhands as Gilcher halted his prancing blacks in front of the barn, handed the reins to a waiting hostler, and then reached up a thick hand for the slende blonde girl with him.

There was a rustle of crinoline and white silk as Marie Gilcher swung lightly to the ground. Her golden hair gleamed like a star which had suddenly fallen among them. The rancher waved the men aside, tucked Marie's arm beneath his own and prepared to make his grand entrance.

And then Marie Gilcher saw Dale Pardee. He had not moved out with the others. He had merely taken one step to the right so that the light from the lanterns inside could strike his face. A deep-throated gasp of wonder and surprise came from Marie, and suddenly she had pulled away from her father's arm, leaving him standing open-mouthed.

After reaching him, she seemed at a loss for words and somewhat embarrassed by her impulsiveness. She grasped Pardee's hand silently and smiled into his face.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, ma'am. I took your advice and I—"

Pardee's words broke off as Ed Gilcher loomed before him. Gilcher eased Marie toward him and waited for an explanation.

For a moment Marie's wide gray eyes expressed her doubts. Then she said, "Father, this is Dale Pardee. I met him last summer while I was visiting Aunt Martha in El Paso."

Gilcher's face turned the color of scorched leather, as he moved in front of his daughter.

"You're not Pardee the gunny, are you mister?" His usual booming voice was a threatening whisper.

Pardee's black brush jacket swelled with his sharp intake of breath and he tugged irritably at the wide brim of his black hat.

"Not a gunny, Gilcher. A trouble-shooter for the Southern Pacific and a guard on some gold shipments where I had to shoot fast to keep the vultures from picking the bones of honest, hard-working folks I respect."

"Put any brand you want on it," Gilcher sapped, "and you still ain't the kind of man I want my daughter sashaying around with."

"After I met Marie I didn't want to be that kind any more either," Pardee added mildly. "I hired out my gun because it got me a hundred a month. Punching cows used to get me forty. I never could have saved enough money to buy my own place that way."

A scornful grin broke through Ed Gilcher's tight mouth. "So now you're a cowman?"

Pardee nodded. "I bought the old Double O place on Kildeer Creek."

Telling Ed Gilcher this was like belting him in the belly when he wasn't looking. He raised a knotted fist toward Dale Par-

dee, held it quivering there a moment, and then gazed at his daughter, suspecting her of conspiracy.

"You go on inside, honey," Gilcher said. Marie quickly obeyed the polite order. Pardee's steady glance did not erase the fear from her face as she entered the barn.

AFTER HIS daughter had left, Gilcher's steely eyes swung once around the circle of cowhands who were beginning to sense the tension between the two men at the door. The onlookers drifted inside as abruptly as if Gilcher had herded them with a whip.

Gilcher fastened his eyes on Pardee's face. "Most likely Marie told you a youngster with a lot of guts and gall could pick up the Double O for a song and make a go of it. Last two years since her Ma passed on it seems she gets a lot of amusement out of tormenting me. But she ought to have told you to ask Jeff Lansing a few questions before you took a deed to it. Lansing just pulled out and left the place a couple years back."

"Lansing didn't need to tell me much," said Pardee, with a newly acquired hardness in his voice. "His shoulder's still stiff from the slug you put in it. Maybe you can swell your chest out a little bigger when you know his nerve is gone and he's satisfied to run a saddle shop in El Paso. He told me the two gents who owned the place before him are still carrying the scars of your lead. I've heard that the sheriff doesn't even ask questions in cases like that because you can change sheriffs just by saying you don't like him. You're a big man, Gilcher."

The sting of Pardee's sarcasm caused Gilcher to lower his head briefly, but as he looked up he appeared to have a grip on his anger. Yet he said, stubbornly, "The last three men on the Double O didn't last a week, Pardee. You'd better think that over."

"Why, Gilcher? What makes you think

you've got to boss graze that don't belong to you?"

Gilcher's eyes narrowed. "You'll hear I'm piggish, Pardee. I'm not. It's the others. My Anchor graze ends fifty feet short of Kildeer Creek. Three men at Double O have built fences on my side of the creek. They said they were afraid I'd crowd my cattle onto their range and take it over. I've torn that fence down three times and there's always been some lead-sliding afterwards. But I can't graze my cattle on one side of my range and have them walk ten miles across to the next water hole. I'm not a killer, Pardee. But I believe there's some things that have to be shared by neighbors in a big country."

A dry chuckle came from Dale Pardee's lips. With his head turned toward the door, he sneered, "You never shared anything with anybody, Gilcher."

"No," Gilcher admitted guiltily, "I reckon I haven't. But nobody ever let me do a favor. Everybody's afraid I'm trying to take something away from him, so little folks walk around me with their hackles up."

Pardee shot the man a level gaze. "I'm not afraid of you, Gilcher."

"You ought to be," Gilcher said. The muscles of his thick neck corded as the anger in him renewed. "You've got more reason than anybody. When you start to string up the wire my men have cut off that fence along the creek you'll—"

"I can't do that, Gilcher," Pardee cut in quietly. "One of the first things I did when I moved into the shack up there a few days ago was pull down the poles." He ran his hand along the worn butt of his six-gun for the first time since Gilcher's arrival. "I don't need a fence to keep Anchor cows off my spread, Gilcher. I'm leaving that job up to you."

THE SCRAPE of the fiddles and the thump of dancing feet were loud in the stillness which surrounded Pardee's words.

For several seconds Gilcher's eyes bored into Pardee's face. His glance shifted to the wooden handle of the gun which had made Pardee a legend along the border. Then the hard lines of Ed Gilcher's face relaxed and a strange unreadable smile softened his mouth.

Finally, he said, "How well do you know my daughter, Pardee?"

"I saw her several times when she was visiting her aunt. She didn't tell me everything about the Double O, but it didn't matter. Nothing could have kept me away from Singletree, Gilcher, and nothing can make me leave."

Ed Gilcher pursed his lips and rocked on his toes a few times. He toyed with the diamond stickpin in his tie. "You must have piled up a sizeable bankroll then."

Pardee shook his head. "Just enough to buy the Double O. When I paid off Jeff Lansing it cleaned me out."

"Then how do you figure to build a cattle spread. Marie's seen too much success to hang on to a failure."

"I'll take odd jobs," Pardee said firmly. "I'll break horses, fork hay at the livery or swamp for saloon. I'll buy a cow when I can, Gilcher, but I'll build me a ranch here."

"I'm thinking you might do all you say you will," he grunted, almost to himself. "Yessir, I believe you'd give it an honest try."

Seeing the change in the man, Dale Pardee chewed thoughtfully on the corner of his lower lip. He started to walk away, hesitating as Ed Gilcher continued to nod his head gravely.

"What does all that mean, Gilcher?" Pardee asked suspiciously.

"It means," Gilcher said slowly, "that I'll be seeing you in the morning about day-break."

Before Pardee could question him further, Gilcher strode past him into the barn. Pardee followed him, his deep-tanned face going pale as he studied Gilcher's retreat-

ing back. He felt the soft touch of a hand on his arm and turned to find Marie smiling at him. He rubbed his forefinger playfully over the worry lines that blemished her wide forehead and returned her smile.

"Your old man and I understand each other now," he said, feasting on the quick joy his words brought to her eyes. But as he slipped his arms about her and took up the step of the Chicken Reel, he found Ed Gilcher's eyes following him. Pardee wished he could believe his own lie.

As the dance went on, he did not talk with Marie as much as he would have liked. Couples stopped them frequently to make introductions. The cowboys who had waited outside had heard enough to start everyone buzzing, and before the evening was over Pardee was the object of many glances. They knew about Dale Pardee. They'd heard talk of him from grubline riders and passing drummers. They wanted to be able to say they'd shaken his hand and got a close look at his black-butted gun. The coldness with which Pardee greeted such attention did not discourage them. At last he pulled Marie toward a side door.

"Let's get outside," he said uncomfortably. "I want to see if I'm still an ordinary two-legged man."

Marie squeezed his hand in hers and said teasingly, "I thought you'd never find an excuse, Dale."

"You mean you're as sick of this as I am?"

"I mean it's been a long time since you've kissed me," she whispered softly, and Pardee's face reddened as he lengthened his stride.

Pardee's haste was in vain. He'd just started to step through the open doorway, welcoming the coolness of the night air against his face, when a tight, commanding voice lashed out with an order. "Pull up there, Pardee, and let's talk over an old score."

Pardee dropped Marie's arm and turned swiftly. "I'm Pete Decker, up from the Pecos," the man said, and braced his legs and waited as though the whole matter were explained.

Decker was tall and thin-limbed. His ragged levis had turned a motley gray from the caliche dust picked up in miles of travel. His hands were bony and long-fingered. They twitched nervously while they hovered above the outthrust butts of two ivory-handled Colt .45s. Around him the dancers were as still as desert dunes. A shadow-laced aisle opened between him and Pardee.

"I don't know you, Decker," Pardee said evenly. "I've got no quarrel with you. Why don't you help yourself to some grub and join the shindig?"

Decker's lips pulled back to allow a bleak smile to break through the dark stubble on his hawk face.

"They know you along the Pecos, bucko. Before I was sent up to the pen in Seventy-nine I was knowed as the fastest thing on the river. When I busted out a while back some told me you was faster. I didn't believe them so I come to find out." Decker paused, flexing his poised hands. "I'm ready when you are, Pardee."

Pardee shook his head slowly from side to side, as though to shake the picture from his mind. His glance touched Marie's bewildered face and she took a step toward him, asking, "What is it, Dale? What does he want?"

"Nothing," Pardee said sharply. "Walk on outside, Marie, and wait for me."

"If you'll tell me why he's here."

"He wants to kill me," Pardee said savagely. "Now do what I tell you, Marie."

"But why, Dale? What have you done to him? What's—"

There was a stir in the crowd, and Pardee saw Ed Gilcher's hulking form out of the corner of his eye. He heard the rancher's gruff voice explaining, "Because Pardee's a gunman, honey. There'll always

be men hunting him, jealous men who want the name Pardee's got. The only way Pardee can get rid of them is to let one of them kill him, and then it'll start all over again with the killer."

"But—but that's so cruel! Dale doesn't want to—"

PETE DECKER'S nerves couldn't stand any more. The movement caused by Gilcher's interruption had made him jump, but he knew if he turned his head he'd lose an advantage. He screamed, "Grab it!" and Pardee almost welcomed the moment.

As Pete Decker yelled, his bony hands plunged toward his oiled holsters. Nobody knew when Pardee first moved, but it was some time after Decker got his own guns free. A single shot echoed through the high loft of the barn and Pete Decker's dead hands could not lift the guns he'd drawn. Decker spun half-around, twisting his legs grotesquely, and then fell heavily on the planked floor.

For a long time no one moved or spoke. A man finally said in an awed whisper, "By God, what I read in the papers wasn't no lie. Pardee's quicker'n quicksand."

Pardee looked hesitantly at Ed Gilcher and said lamely, "I saw a reward dodger on Decker a while back. He shot a guard in the back when he broke out of Huntsville, and he had a lot of notches on his guns before that."

The disapproval on Gilcher's face was as plain as a brand, and he pretended not to hear Pardee's words. But Marie heard them, and she sensed the agony which had caused them to be spoken. She pulled away from her father and ran into Dale Pardee's arms. Her words were so loud it seemed she wanted everyone to hear her. "I love you so much, Dale! I love you even more because everyone else is afraid."

Ed Gilcher came up to them slowly and

gently put his hand on Marie's shoulder. He looked like a man who had lost an exhausting struggle.

"We'd better get back to Anchor now, honey." He took Marie's arm and looked at Pardee from expressionless eyes. "I'll see you in the morning," he said.

Dale Pardee shot Ed Gilcher the next day shortly after sunup, and it was a long time before anyone got the straight of what happened.

It was mid-morning when Pardee came into Singletree with his big sorrel gelding carrying double. He sat far back on the cantle, his lean face lumpy and worried. Ed Gilcher was seated in front of him with most of his weight braced against Pardee's chest. The rancher's face was pale and drawn. He had a blood-stained neckerchief wrapped around his right arm-pit.

Pardee pulled to a halt in front of Doc Kelton's office and helped Gilcher to the ground. When they came outside twenty minutes later they conducted themselves like strangers. Gilcher's shirt was buttoned over his right arm, but a wad of white bandage was visible around the collar. He stepped onto the boardwalk and turned left toward the livery stable, ignoring Pardee.

But Sheriff Nate Butterworth had seen them arrive and he was waiting for them. He rose from the shade of the hotel awning next door and blocked Gilcher's path.

"Looks like there's been some sort of difficulty, Ed," he said politely. "Maybe you ought to tell me about it."

Gilcher shook his head and started to move on, but Pardee provided the answer. He turned away from his horse and met the gangling sheriff's curious stare. "I shot him," he admitted.

"It's none of your affair, Nate," Gilcher said gruffly. "I'll handle it."

Nate Butterworth hooked his thumbs in his leather galluses and squinted his faded eyes at Pardee. "I saw what happened at Stacy's barn and didn't need to ask ques-

tions. But I don't like this, Pardee. You've admitted shooting Ed and you'll need some good reasons to keep me from locking you up."

Pardee gave Gilcher a long look, his manner somewhat apologetic, but the rancher turned his face away to stare stonily at the hotel door.

"I was told from the beginning Gilcher would make trouble for me," Pardee began slowly, "and when he promised to pay me a visit at daybreak I was up on the ridge watching for him. At sunrise I heard cattle moving toward the creek, and then they busted out into the open and headed my way. Gilcher was alone. The cows were wearing Double O brands—my brand—and Gilcher started hazing them onto my land. You see how it looked to me."



The sheriff nodded. He frowned over his shoulder at Gilcher, and then faced Pardee again. "A man would likely think Gilcher was trying to frame you with a rustling charge. That what you figured?"

Pardee shifted uncomfortably. He ran his thumbs along his shell belt and stared at the ground. "I called out to Gilcher.

I told him I didn't want them cows on my land. I told him if he pushed them across the creek I'd put a slug in his shoulder. He just laughed and kept coming, so I shot him."

"What about it, Ed?" Butterworth asked. "You want to lay up some charges against Pardee? You ain't told your side of this."

Gilcher swung his head around and aimed his words. "I told you I'd handle it, Nate. Only way I ever knew to pay off lead was with more of the same. Pardee won't get off." He strode away angrily.

AS THE rancher disappeared around the corner, Butterworth stepped down and laid a hand on Pardee's shoulder. "You've done Ed a big favor, Pardee. He knows you're in love with Marie and he don't want her to die with a broken heart when some fast gun finally takes your rep away. He'd rather see you dead now while it won't make her a widow. Ed's no slouch with a gun himself, and he'll be calling on you again."

"He'll be doing me a favor," Pardee said tonelessly and swung aboard the sorrel. He rode down the street without a backward glance. Nate Butterworth watched him out of sight, knowing something was amiss and not knowing what it was.

Ed Gilcher was a man of his word. His shoulder mended quickly, and in three weeks he sent for Pardee.

Pardee was in Singletree at the time. He'd spent a week grubbing mesquite out of his lower pasture, and then he'd come to town in search of work which would help him store up enough cash to buy cattle. The livery stable had a band of thirty wild mustangs which had to be gentled for the army, and after the contractor had seen a free sample of his work in the saddle, Pardee got the job at five dollars a head.

Pardee relaxed on the bench in front of the blacksmith shop each evening before

he bedded down in the livery's loft. He could watch the trail to Gilcher's Anchor Ranch from there, and he did not try to conceal his hope that Marie would ride in for a visit with him. When she didn't come, he knew Gilcher either had forbidden her to leave the ranch or she was too angry and hurt over the wounding of her father to care for Pardee any more. Pardee had to know which reason had kept her away, and on the day he finished breaking the horses he planned to ride to Anchor for the answer.

Marie was waiting beside his horse, however, when he stepped outside with his blanket roll on his shoulder and the army contractor's crisp new bills still wadded in his hand. The sun was dying on the horizon behind her, and the fiery sky made her look like she'd walked right out of heaven.

Pardee called to her, but his quick grin faded as soon as he was near enough to see the tears in her eyes.

Marie clutched him to her and Pardee had to hold her very close to understand the words which tumbled from her lips between sobs. But, when at last he understood her—understood that Ed Gilcher was waiting in the street to avenge the wound Pardee had inflicted upon him—he left her quickly. But Marie pursued him and Pardee had to force her arms loose so he could continue.

Behind him, the girl sobbed brokenly and said, "I tried to make him stay home, Dale, but he wouldn't listen. But at least I persuaded him to let me see you instead of sending one of the ranch hands for you. I'll wait here until—until you or father comes for me—and then I'll wait and wait—all my life for the other one."

Pardee went on down the street with the girl's sobs echoing in his ears. He turned the corner at the blacksmith shop. Seventy yards ahead of him a big, defiant shadow stood alone in the street. It was Ed Gilcher.

They had their shoot-out there in the quiet twilight with a score of faces peeping at them from around windows, rain barrels and porch posts. And when it was over Dale Pardee was lying stretched out in the caliche dust, the wind knocked out of him and one of Ed Gilcher's slugs burning in his shoulder.

Dimly, Pardee was aware of Ed Gilcher towering above him. The rancher's broad face was as white as paper and his eyes were wide with shock. Gilcher reached down to get his arms under Pardee's back, but Pardee elbowed him away.

"I can stand," he said weakly. He got his feet under him and struggled erect. The buildings started whirling and the street rocked at a sickening angle. He started falling, but Ed Gilcher's meaty shoulder caught him and he was vaguely aware of being lifted and carried away.

HE WOKE a half hour later in Doc Kelton's office, somewhat chagrined because the bullet shock had knocked him out. He was lying on the same cot where Ed Gilcher had rested three weeks ago when the doctor had dressed the rancher's wound. Marie was kneeling beside the cot, her troubled eyes waiting to meet his.

When she saw him looking at her, Marie's breast rose in a relieved sigh and she ran her hand tenderly through his hair.

"Why did you do it, Dale?" she asked tremulously. "Why did you just stand there and let father pull a gun and shoot you? Everyone in town says you didn't even try to draw your gun."

"And that ain't all they're saying," Ed Gilcher boomed, shoving tiny Doc Kelton aside and striding across the room. "You

know what the talk in the saloons is right now, Pardee? They're saying you've got a yellow streak wide as a barn door up your back and that I'm a better man forty ways from Sunday. They're saying just the sight of me cutting down on you scared you so bad you couldn't even grab for your gun. I don't like it, Pardee. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. If you ain't able to get on your feet and tell them why you did it, I aim to tell them myself."

Pardee, wincing at the pain in his shoulders, shoved up on his elbow. "You're not telling them anything, Gilcher. Take a man like Pete Decker, now. Why would he want to risk his neck just to shoot it out with an old yellow dog like me? It wouldn't help his rep a bit after this."

Ed Gilcher stopped his restless pacing and stared at the floor a moment. When he looked up again he seemed more at ease with his conscience. "Well, when you look at it that way I reckon you owed me the satisfaction of putting that slug in you."

Marie jumped to her feet, her eyes blazing indignantly. "He owed you nothing, father. Everyone knows you were trying to frame Dale so—"

"You've got your old man all wrong, Marie," Pardee cut in sheepishly. "Just as far wrong as I had him, maybe. My trigger finger was too eager when I put that slug in Gilcher. It wasn't until I brought him into town that I found out he was willing to help me get a start in return for the water I was letting him share. He was giving me the ten cows he was pushing across the creek with my brand on them. He thought I was arguing with him because I was too damn' proud to take them!"

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*Satan was Ard Crandell's pard
and they ruled with fire . . .
until Clay Evers came out of
the flaming horizon—guns
screaming—with revenge in
his gunsmoke and hell his des-
tination!*

Six-guns Say Die!

By
A. KENNETH BRENT

IN THE GRAY light of dawn he drifted, looking for a place to make day camp. He knew that he should have stopped an hour ago while darkness was still on the hills, but he had not found water, and both he and his horse were thirsty. Man and beast, they were a hard-bitten pair. The man was lean; there was a week's beard on his face, and his hair showed the signs of self-barbering. The horse was gaunt and tired, and one forefoot had needed a new shoe for a long time.

The man's name was Clay Evers, and across the territorial line, three hundred miles away, he was wanted for murder.

He had been riding the out-trails for almost a year, drifting aimlessly and traveling mostly at night. His few attempts to get work had been spoiled by someone's curiosity or suspicion, and he no longer tried to hook on with a spread. He lived on what game he could kill and on the occasional meal he shared with some line shack cowboy. He supposed, when he thought about it, that he was heading for California, but when he got there, or if



The lean man screamed and
sprawled in the dusty street.

he got there at all, he did not much care.

Now he was following the crest of a high, timbered hill and was preparing to swing down into the valley when he came to the edge of a clearing. He drew rein sharply as he saw that he had come upon a road and that a stagecoach stood at the summit of the hill, the horses blowing and resting after the hard climb. The driver slouched sleepily in his seat, and even as Clay Evers watched, a woman stepped from the coach and walked up and down at the edge of the road.

A feeling of pain gripped Evers's stomach as he studied this woman. She was of medium height, and as she took off her hat and swung it at her side, he saw that her hair was a coppery red. She wore a long blue dress trimmed in white, and in one hand carried a pair of white gloves. Her walk combined an easy grace and youthful vigor, and though Evers could not make out her facial features clearly, he sensed that she was pretty.

Clay Evers had not so much as seen a woman in over two months, and as he watched this one now, beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead despite the coolness of the morning. It was as if somehow she symbolized all that was missing in his bleak, solitary life.

He imagined that she was going to the next town to meet her husband, and for a moment Evers was consumed with an unreasoning envy. That man would take her in his arms and kiss her. He would sit at a table with her and they would eat together and talk about small, unimportant things. At night he would lie beside her and feel the softness of her.

The stagecoach driver said, "We'll go now, Miss Raines."

The woman stepped back into the coach, and in an instant the stage was down the hill and out of sight around a curve. Clay Evers sat his horse very still until he could no longer hear the sound of the stagecoach wheels, and then, without knowing why

he did so, he moved forward to the place where the woman had been. In the red dust of the road he saw wheel tracks and shoe prints, and then as he was turning back to the timber, he saw something else—something white—half covered with the dust pushed up by the coach's wheels.

Evers swung down and picked it up, and it was a white glove, soiled now to a reddish brown. He held it for a long moment and then dropped it back to the ground. But before he remounted, he picked it up again, folded it, and put it in his shirt pocket.

He did not know why he did this. He did not even think about it until he realized that he was riding for the town which must lie ahead. He had not ridden on a road or into a town in months, but now he was. He had to sleep in a decent bed just once more, he told himself. He had to eat a decent meal and drink a drink and listen to men talk. He had to have some clothes that weren't coming apart, and his horse needed a shoe.

And Clay Evers knew that he was lying to himself. He was riding into town to see the woman from the stagecoach again and to talk to her a few seconds when he gave her her glove. It was a crazy thing to do, a damn fool thing to do. He admitted this to himself—and he kept riding.

He thought, *Maybe I'll have some luck.*

AND HE knew that he wouldn't. For years Evers had lived by his gun as trail town marshal, range detective, sometimes as private gunhand for big cattle outfits terrorized by rustlers. He had had some close calls in those years, and they had brought him to believe in hunches and breaks and runs of luck.

He was in a run of bad luck, and he had decided that it would keep on being bad now until the end. It had started two years ago when he had decided to quit his gun work and settle down to a life of ranching. He had picked the Seven Rivers country,

and almost immediately the entire area had flamed into a savage range war. He had fought for what was his, had lost, and, like the half-dozen other losers, had been branded a murderer by the winning faction which had the law on its side.

He had pulled out before he could be arrested and brought to trial, but running and hiding had not been easy for him. His past reputation as a gunman had marked him, and there were many who would kill him for the fame it would bring.

Riding the out-trails, he had been able to stay clear of such men, but in town it might well be different. His protective instinct, sharpened by a year on the dodge, told him to turn back to the hills. He told himself that he probably couldn't even find the woman. And what if he did? He could look at her, give her the glove—then what? Then ride out of town fast, if he could.

But he wanted to see her again, just why he didn't try to figure out, and so he rode on. He'd be a fool this once. What had being smart got him?

It was three hours before he came to the town, and it was a fair-sized place for a cow town. He saw the stagecoach still standing in front of the weathered, two-story hotel, and he rode directly for that building. He was aware that his shabbiness and the lankness of his horse made him the target of curious eyes, but he hunched his shoulders against the stares of the men he passed and moved determinedly on.

He tethered his horse loosely at the hitchrail, went into the hotel, and walked directly to the desk. The clerk, a dignified young man in a gray suit and immaculate white shirt, looked at Evers doubtfully.

"Yes, sir?" he asked coolly.

Evers turned the register around and glanced down the page. No woman had registered yet this morning. He looked up and saw the clerk watching him with suspicion and distaste.

"Don't worry," Evers said, "I'm not going to dirty any of your sheets. I'm looking for a woman named Raines. Do you know where I can find her?"

Surprise showed in the clerk's eyes. He hesitated a long time before he said, "Why, I guess you mean Mary Raines. She has an office down the street—Raines Ranch Equipment. You might try there."

Evers nodded and turned to leave. As he did so, he caught sight of himself in a wall mirror, and for a moment the shock of what he saw held him motionless. The man reflected back at him was gaunt and hollow-eyed. Hair was curling down over his ears and his face was covered with a heavy black stubble. His clothes were shapeless and torn. Lord, no wonder men stared at him!

At a general store across the street from the hotel he bought a complete new outfit from hat to boots, and then he went to a barber shop where he got the works, including a bath, and changed into his new clothes. When he came out he felt human again and less like an animal that had accidentally wandered into a place where people live.

He took his horse to the blacksmith's and left instructions that the animal be given a good meal at the livery next door when his new shoe was on. After that Evers went to a cafe and had steak, eggs, and french fries and then to a saloon for a drink. He built a cigarette and smoked it slowly, and all the while he knew that these things—the eats, the drink, the smoke—were merely ways of putting off and savoring for a while the thing he had really come to town for. But now he must find the woman named Mary Raines and then leave town quickly, for he had crowded his luck too far already.

He went out of the saloon and walked down the street until he came to a sign swinging over a flight of stairs that led into a two-story office building. The sign said RAINES RANCH EQUIPMENT, and an

arrow pointed upstairs. He climbed the stairs slowly, reluctant now, for some reason he could not clearly name, to come face to face with this woman he had risked everything to see again.

The door to her office was ajar, and he started to knock but checked himself as he heard a man talking. The man's voice was loud, and his words came clearly.

"You went to Silver City yesterday to try to get financial backing," he was saying. "I told you what would happen if you did that."

A woman's voice said coldly, "And what will happen?"

Clay Evers moved slightly so that he could see into the room. The man standing there was big. His handsome, heavy-featured face was red with anger, and a half-smoked cigar was clenched tightly between his teeth.

Mary Raines was standing behind her desk, and her face was exactly as Evers had pictured it this morning except that now it was white and strained.

The big man was saying, "I'll tell you what will happen. My offer for that junk in your warehouse is half what it was last week. If you make any more plays to bring in outside help, I'll cut my price in half again."

Mary Raines laughed bitterly. "Don't think I'd sell to you at any price, Crandell," she said. "I'll give every length of pipe and every foot of wire away first."

The man called Crandell took a half step forward. His eyes bulged slightly.

"You cheap slut!" he said. "If you try that—"

HE GOT no further. A savage fury, so intense that it almost made him sick, swept over Clay Evers. He came into the office without thinking. He caught the big man by the shoulder and jerked him sharply around.

He said with a deadly flatness, "Tell her you're sorry you said that."

Crandell angrily jerked away. He looked at Mary Raines, who stood motionless in surprise, and said with a sneer, "So you hired yourself a gun tough. You think that's gonna help you?"

Evers slapped Crandell across the face, and the big man stumbled against a chair and fell to one knee.

"Tell her you're sorry you said that," Evers repeated, and he drew his gun from his holster.

Sudden fear showed in Crandell's eyes. He got to his feet and he was looking at Evers instead of Mary Raines, but he mumbled through lips that were flecked with blood, "I'm sorry I said that."

The cold, killing fury still raged in Evers. He jabbed his gun barrel into Crandell's stomach so hard that the man gasped in pain.

"Get out of here," Evers said, and when Crandell started for the door, Evers followed him.

At the head of the stairs Evers grabbed the man by the shirtfront.

"Next time I'll kill you," he said.

He shoved Crandell then, and with a hoarse yell the big man half stumbled, half fell down the stairs, his arms flailing the air helplessly until he landed in a heap.

Evers turned away abruptly and walked back to the office where Mary Raines still stood unmoving. In her brown eyes he saw a look of amazement.

"Who on earth are you?" she asked.

Now that the time for talking had come, he realized that there was nothing he could say. He couldn't even answer her question about who he was. He reached into his shirt pocket for the glove he had found this morning, and now the returning of it seemed a foolish thing, but he handed it to her.

"I found this. I believe it's yours"

She took the glove and now her puzzlement was complete. "Why, where did you find this?" she asked, and she repeated, "Who are you?"

He knew now that it was a mistake for him to have come here. The only thing to do was leave quickly.

"I found the glove on the road and was just riding through," he said. "I've got to go now."

Mary Raines came from behind the desk then.

"You don't want to tell me who you are," she said. "But I thank you for the glove—and for what you did a moment ago."

Evers said, "I probably made more trouble for you."

Mary Raines shook her head. "You couldn't do that," she said, "but you've made trouble for yourself. Ard Crandell will try to kill you for that beating you gave him. I hope you'll leave town immediately."

"I'll leave," Evers said, "but not because of Crandell."

He left the office quickly then and went down the stairs and out into the sunlit street. Despite what Mary Raines had said, he knew that he had made more trouble for her, and this thought rankled inside him as he walked down the board sidewalk toward the livery stable.

Someone called, "Hey, stranger!" and Evers pivoted sharply to see a short, heavy-set man angling across the street toward him. A sheriff's star was pinned to the man's buckskin vest. Now his little vein of luck had pinched out, Evers thought, and it was too late to do anything about it. He let his hand fall casually to the gun at his side, and waited for the sheriff to come to him.

"You the feller just pistol whipped Ard Crandell?" the lawman asked.

Evers said, "I wouldn't call it pistol whipping."

"He called it that," the sheriff said, "and you can bet he wouldn't have been telling me about it except to get ready an alibi for killing. You'd best do your business here and make tracks. I don't want no more trouble than I've got already." The man

stopped and studied Evers, then said, "Say, ain't I seen you some place before?"

Clay Evers said carefully, "I wouldn't know, sheriff. I'll be going now like you said."

He walked quickly to the livery stable and found the hostler, an old man with tobacco-stained whiskers, brushing his horse. The oldster looked up.

"Nice hoss," he said. "Yours?"

Evers nodded. "Is he ready?"

"Ready as I could git him," the hostler said. He peered closely at Evers. "Rid him pretty hard, ain't you?"

Evers thought, *There'll be a posse on my tail in an hour.* But suddenly he did not care. Here was a man who would talk, and Evers had some questions he wanted the answers to.

He said, "Can you tell me about the trouble between Mary Raines and Ard Crandell?"

The old man's eyes narrowed. He took a plug of tobacco from his shirt pocket and bit off a chunk.

"That'll take some telling, mister," he said.

"I've got time to listen," Evers told him.

THE HOSTLER dropped the curry comb and sat down on a box. "Ten years," he said, "things was tough in these parts—drought and low prices on cattle. Jed Raines—he was Mary's pa—just managed to keep one step ahead of goin' bankrupt selling ranch equipment like bob wire and windmills and tanks, mostly on credit.

"Then two years ago beef prices went sky high, and about that time artesian water was tapped here. Things went as good as they had been bad. Ever'body had money, and it looked like Jed Raines would clean up with his wire and pipe, and pumps stuff."

Clay Evers said softly, "And then Ard Crandell showed up."

The old man looked annoyed at the interruption.

"That's right," he said. "Crandell came in with ranch equipment of his own and a passel of the hardest hombres you ever seen to help him sell it. Wasn't long before a thing or two was plain to see. If a rancher bought from Jed Raines, his wire got cut mysterious-like or his well pipes busted or his pump stove in. If he bought from Crandell everything was fine. Seems that ranchers that bought from Raines got choused into fights with Crandell's men when they came to town and always came off second best. There was a couple of killings, but the killers got off on self-defense alibis because they badgered the ranchers into drawing first."

"What did Jed Raines do?" Evers asked.

"Jed were a fighter," the old hostler said, "but he picked the wrong man to start on, one of Crandell's toughs named Macho Starnes. After Jed got killed, Crandell had it pretty much his way. Mary took over her pa's business, but she ain't able to move much stuff. She's got a warehouse crammed with ranch equipment right now."

Evers said bluntly, "Looks like the ranchers remembered their friends."

The old man's head jerked up.

"You can be hard on 'em," he said. "But you wasn't here for ten years of no rain and bad prices. They've had a bellyful of trouble, and I ain't one to blame 'em for sidesteppin' some of it now. Besides, nobody's ever been able to prove a thing on Crandell and his men, and it's hard to fight when there ain't nothing to hit."

The hostler broke off as a tall, gray-haired man drove up in a buckboard. The man stepped down and said, "Take care of 'em, Hank. I'll be back in a couple of hours or so."

The hostler nodded and waited until the man was out of earshot, and then he turned to Evers again.

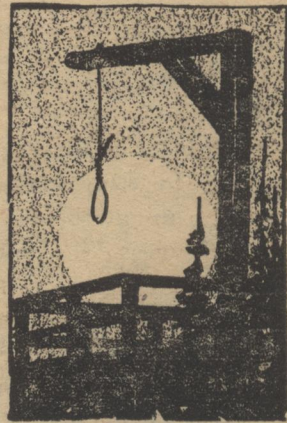
"You take that feller right there," he said. "Joe Raymond. He's got a fair-sized spread out east of town, and he's a

friend of Mary Raines. But he's got a wife and three kids. What do you bet he's going right now to place an order with Ard Crandell? Heard him say last week he was set to make improvements."

Clay Evers watched the rancher head for a big yellow building with the sign **ARD CRANDELL—RANCH EQUIPMENT** painted high across its front. Evers was unaware of coming to any decision, and yet suddenly he was walking out of the livery and down

GUNS OF THE NIGHT RIDERS!

By Marvin de Vries



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the street, following the rancher. When the man had almost reached Crandell's place, Evers called, "Raymond!"

The rancher swung around and Evers came up to him quickly.

"There's a place down the street where you can get a better deal," he said.

Joe Raymond stared and his face turned red.

"What's your stake in this, mister?" he asked.

Evers said, "It sounds crazy. I've got no stake. I just thought you'd like the information."

Perspiration was suddenly on the rancher's face.

"I'd give my right arm to help Mary Raines," he said. "But I don't think I'd give my life—it's important to some people besides me."

Clay Evers's face was hard-set. He said, "You won't have to give anything. Not anything at all."

The flat positiveness in Evers' voice seemed to shake Joe Raymond. He was silent for almost a minute before he spoke.

"I'm a fool, I guess," he said, "but I think I believe you. I'll go see Mary now."

As the rancher turned around, Evers looked up and saw Ard Crandell standing in the doorway of his store. The look of utter disbelief on the big man's face told Evers that Crandell knew what was happening, knew that an important customer had been snatched away from him.

Crandell disappeared from the doorway and Evers fell in beside Joe Raymond, figuring that he should stick with him in case Crandell tried to send an interceptor out the back way. They walked quickly down the street and up the stairs to Mary Raines's office.

She was still at her desk, and she looked up in surprise as Joe Raymond came into the room.

"You've got a customer, Mary," he said, and he added, smiling, "and you've got a mighty good salesman, too."

He jerked a thumb in the direction of the door, but Clay Evers had not entered the office, and he was already going down the stairs. Mary Raines moved quickly from her desk and ran after him.

"Wait!" she called. She caught up with him on the landing, and she said. "Who are you? And why are you doing these things? First you beat Ard Crandell and then you bring me the first customer I've had in a month. Why? I want to know."

EVERS LOOKED down at her, and his only thought for a moment was that she wasn't as tall as he had first imagined. And then he thought about what she was saying. He could tell her why he had done these things—that was easy. But what sense would it make to her? Would she understand if he told her that it was because he had seen her walking in the dawn this morning when he was half crazy from riding the out-trails? Would she know what he meant if he said it was because she reminded him of all the things he never would have?

He didn't think so, and so he said. "I know a couple of things. One is that if you have a piece of luck, you shouldn't worry too much about how it happened. If you do, it's likely to get away from you. Just take it and play it to win."

"But—" she began.

"You've got a customer upstairs," Evers said. "You'd better go see what he wants."

He went on out of the building then, and when he reached the sidewalk, he was not surprised at what he saw. Half a block away was Ard Crandell, and flanking him were two lean, cold-eyed men. One of them he recognized as Macho Starnes, a cheap killer he had seen once in Caldwell. The other man, dressed in a black, flat-crowned sombrero and black shirt and pants, he did not know. They were walking slowly toward him and fanning out a little now.

This was it, Evers knew. These men had not come to warn him out of town.

They had come to kill him. When not more than forty feet separated them, Crandell stepped out a little in front of his two gunmen, and the three of them stopped.

Crandell's face was white with rage.

"You yellow-belly!" he said, and he seemed to spit the words out of his mouth.

Clay Evers kept walking. He laughed.

"You trying to get me to draw first, Crandell?" he said. "That's a specialty of mine."

His hand was bringing his gun up while he was still talking, and the suddenness of his move caught the three men off balance. He fired from the hip, and his first bullet caught Macho Starnes in mid-draw. The lean gunman screamed and sprawled in the dusty street, his feet kicking wildly as if he were trying to run.

Evers dropped flat into the street and snapped a shot at Crandell, but the bullet was wide, and then both Crandell and his remaining gunman had their guns out and were firing. Evers rolled and triggered again, and this time the black-clad man jerked and threw his hands over his head. His gun spilled from his fingers and he crumpled slowly to the ground.

A bullet kicked dirt into Evers's face and another singed his shoulder as it whined over him. His eyes were smarting from the dirt in them, but for one brief instant he saw the big bulk of Ard Crandell clearly, and he pulled the trigger. Crandell staggered and fell to his knees, but he made a desperate effort to raise his gun.

Evers fired once more, and his shot and Crandell's blended as one. A blinding white pain seared Evers's brain, but before the engulfing wave of blackness hit him, he saw that his last shot had done its work. He saw Ard Crandell face down in the hot dust.

WHEN CLAY EVERS opened his eyes he saw that he was in the living room of a house, stretched out on a cushioned sofa. His head ached dully, and when he

raised his hand to it, he touched bandages. He sat up slowly, and as he did so, Mary Raines came into the room. Sudden relief softened the strained lines of her face as she saw him sitting up.

"Thank heaven," she said. "The doctor said you were only unconscious, but I was afraid."

Evers knew that if he was held for this shooting affair, the murder charge against him would certainly come out.

"When three men attack you, it can't be anything but self-defense," Mary was saying. "A coroner's jury met while you were being brought here to my house, and you've been cleared."

"Crandell?" Evers asked.

"Dead," Mary Raines told him. "Starnes is, too. The other man—Sprull—has a broken shoulder."

Evers stood up. "I'll be going now," he said.

She came to him. "I won't try to stop you," she said, "because I know it won't do any good. But I wish I knew who you are. I wish I knew why you've done this. I wish—" She stopped and looked away for a moment, and then she turned back to him. She said, "Come back some day, won't you?"

There was no answer really, but he said, "I'll try," and then he went quickly out of the house.

Someone had brought his horse around. He swung into the saddle and rode down the street toward town. Afternoon shadows were lengthening, but he could see the hills, red and purple in the distance. Back to the out-trails, the night riding, the cold camps. Evers turned to look at Mary Raines's house. It was a small white bungalow with red and black hollyhocks growing at the windows and a row of tall poplars for shade. She stood in the doorway watching him, and she raised her hand when he looked back.

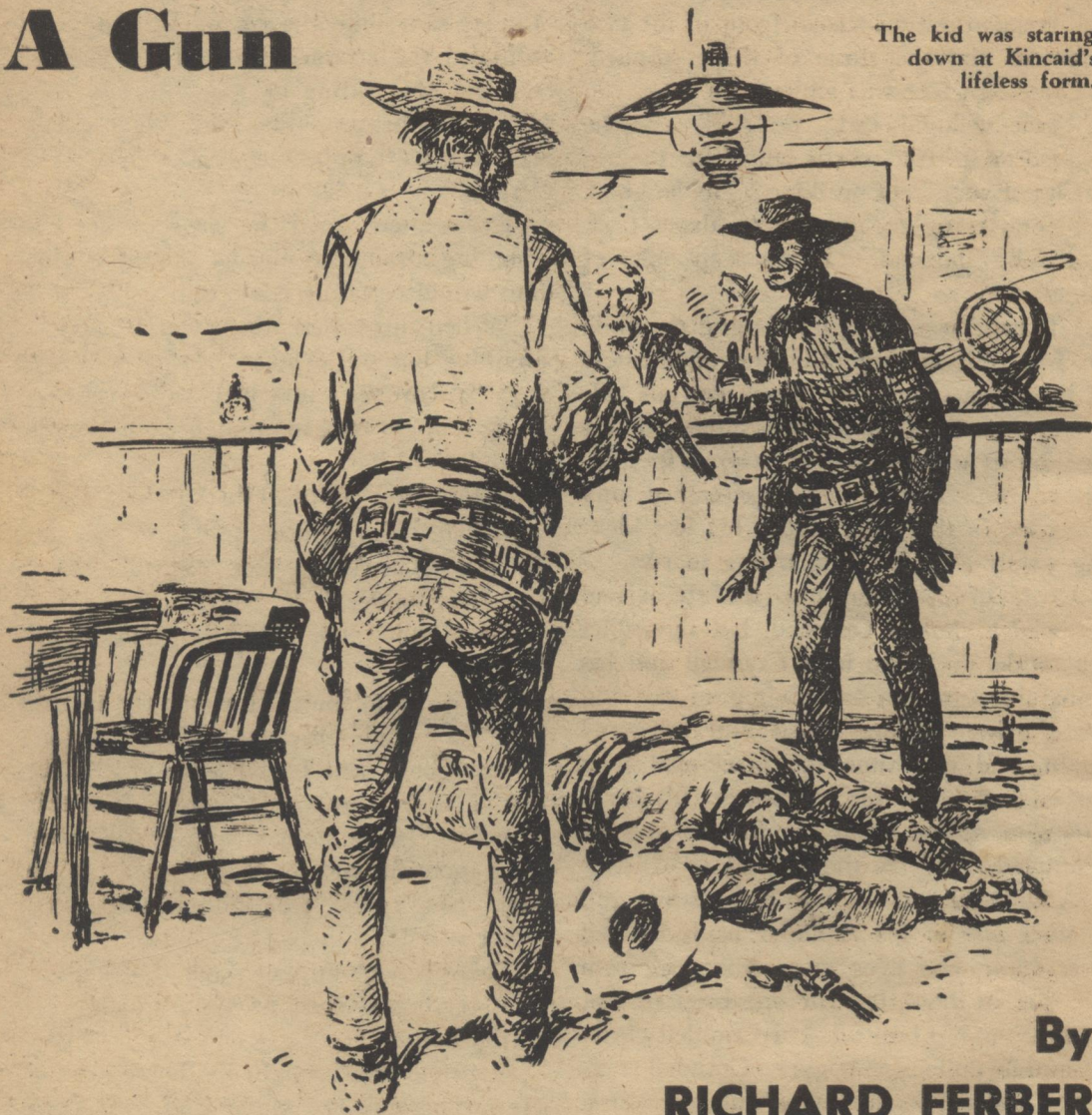
When he came abreast of the sheriff's

(Continued on page 109)

The Preacher Takes

A Gun

The kid was staring
down at Kincaid's
lifeless form.



By

RICHARD FERBER

*Gunfire was the only language
Bal Kincaid spoke and no one
dared answer . . . until blood
tempted Ben Hardeman, the
preacher's son—and a Colt
.44 fired the final Amen!*

THE SUN rose above the far rim of the basin, sending the first warmth to the long porch of the ranch house. Jeff Hardeman stretched and walked to the railing, the morning stiffness beginning to work out of his bones. He looked at his watch. Nine o'clock. He could feel the winter chill on the wind. In another week they would have to start driving the cattle down from the upper ridges.

He stretched again, and a long, quiet sigh escaped him. He brought one hand up to rub the thick crop of gray hair. His lean body stood rigid against the coldness of the morning. Under the neat vest his stomach was still flat, but it was going soft, he guessed. He recognized it with some regret, yet it was to be expected. A man's body became slower, and perhaps, if he was lucky, his mind made up for it. He smiled, considered another cup of coffee, and started to go back into the house.

The smile faded and drew into a frown when he saw the boy lead the stallion around the corner of the building. He let the screen door go and moved to the head of the steps. He took the watch out again, letting the boy see it, and said, "Pretty early to be going into town, isn't it, son?"

The boy didn't answer. He turned his back and began working at the front latigo of the big stallion's saddle. Hardeman took out his pipe and began packing it, his eyes moving frequently to the kid. The youth had his tallness. He was sparse-framed, and when he was finished with the cinch he swung into the saddle with an uncommon gracefulness. He was riding his Sunday horse, but his clothes were dusty and his face dark with a neglected beard. The gun holster hung low on his hip, and he pushed it back a little to keep it from bouncing. He looked at Hardeman with a thin smile creasing his even features.

Hardeman felt the irritation rise in him and he forced it back. He said quietly, "Don't seem likely that the saloon will be open this early."

The kid made a little laugh and brought the stallion's head up.

"If you had your way, it wouldn't be open at all."

"Well," Jeff said agreeably, "when I was drinkin' I guess I didn't care what day it was."

The kid laughed louder. "You didn't tell me you took a drink once, pa."

The old man frowned and ran a match

along the railing of the porch, lighting the pipe. The kid lifted the reins and started to leave the yard. Hardeman watched him for a moment over the puffing clouds of smoke.

"Ben," he called softly. The kid reined up and showed his irritation. "Listen, Ben," Hardeman said. "You stay away from that Bal Kincaid."

The kid shook his head disgustedly. "Always preaching," he said. "It don't matter if it's Sunday, or any other day." He heeled the stallion and pointed him toward the ford of the creek.

"You hear?" Hardeman yelled after him.

"So long, Preacher," the kid shouted back, and swung the horse out of sight beyond the river willows.

Jeff listened to the stallion running on the wagon road. For awhile he stood motionless, worry pulling at the leather features of his face. Finally he turned and went through the door and let it close quietly behind him.

In the kitchen his wife was working over the sink. He sat down at the table and stared absently at her back.

"Martha," he said suddenly, "I don't know what I'm going to do about that boy of ours."

She turned to regard him closely. "More coffee, Jeff?" she asked.

He nodded. "It seems like he's getting worse every day. And that Kincaid fellow. He'll get him into trouble. Bad trouble."

The woman brought a cup and poured the steaming black liquid.

"It worries me," she said. She frowned down at him, but her tone was kindly. "Sometimes he reminds me of how you used to be, Jeff."

Hardeman brought the cup to his lips and put it down again. He didn't like to remember, but there was no help for it. A man couldn't completely forget his past. He was grateful to the woman that she spoke of it so seldom. Thinking about it now, he could see the truth of her words,

see the resemblance between his son and himself, as he had once been. It was a long time ago, but he could picture vividly the swaggering bully with the gun on his hip. And from there it was only one more step to the killer. It had taken twenty years to live that down, twenty years of hard work on this ranch—without telling a man who he was or where he had come from. Even his son, Ben, didn't know. Though it didn't seem to matter; he was getting his ideas of what a man ought to be from someone else—someone like Bal Kincaid.

Jeff's fingers tightened around the metal cup, then relaxed. The boy would learn; patience and kindness would teach him. He finished the coffee and stood up.

"It's near ten, ma," he said. "We'll have to hurry."

He went into the closet and took down the freshly-pressed coat. It seemed to bind him a little when he slipped into it. He moved to the dresser and found the Bible where he had left it the Sunday before. He stood for a while, adjusting the narrow crown of the hat and wondering which chapter he would read this morning. It wouldn't matter, he thought, smiling to himself; they wouldn't listen anyway. He picked up the book, wedging it under his arm, and went outside where his wife and the buckboard were waiting.

The street of Dolan's Corner ran only five buildings long. Hardeman drove through it without looking left or right, except to notice that the stallion was at the rack and the door of Dolan's Saloon was propped open. There were a half-dozen rigs in the school yard when he turned into it and reined the team to a halt. He helped the woman down and stood for a few minutes to shake hands and talk idly with his neighbors. Then the school bell began to ring and he led the way toward the door.

THERE WAS no church building at The Corners, though the school sufficed to hold the services, and Jeff Hardeman to

conduct them. He had been chosen more for his ability to read than anything else, he guessed. Still, there was considerable satisfaction in the task, even if it sometimes made him uncomfortable. Standing before the small congregation as he did now, only half-listening to his own droning voice, he wondered what the people would think if they knew him as he once was. Still, how many men in the valley could boast of a past that didn't rise up now and then to haunt them?

The people settled uneasily within the confines of the small desks. Glancing up over the Bible, Jeff smiled inwardly at the sight of Parker Handley's squeezing, sweating form. A child began to talk and the people, twisting to look, sent the chairs to creaking loudly. He raised his voice, announcing each word in clear, ringing tones. The crowd quieted so that he could hear the buzzing of the flies in the heat of the doorway. Outside a horse tightened the traces and stomped the hardened ground. He finished the passage and, carefully closing the book, placed it on the desk. He scanned the congregation.

"Anybody know *A Mighty Fortress*?" he asked. He pointed toward a man in the corner of the room. "You, Bill?"

The man shook his head. Parker Handley's wife said, "I do," and stood up.

"Lead away, then, ma'am," Jeff told her.

The woman started to sing. Her voice was faded almost to a murmur before the people took up the melody. Hardeman sang with them; he put one hand in front of him and beat an out-of-time rhythm with an extended finger. The rough voices straggled through the hymn; it was almost over when the shot came. Another one followed immediately. The singing stopped and the congregation turned, craning their necks toward the door. A man went to the window and peered out through the dust. In the silence he said, "Came from down the street. Near Dolan's, I think."

Hardeman cleared his throat and drew

the attention of the people back to him. He started the hymn again. They sang weakly now, twisting in their seats and almost talking the words. He could hear his wife's voice, distinct above the muttering. He finished quickly and bowed his head.

"We'll have our prayer," he said.

He had a hard time keeping his mind on the idea. The gunfire started again, this time in a rapid staccato. The sound of a voice carried down the street, and he stopped, anxiously listening. Then he went slowly through the rest of the prayer and paused, expectant, before he said, "Amen." The people got up and rushed toward the narrow doorway. Hardeman smiled disapprovingly, picked up the Bible, and went to his wife.

Outside a few people had taken the time to unhitch their teams. Others had gone off on foot toward the street, leaving the horses still tied to the tall cottonwoods. Hardeman helped the woman to the seat of the buckboard and started the team through the yard. Once on the street he could see the crowd gathered in front of Dolan's Saloon. He stopped the wagon at the edge of it and climbed down, pushing his way through the group. On the sidewalk he saw his son, Ben, and a little farther down, leaning in the doorway, was Bal Kincaid, a bottle in one hand and a gun in the other. The Circle N's half-witted Mex, Santiago, was sitting in the dust of the street, his gnarled face white with fear.

"Dance, you greaser," Kincaid yelled at him. He brought the gun up and sent a shot whipping through the dirt. The bullet skidded past the Mex's hand. He jumped and rolled to his side and stayed there, crouched and whimpering. Ben Hardeman laughed and raised his own gun. A commotion started at the back of the crowd and Chet Maurer stepped forward.

"You got no right to do that," he shouted indignantly.

Kincaid had the bottle to his mouth. He

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brought it down again. He was a stocky youth; his hat was tilted back exposing the pale, dirty hair. His lips twisted into a thin smile.

"Who says we haven't?" he sneered. His eyes scanned the gathering of men. Here and there a man edged back, losing himself in the crowd. Chet Maurer fidgeted and said nothing. Kincaid pushed himself out of the doorway and came to the edge of the sidewalk. He tipped the bottle up and drank in long, gulping swallows. He let it drop to his side and glared scornfully at the men in the street.

"Somebody want to join this party?" he asked meanly.

No one spoke. The crowd drifted slowly back, leaving Hardeman alone. The Mex was sitting up again, his rounded eyes darting back and forth. His hat had come off and his black, greasy hair stood up at an angle. He chattered in Spanish and started to creep backwards toward the opposite

sidewalk. Kincaid caught the movement and swung the gun toward him. Santiago froze. Kincaid seemed to notice Hardeman for the first time. He turned to the kid, Ben, and said, "If that's your old man, tell him to get off the street." He lifted the bottle, saw it was empty, and for a moment bounced it lightly in his hand. Then he threw it at the Mex, and turning, disappeared inside the saloon.

The bottle bounced at the Mex's feet. He stared at it dumbly. The crowd stirred restlessly, not talking, and began to break up. The kid moved down the sidewalk toward the saloon door. Hardeman went over to him.

"You coming home now, Ben?" he asked.

The kid stopped and considered him narrowly. He was conscious of the eyes of the lingering remnant of the crowd.

"Like hell I am," he said testily. The gun was still in his hand. He opened the cylinder and began to reload from the cartridge belt. He snapped the cylinder shut and gave the pistol a spin and dropped it in the holster. He moved sideways and leaned his body against one of the veranda supports and fixed Hardeman with a defiant stare.

Hardeman pivoted to look at the Mexican in the street, then swung his gaze back to the kid.

"You ought to come home now, Ben," he said. "This ain't no way to act."

"Hell," the kid repeated. "A little fun, that's all." He scowled and kept glancing at the door of the saloon. The Mex stood up and began casting about for his hat. He found it and put it on and moved quickly from sight around the back of the feed store. The last wagon left the street and creaked away, sending up a cloud of dust behind it.

Hardeman shifted the Bible from one hand to the other. He looked at his wife, sitting anxiously on the buckboard. He said to the kid, "Your ma's worried, Ben. You

ain't acting like you ought to. It's Sunday. Why don't you come home now." He could think of nothing more to say; he could see the words had no effect on the kid.

The kid was building a cigarette. His fingers bit hard into the paper as he rolled it. He sucked in a long breath, showing his boredom, and spit disgustedly on the sidewalk. Then he finished the cigarette and lighted it, still paying no attention to the man in front of him.

Hardeman moved his weight to the other foot. He looked down intently at the toes of his boots.

"A man can find better things to do than scarin' a poor half-wit," he tried. "A man. . . ."

He didn't finish. The kid straightened suddenly and pulled the cigarette from his mouth.

"Who are you to be talkin' about a man?" he said. "You call yourself a man?" He laughed disdainfully. He didn't wait for an answer; he threw the cigarette down and turned toward the door. "The Preacher," Hardeman heard him say, as he stepped into the darkened interior of the saloon.

"There's all kinds of men," Jeff said after him, and for a moment stood watching. He felt a surge of anger at his helplessness to deal with the boy. He glanced at his wife and saw the look of plain sympathy in her eyes. He went to her and climbed up on the seat and clucked the team into a trot. It was hard to talk with the noise of the axles and the clicking of the team's hoofs on the hardpack, and they rode home silently.

WHEN THEY arrived at the ranch house he went slowly about the task of unharnessing and watering the team. The heat had begun to settle in the valley now, and after he had turned the horses into the corral he lingered for a while in the shade. But he was restless. He wandered to the bunk house and found no

one there. His two riders would be at The Corners, probably at Dolan's Saloon. He walked back to the stable and saddled up the dun gelding, and rode toward the creek.

He let the horse drink in the shallows and dismounted to lie belly-flat on the sandy bank. Afterwards he propped himself against a nearby tree and began to load the pipe. It was quiet in the cottonwood grove, except for the faint trickling of the water over the rocks, and the sound of the gelding pulling at the long grass. He puffed gently on the pipe and tried to keep his mind from dwelling on the kid. It was funny, he thought, how a man changed. But it was the years that brought that change, and maybe trying to teach the kid was useless. Still, he could see what the kid was headed for, and it was hard not to think of his own past. Ben was just a kid now, still as green as the grass at his feet. But later it would be different, and it would be too late then to find out what a gun was for. He would kill his first man, and from there it would be a story that he knew too well.

He wished he could talk to Ben, but the kid seemed to understand nothing that he said. He would sooner listen to Bal Kincaid than his own father. Hardeman knew he had lost the boy's respect, lost it because he preached in the school house every Sunday, and because he didn't wear a gun. He could change all that, he supposed, but he had never considered it seriously. A gun had once cost him too much. This was a new life, far removed from the past, even though he could remember it sometimes so clearly.

A fly hummed about his head. He put a hand up and brushed at it. He was glad winter was coming. The flies would be less then. And there would be work to do. It would give the boy something to occupy his time. The pipe had gone dead in his mouth; he closed his eyes, still gripping it, and listened to the sound of the water before he fell asleep.

The sun had dipped beyond the mountains when he awoke. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and saw the growing darkness of the valley. The dun had moved out of the cottonwoods and was grazing in the openness of the pasture. He pulled himself to his feet and went toward it, feeling the stiffness of his legs again. There was only a red glow over the mountains where the sun had been; the long shadows had already begun to stretch along the flatlands. Across the valley he could see the lights of the ranch house. For a moment his thoughts went back to the boy, but he pushed them hurriedly aside. He was hungry, and his dinner would be cold and waiting for him. He swung up on the leather and heeled the dun into a long lope over the darkening ground.

The woman was standing in the doorway as he rode into the yard. He reined the gelding toward her and saw one of his riders, Sam Bartlett, in the shadows near the porch. At the rack was a lathered pony. He pulled up beside it and dismounted and moved to the steps. Bartlett stayed in the shadows; the woman let the door close behind her and came to the edge of the porch.

"What's the matter?" Hardeman asked, glancing from her to the man.

The woman spoke reluctantly "It's the sheriff, Jeff. Kincaid killed him."

"What?" Hardeman asked. He looked into the darkness, trying to make out Bartlett's face.

"That's right, Mr. Hardeman," Bartlett said, stepping forward. "Happened about an hour ago, in Dolan's."

Hardeman felt his blood stop pulsing abruptly. For a few seconds the actions of his body seemed suspended.

"Was Ben there?" he asked hesitantly.

"He was there, Mr. Hardeman," Bartlett went on. "He didn't have no hand in it, though. Kincaid was shootin' at the bottles on the back of Dolan's bar. Yates came over to try to stop him."

"I see," Hardeman said, almost in a

whisper. He went up the steps and moved past his wife without speaking further.

In the kitchen the places were laid out for dinner. He took the coffee pot and a cup and sat down at the table, pushing the silverware away. His wife came in and stood at the stove, watching him. He poured the coffee and drank it, without noticing the burning heat. He stood up again and moved about the room. The Bible lay on the counter where the woman had left it. He picked it up, held it for a moment, and put it down.

"Seems like this book can't do the whole job," he said quietly.

The woman turned from the stove. "What do you mean, Jeff?"

He ran his hand along the side of his wrinkled face. "Why, I guess I figured when I put down the gun and picked up the Bible that it was going to do all the work. I tried to bring Ben up by it, and I tried to live by it myself. A Bible and a gun never mixed, I figured. You either had one, or you had the other. Only now, I'm thinkin' that I figured wrong."

"Say what you mean," the woman demanded impatiently. "I can't understand you when you talk around that way. You're not in the school house now."

He brought his eyes up from the floor and studied her without seeing her.

"I mean," he said, "that the time for talkin' is over. Bal Kincaid ain't gonna listen to any talk, and neither is Ben."

"Ben had nothing to do with it. You heard Bartlett."

"Ben will have something to do with it next time, when he sees how easy it is. No, the way I figure it is this—there ain't no man in the valley that's going to stand up to Bal Kincaid. Maybe I don't blame them. Maybe I don't like the idea either. But next time it'll be Ben, and I don't aim to see that happen. If he won't listen to talk, then he's gonna have to listen to a gun."

"Jeff, what are you going to do?" the woman cried. She came to him, taking his

arm firmly as he started to move away.

He eased gently out of her grip. "You heard what Bartlett said. Yates is dead. But we still got a jailhouse. Somebody's gonna have to take Kincaid in. What happens to our kid after that is up to him."

She tried to stop him again, but he pushed past her and went into the bedroom. The old trunk stood in the corner; its rusty hinges squeaked as he lifted the lid. In the bottom underneath the piles of clothing he found the single action Colt .44, and the holster. He took them up gingerly and stared momentarily at the gun. A thin coat of oil covered it. He brought out a handkerchief and wiped it and spun the cylinder against his palm. The woman came to the doorway, but he paid no attention to her. He loaded the weapon and put it in the holster and strapped the belt on. It took him a minute to find the proper position on his hip, then he strapped it down with the leather thongs. Bending down, he felt the binding of the coat and he pulled it off and tossed it on the bed. He heard the woman sigh and he threw her a brief glance. She stepped aside as he went out the door, saying nothing.

On the porch outside he stopped to look back at her. "Don't worry, ma," he said. "Maybe I'll come back with a new boy."

Sam Bartlett was still waiting at the foot of the steps. "You want I should come along, Mr. Hardeman?" he asked.

"No," Hardeman told him as he climbed to the saddle. He wheeled the dun gelding through the yard, and once out of it, put the horse into a hard run toward the road.

THERE WERE a few buckboards in the street when he rode into Dolan's Corner. They stood huddled in the deep shadows in front of the feed store, out of the shaft of light from the saloon. A half-dozen ponies waited at the saloon hitching rack. He dismounted and tied up and started onto the sidewalk. A man came out of the darkness,

calling his name, and stopped when he saw the gun. He hesitated and went back into the shadows of the store, and Hardeman could hear the men whispering there. He moved to the glass door of the saloon and paused before opening it. The gun felt unfamiliar on his hip. He lifted it in the holster and let it sink back lightly. He listened for the sounds inside, but the place seemed strangely quiet. It wasn't too late to back out, he knew, but now the anger had taken hold of him. He pushed open the door and stepped into the smoky interior of the saloon.

Bal Kincaid was standing in the middle of the bar, a glass in his hands. Behind him the kid was drinking from a bottle. His eyes caught Hardeman in the mirror and he brought the bottle down slowly, his mouth remaining open. He stepped back, turning to look over Kincaid's shoulder. Behind the plank, Dolan gave one fleeting glance and retreated toward the end of the room. Hardeman moved to the bar and called to him.

"Bring me a bottle, Dolan."

Dolan came back slowly. He put a bottle and a glass in front of Hardeman. Jeff dropped a silver dollar on the bar and watched it spin and come to a stop.

"Keep the change, Dolan," he said. "You'll need it. After tonight you're going to have one less customer." He shifted his gaze to Kincaid and the boy. "And maybe two," he added.

Kincaid eyed him suspiciously and poured another drink. The kid moved back to the plank and stared at the half-empty bottle, not touching it. Hardeman made a slow, easy survey of the room. The saloon was almost empty. A few men sat at the tables along the wall. At the far end of the bar a man picked up his drink and casually moved away. Dolan dropped the dollar in his cash drawer, shook his head a little, and sauntered idly toward the back of the room.

Hardeman filled his glass. "Any time

you're ready, Kincaid," he said quietly.

Kincaid was leaning against the plank. He bent forward now, peering at Hardeman through half-closed eyes.

"Meaning what?" he said roughly. His mouth twisted into a smile, pulling his eyes into thinner slits.

Hardeman took the whiskey down; it had a bad taste, burning at his throat. He set the glass back on the plank and turned to face Kincaid.

"They tell me Yates is dead, Bal. I'm takin' you in."

"You're what?" Kincaid said in disbelief. He tilted his head slightly and gave a high, hoarse laugh. "You're crazy, old man. Go back to your preachin'."

Hardeman ignored the laughter. He watched Kincaid with distaste. He said. "No, Bal. We're going to the jailhouse. You've got time for just one more drink."

"Why, you. . . ." Kincaid started forward. He checked himself suddenly and straightened up, smiling again. "Sure," he said. He poured a glassful and brought it up to his mouth, and threw it without warning toward Hardeman. The liquid spilled out over the vest and the clean white shirt; the glass struck the dirt floor almost noiselessly.

"You're ready now," he told the man calmly, and moved toward him.

Kincaid's smile faded. He took an uncertain step backwards, and stopped. His hand edged back toward his gun.

"You're crazy, Hardeman," he said menacingly. "I don't like to kill preachers, but I'll fool just so long."

Behind him the kid eased sideways and moved clear of the bar. His eyes were wide-sprung and darted from Kincaid to the old man. Hardeman went past without noticing him. He came within ten feet of Kincaid and halted. "I want the gun, Bal," he said tonelessly.

Kincaid looked at him for one instant, then he drew. Hardeman's slug caught him in the stomach before he could bring the

weapon up. It discharged, bursting the dampened earth at his feet, and slipped slowly from the man's grasp. Kincaid reached a hand for the bar and brought it back, clutching, to his belly. He hunched forward, his neck arched up, his eyes round and unbelieving. He hung there, near balance for a moment. The place was silent, and when he fell his body made a soft thud against the hard dirt of the floor.

Hardiman dropped the Colt back in the holster. The kid was staring down at Kincaid's lifeless form. Dolan came up and leaned over the plank, shaking his head again. A man near the wall started to get up. The chair scraped and he returned stiffly to the seat. The kid glanced uncertainly at the bottle still on the plank and started to move away. Hardeman took a step closer to him.

He shouted, "You wanted to be a man. Well, Ben, there's one lying on the floor."

He grabbed the kid by one shoulder and sent him headlong toward Kincaid's body. The kid hit it and rolled over and came up on one knee. Hardman didn't give him time to gain his feet. He pulled him up, both hands wrapped in the kid's shirt front.

"You were right about one thing, son," he said, jerking the kid's head with a snap of his wrists. "You said I talk too much. Nothin' but preaching. I'm through with that."

He took one hand away, cocked it back, and slammed it full into the boy's face. The kid drove backwards and crashed against the bar. He got up, blood spilling from the corner of his mouth. He tried to bring his hands to his face, but Hardeman knocked them down and sent another blow high to the head. The kid spun around and hit the edge of the bar with his stomach. He doubled up and made an effort to hook the bar with his elbows, and slipped. Hardeman caught him by the back of the neck, turning him. He hit the kid again, and this time the kid slumped down and lay motionless on the floor.

Hardeman walked over to him, rubbing the knuckles of one hand against the palm of the other. He looked at the kid's face.

"He's had enough," Jeff said, almost aloud, and for a moment felt sorry. But it had to be this way, he told himself. He took the kid by the shoulder, and without speaking further, dragged him toward the door.

On the sidewalk he gave the kid one last shove with his boot so that he rolled into the street. The jar woke the kid up. He pulled himself to a sitting position and rubbed lightly at the bleeding nose. He cast around him in the faint light from the saloon window, and finally looked up at the old man.

Jeff made a move to help him and changed his mind. He said, "I asked you to come home this morning. You coming home now?"

The kid nodded his head quietly. He twisted around, finding the stirrup leathers of the stallion, and pulled himself to a standing position. Hardeman watched him struggle into the saddle. He went around to the near side of the gelding and mounted and turned out into the street with the kid riding beside him.

The men in front of the feed store came out of the darkness and hurried toward the saloon. The open door threw a streamer of light into the street that was gone quickly. Hardeman held the dun at an easy trot. The kid rode silently, his horse beside the gelding and a stride back. Hardeman stole a look at the kid and then kept his gaze on the ears of his own pony. The kid didn't feel like talking, he knew. He didn't blame him. Tomorrow, maybe, it would be different. It might take some time, but it would be better this way. He regretted the gun, though. He was sorry he had to use it. Well, he could put it back in the trunk again. And there was still the Bible. He smiled. Maybe what he had told his wife was true; maybe he was bringing home a different boy tonight. ☆☆☆



Old Bronc Rider

By S. OMAR BARKER

"These tame ol' plugs you ride these days,"
remarks ol' Baldy Bill,
"They maybe buck a little, but they just ain't
got the will
To throw a man or bust a gut a-tryin', like
the kind
We used to ride when I was young. I calloused
my behind
On rank ol' mustang outlaws that was born to
buck and pitch
The way that some of us is born to scratch it
when we itch!
I used to comb the foretop of them mustangs
with my spurs
Until both wheels was all gobbed up with hair
an' cuckoldurs.
Meanwhiles I'd roll a cigarette, an' with my
other hand
I'd wave my hat at all them cheerin' people in
the stand.

I win a heap of ridin's when the broncs was
tough as hell,
But had to quit the rodeos back yonder quite
a spell,
Because although them buckers was the wildest
ever born,
My ridin' broke their spirit till they wasn't
worth their corn!

Yessir, these plugs you youngsters ride," ol'
Baldy kinder grins,
"They ain't got what it takes to make you sorry
for your sins!
Seems like they lack the dynamite them old
uns had inside 'em—
But just the same I'm glad I'm old—so I don't
have to ride 'em!"

TALES of the

by LEE

GAMBLIN' MAN

THE OLD WEST LIKED A GAMBLER, SKY'S THE LIMIT KIND. AND JOHN HAMILTON WAS A GAMBLING MAN — SMALL, DAPPER, WITH A RED VANDYKE BEARD, COLD BLACK EYES, HIGH BEAVER HAT, DERRINGER UP HIS SLEEVE — A KILLER BUT HIS BIG BETS WERE ALWAYS ON A SURE THING, THOUGH NOBODY SUSPECTED IT AT THE TIME

BORN IN TEXAS AROUND '67, HE APPEARED IN NEVADA SOON AFTER THEY BROUGHT IN THE GREAT SILVER BONANZAS.



IN A POKER GAME, JOE RISCO, ANOTHER GAMBLER, ACCUSED HAMILTON OF CHEATING. A FEW NIGHTS LATER, RISCO WAS RIDDLED WITH BULLETS. FIVE MEN SAW HIS KILLER RIDE OFF, AND SWORE IT WAS HAMILTON. BUT THE GAMBLER PROVED HE WAS PLAYING CARDS 50 MILES AWAY.



A MAN APPROACHED A CHAP NAMED AXEL ANDERSON WHO HAD COME TO GOLDFIELD WITH \$35,000 IN CASH TO INVEST IN REAL ESTATE, AND OFFERED TO SHOW HIM A CHOICE PARCEL. ANDERSON ENDED UP IN A DARK ALLEY — UNCONSCIOUS AND OUT HIS \$35,000. HE IDENTIFIED JOHN HAMILTON WHO AGAIN PROVED HE WAS PLAYING POKER ALL THE TIME



"OLD" WEST

MOVING ON TO RAWHIDE, HAMILTON BET A PROMOTER \$1,000 HE COULD RIDE TO ELY IN 12 HOURS, THOUGH IT TOOK THE FASTEST STAGE TWO DAYS. A WEEK LATER HE DID IT, WITH MINUTES TO SPARE.

WHEN A LONE ROAD-AGENT HELD UP A STAGE, A LADY PASSENGER NOTICED A BIT OF RED BEARD UNDER HIS MASK. SEEING HAMILTON ENTER A TONOPAH GAMBLING HALL, SHE RUSHED UP CRYING THAT HE WAS THE ROBBER. BUT HAMILTON SUAVELY, AND UNQUESTIONABLY, PROVED HE WAS PLAYING CARDS WHEN THE HOLDUP TOOK PLACE.

A PROSPECTOR NEAR KLONDYKE WAS ROBBED AND MURDERED AND THE KILLER SEEN SPURRING AWAY. HIS BEARD WAS RED, HIS CLOTHES HAMILTON'S. BUT WHEN A POSSE, PRIMED FOR A LYNCHING, CAUGHT UP WITH JOHN HAMILTON HE HAD AN UNSHAKABLE ALIBI.

WHEN IRA CROSS WAS ROBBED AND MURDERED NEAR GOLDFIELD UNDER SOMEWHAT SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES AN INVESTIGATION WAS BEGUN. THEN THE TRUTH CAME OUT.

JOHN HAMILTON HAD A BROTHER, WESLEY, A YEAR YOUNGER, WHO COULD HAVE BEEN HIS TWIN, AND THUS THEY WERE ABLE TO PROVIDE ALIBIS FOR EACH OTHER.



APPREHENDED IN SAN FRANCISCO, JOHN HANGED HIMSELF IN HIS CELL AND WESLEY WAS CONVICTED OF MURDER AND SENTENCED TO LIFE — ENDING ONE OF THE OLD WEST'S STRANGEST GAMBLERS



Brothers under the Rope

*The tinhorn brothers had one draw left apiece, so they made
it sixguns . . . back to back!*

By Dennison Rust

THE famous feud between the Quaintances, partners in the Golconda, started when the taller one—named Parson from his habit of wearing a long black frock coat, and his generally devout mien—first learned that his stubby, jovial half-brother, Flash, was as crooked as any dog's hind leg.

Later, Fash grinned and winked at the dour-faced Parson. "Simple as shootin' fish, feller," he laughed. "All I need is to practice that deal some and I'll make us plenty of easy dinero. Hell, everybody expects a gambler to cheat, an' if he does it well enough, what's the difference?"

The Parson's long face grew bleak. "From here out you an' me split the blankets. The Golconda is a straight place, and I'm givin' a square deal to every son who steps in these doors. I'm buyin' you out—right now!"

Yet for all his underhand work, Flash Quaintance, in his new place on Kansas Street, did a fine business.

That mutual hatred was bound to end in gunsmoke, had not something happened to change the course of their destinies. That factor was a growing civic consciousness on the part of Painted Springs.

Therefore, it wasn't strange that a grim deputation of citizens called on Flash Quaintance one night, dismantled his Palace saloon, and took him down toward the gnarled cottonwood on the edge of town. Then he saw another silent group leading his brother, Parson.

"Parson *seems* straight enough, but he's blood-brother to this snake, an' snake blood

will out, shore's preachin'!" explained one citizen.

But another citizen intervened. "Make 'em cut cards to see which one will hang, an' which one will head out."

The cards were shuffled, spread out on the level ground. Flash made his draw, the jack of spades, and watched Parson's fingers steal over the deck. . . .

Maybe it was because Parson had never known temptation before, until his life depended on the turn of a card, that he tried his fumbling, crooked play and came up with a king. Then he met his brother's gaze, and for the first time something like a friendly smile of human understanding broke at once over the two gamblers' faces.

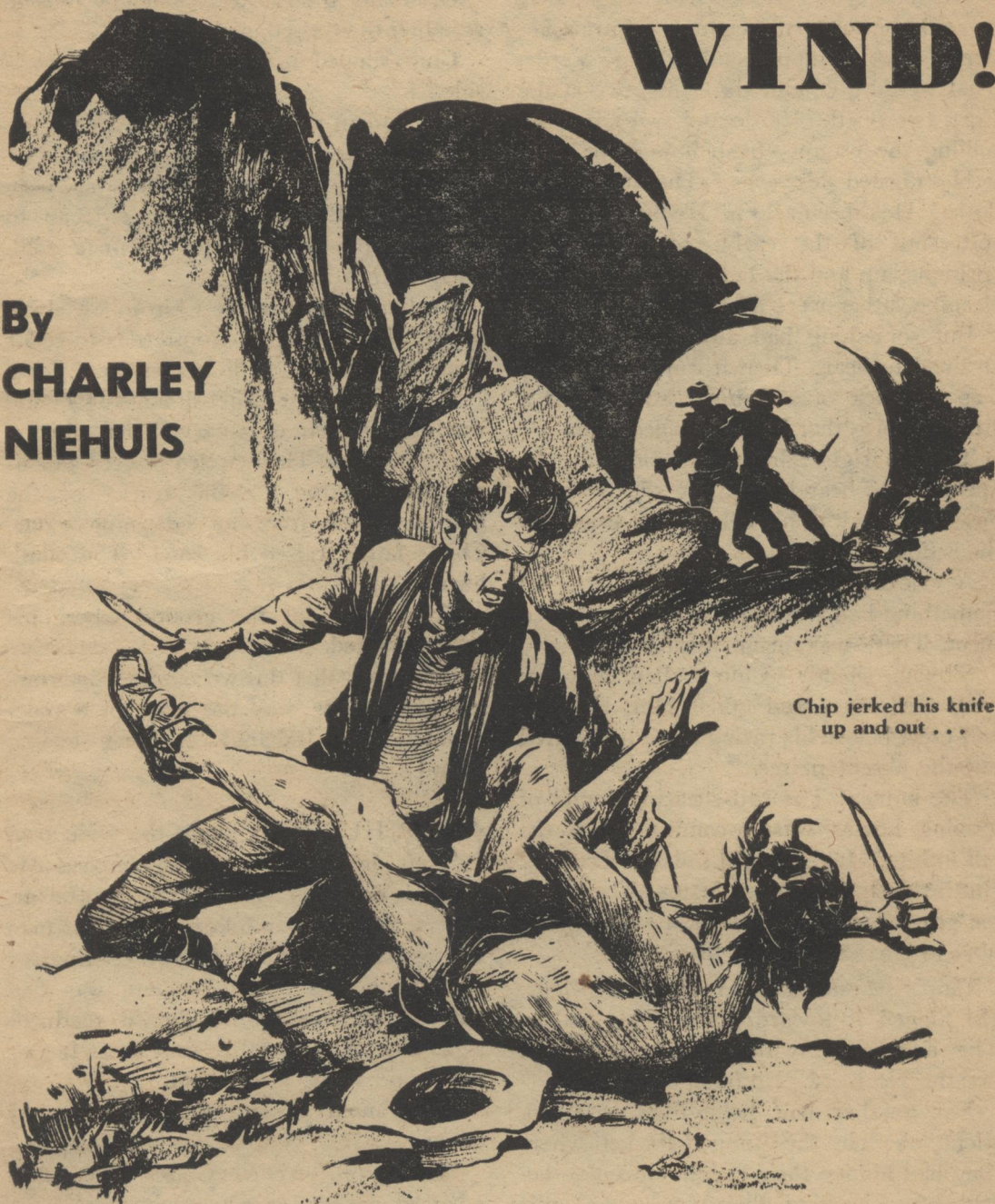
Amid the cries and shouts condemning Parson's obvious attempt, Flash elged close and whispered in his brother's ear. Parson swooped downward, his two hands already loosed, sought and found the stingy gun in Flash's boot-top. And then they were together, back to back, fighting their way toward their horses.

A few years later, two men answering the description of the Quaintance brothers were seen in the Nevada gold camps. The squat one grinned when asked about his tall, ministerial-looking partner. "Pshaw," he said. "He's just as human as you or me. He plays a straight game—they say I don't. You take yore choice. . . ."

And the tall, black-garbed one looked fondly down at his stocky, flashy little partner. "Don't let anyone tell you," he said, "that this feller ain't straighter than any one you ever met . . . Cards, gents?"

RACE the FIERCE WIND!

By
**CHARLEY
NIEHUIS**



Chip jerked his knife
up and out . . .

Hotter than the blazing desert was the vengeance in the heart of Whispering Buckman . . . And the only way the flames of revenge could be quenched was by his son's death—or his own!

TWO MORE horses. That's all he needed. Even though Chip was wide awake, he was dreaming as he listened to his hobbled horses grazing on the hillside above the scattered cedars. The moon shining through the juniper cast a

network of leaf-like shadows on his tarp.

He had ten horses—with two more he could bid on that freighting contract between Fort Whipple and Camp Verde. That would give him six teams, two at the Fort, two on the Verde and two spans for pulling the wagon—fresh horses for. . . .

He opened his eyes. The moon was down! He'd been asleep. He listened. The soft sigh of the early morning breeze springing up and the light breathing of his sleeping father were all he could hear.

But something had awakened him. He strained to hear. Then it came to him. It was the lack of a familiar sound, not a strange noise that had awakened him.

Tense, fright drying his mouth, he opened it to hear better. He slid his hand down the stock of his rifle, fitting it around the action.

A cricket chirped, once. That was it! Something had scared the crickets, silenced them. There was an answering chirp.

Slowly, silently, Chip pulled his legs from the covers and under him. He rose half erect before his racing mind had sorted out the absent noises.

The horses! The soft-shearing sound of grazing horses wasn't coming down the hill to him. Maybe they'd finished grazing? But instantly Chip knew better. The grama grasses were too sparse, a horse would have to graze all night to fill up.

Chip's searching fingers found a pebble. He flipped it toward his sleeping father. The man woke with a sharp intake of breath. No word. No other sound.

For another half hour they crouched, silent, alert in the juniper thicket where they had hidden their beds the evening before after cooking their suppers a mile away.

Sometimes Chip thought his father, Whispering Buckman, was too careful about Apaches. The older man's caution when they were riding the range was sometimes a hardship. Now Chip didn't feel that way. Marauding Indians didn't just

steal horses. They'd just as easily kill too.

Gradually the crickets along the hillside resumed their rhythmic song.

Chip slipped noiselessly to his father's side.

The Indian-fighter whispered, "Varmint, red or white, sneaked off your horses."

Chip felt sick inside. His fears had been confirmed. But he knew better than to race out into the open and begin a wild, noisy search for them.

An hour passed while Chip followed his father, slowly, silently from cedar to cedar along the hillside. The horses were gone.

With them went Chip's dreams. His mind was washed clean of fantasy. Then, finally, daylight came. They circled in ever-widening arcs, cutting for the tracks of the horses. Then from an adjoining ridge, Chip's father raised his hand. The youth hurried over.

Chip looked at the ground where his father pointed.

In the soft dirt thrown out by a burrowing prairie dog was the print of a moccasined foot. Indians! A horse-stealing party!

CHIP HURRIED along the wide trail left by the ten driven horses. He glanced over his shoulder at his father, expecting to see him following, but the man was again circling, head down looking for sign. Chip was irritated—there was that extreme caution again! They'd read the sign. The time for that was past. It was now time to be after them.

He wanted to run the raiding party down.

"Come on," yelled Chip. "We know what happened. Let's hit their trail."

The older man only raised his hand while he continued to study the horse tracks.

Chip ignored his father and started to run, not fast, but in a distance-consuming jog—a rate of speed he could keep up for hours, if need be.

The boy heard his father's pounding step behind him, and then a detaining hand on his shoulder. He turned. The older man shook his head.

Chip hesitated while his father mouthed the words with difficulty.

"Don't run! Apaches! Four bucks."

The youth listened, anger boiling up in him like water in a kettle. But, fear came up too!

His father knew Apaches—with reason! Three bucks had captured him once, long ago, when Chip was only ten. They'd cut out part of his father's tongue and crushed his throat. That was why his father was known as Whispering Buckman. It had taken him three years to learn how to talk again, and he still had difficulty although more than six years had passed. Only his family could understand his mouthings.

"They've got my horses," argued Chip, remembering his loss.

"Trail slow then," cautioned the older man. "Slow!" he repeated waving a warning finger. "Don't catch up or get near them before sundown."

Chip slowed his pace, estimating the speed of the horses and trying to match it. The youth looked ahead; the turned stones, crushed grasses, cut and trampled sod was easy to follow.

The trail swung off the ridge and made a half-circle into a wash. The thieves had worked it cleverly, drifting the horses over the ridge away from the hillside where they had grazed, then hazing them into the wash. In the soft sand, they'd trotted the horses to a safe distance, then pushed them into a distance-eating lope.

Chip stepped out, running fast for an hour, until the little valley opened into a bigger one. His father was coursing slightly to one side, keeping to the higher country, looking ahead.

Chip had heard many times the story of the older man's awful experience. How he had trailed a fleeing Apache right into a trap the wily Indians had set for him.

The back-scuttling buck had fooled his father into the ambush set by two other Apaches. There had been a terrible fight, ending in capture—and then night-long torture. Miraculously Thad Buckman had seen an opportunity, grabbed a knife and slashed his way out, leaving one Apache dead, another dying. The third had lost a thumb and finger.

Chip thought how odd it was that in that terrible melée in which his father had fought for his life that he never lost hold of the Apache's thumb and finger that he'd sliced off, and which now lay dried and withered on the mantle of the fireplace in their ranch house.

The youth had often heard his father jest, "The Apaches out-traded me in that set-to." Ever since, his father had been trying to even up with the Indians, disappearing for long weeks at a time, and coming home silent and satisfied with everything.

THE SUDDEN appearance of another wide band of horse tracks coming into the trail Chip was following jerked him back to reality. The new trail was older, probably made the day before. Chip's horses had made fresh tracks on top of them that morning.

The youth stopped and waved to his father, who hurried down the slope to him.

The older man back-trailed a distance and came back, shaking his head.

"Big horse-stealing party. Fifteen in this bunch, six of 'em with riders." Chip's father pointed to the trail coming down from the north, "They're from Anvil Rock ranch." Then he waved to the east, the direction both bands of stolen horses had been driven. "To Sycamore Canyon. Main camp of Indians there—probably at Blue Hole."

Chip knew the place well. Sycamore widened out. The creek pooled up there, its banks carpeted with lush grass. It was a natural gathering-place for man or beast

passing through the semi-arid plateau country of the Arizona territory.

The boy held his rifle at trail and began to dog-trot again. His father raced alongside and stopped him.

A worried frown clouded his face as Chip heard him say, "There's nine bucks with the horses. Probably three or four more in the camp. That's way too many for us."

Chip shrugged his shoulders and continued walking the trail.

Again his father tried to stop him, laboring with the long sentences.

"Five to one of us—at least! Let's circle down to Fort Whipple and get the soldiers. It's only a day's run."

Chip showed surprise at the suggestion. He knew his father always went after the Apaches alone.

"Why, you never do that. You always go by yourself." Chip looked, questioning, at his father, then across the valley, the direction his stolen horses had been driven. Every line of his lithe, well-muscled frame showed vigor. He was a man before his time. His jaw muscles worked as he calculated the risks.

"Sure," agreed his father. "I'll go alone, but I'm not taking my boy into a camp of scalping, tongue-cutting Apaches!"

"You've always said, 'A man looks after his own, or someone else'll take over the job.'"

"That's right, 'bout a man. You're only coming seventeen and. . ."

"If I'm big enough to take a contract freighting, I'm old enough to be looking after what belongs to me," argued Chip.

"They're killers—terrible mean killers."

Chip nodded slowly, agreeing. Then he said, "I'd rather leave my hide on a fence than to spend my life in a coral."

Chip felt his father's appraising eyes going over him. The youth was embarrassed and inhaled deeply of the cool morning air to relieve the tension. Then he spoke with finality.

"You've killed plenty of them since they caught you. That was for what they did to you. Now they've done something to me!" Chip jabbed a thumb into his own chest to emphasize his statement.

He saw his father's eyes light with understanding.

"Yes, but you let me fight the Apaches, boy! I haven't got much to lose. You couldn't do any freighting hunkered up in an anthill."

Chip shook his head.

"I'll still need those horses."

His father lifted a hand to Chip's chin and turned his head. The youth had to look directly into his father's eyes.

"I'll take you," said his father, finally. "Promise me one thing. We do it my way, and no arguments. Remember, they took me in once, but I've been winner every time since."

Chip nodded agreement.

"You're boss," he said solemnly.

His father waved his hand.

"Hit the trail, but keep your eye on me."

Within the next fifteen minutes the spoor of the horses climbed out of the valley and headed due east, toward Sycamore Canyon, just where Chip's father had said they would probably make their main camp.

AS CHIP followed the trail his mind went to the foes ahead. In spite of his anger and the urge that drove him to close with horse-stealing Apaches, Chip felt the chill of fear mount in him the third time since he had awakened. He remembered all too vividly the dramatic scene of his father's homecoming after his escape from the three torturing Apache bucks. Too, his father's reference to the possibility of his sitting in an anthill had brought back a sharp, burning memory—of a bleak, white skull of a man. Chip had found it in a hill of ants. He'd tried to roll it out with his foot, but it wouldn't budge. When he had dug down he'd found the body of a man.

It was plain he'd been buried alive in a sitting position in the hill of harvester ants after the cruel custom of the Apaches. The savages had left only the man's head, from the ears up, exposed to the broiling Arizona sun. The stinging red ants, armed with flesh-nipping pinchers, had picked the skull clean.

Involuntarily his pace slowed. His mind had been so occupied that his father had swung down from the ridge to join him.

"What's the matter with you?" his father demanded. "You're walking blind, like a loco'd mule. You'll walk right into their camp if you ain't careful."

Chip shook his head, swallowed hard, "Thinking about Apaches."

"The next question from his father whisked into Chip's mind like an arrow. Did you remember the prospector?"

Chip nodded, his face paling, and the feeling of sickness sweeping over him again.

"Still want your horses?"

"Yes!" said Chip determinedly.

The youth felt the older man's strong hand on his shoulder.

"That's it, son, we can't run from them—not if we want to live here." His father slapped him on the back for the first time in his life, just as he were another man. "Just remember—I know Apaches, keep your head up!"

Two hours later, at a little stream, Chip knelt and drank his fill while his father watched. Then his father, and they hit the trail, his father scouting the high points.

The trail was freshening fast, Chip noticed. Once he'd found horse droppings, still warm and steaming in the cool fall air. Chip's father cautioned slower travel as they were close behind the tiring horses.

Chip's heart pounded faster, not from the tremendous exertion of the long run, but from the excitement of the impending encounter with the Apaches.

The late afternoon sun had already left the bottom of the washes and it warmed

Chip's back as he climbed out and up toward his father who was travelling parallel and just under the crest of a ridge. The older man waved a halt.

"Big Sycamore's out in front a mile," said his father. "They're camped at Blue Hole, sure as hell. We'll sneak down the rim a piece then slip over the rim. They'll have a couple of bucks watching their back trail where they went into the canyon."

Chip followed silently. He was tired now. They had traveled a long, long way, alternately trotting and walking. His father led him up an arroyo, keeping low and out of sight. Then they crept into the cedar thickets, finally bellying down in the tall grasses. Chip followed his father's every movement. Never once, he noticed, slipping into a crevice that broke the rim rocks of Sycamore, did his father sky-line himself.

Under the rim, in a thicket of mountain mahogany, Chip stopped behind his father to listen. Faintly he caught the sound of moving horses, the click of hoofs on rocks, the murmur of human voices in the deep and gloom-shrouded canyon bottom.

The sudden, piercing scream of an injured horse rose eerily and echoed in the canyon. Chip looked questioningly at his father and saw the silent man grinning in the swiftly gathering dusk.

"Killing a horse—big feast tonight—celebrating the return of the bucks with a lot of horses!"

SOON IT was dark in the canyon and pinpoints of light flickered up through the leafy cottonwoods lining the stream below. Chip felt a hand on his arm, and his father pulled himself to his feet from where he'd been sitting. Slowly, carefully, Chip followed his stealthy parent into the canyon.

Chip had never felt this high exhilarating feeling before—he was stalking Indians! They circled below the celebrating Apaches and went across the canyon. Up on the

other side Chip followed his father along a ledge running the length of the canyon wall, just above the noisy camp.

The youth looked over. The swaggering bucks were back with their squaws. Chip could see and hear them boasting and laughing.

Chip eased his rifle over, but his father grabbed the barrel and held it up, shaking his head. Then Chip heard him, close, whispering directly in his ear.

"Wait!"

Then Chip realized how stupid it would have been for him to shoot.

The squaws brought out quantities of liquor. Chip watched the bucks drink heavily of the potent *tiswin*. The Apaches wolfed down broiled horsemeat and called for more liquor. Occasionally one would throw back his head and let out a terrifying yell at the rising moon, or leap into the firelight and whirl in a few wild dance steps.

Chip shrank from the edge and wilted in spirit. The carousing Apaches were more savage than he'd thought. He looked at his father for strength and reassurance.

The older man looked back, and Chip knew his father recognized the fear that was in him.

"It's good!" he whispered. "Good."

The Apaches continued to whoop it up, eating, and drinking more *tiswin*. Chip saw that even some of the squaws were drunk now. Finally the moon came up over the canyon rim, and the boy felt his father pull him back from the ledge.

Chip was rested again, eager. The Apaches were in a drunken brawl below.

"Why don't we jump them?" he asked. "We could get two-thirds of them with our repeaters."

Chip's father shook his head.

"They never get too drunk to fight. Wait. About four or five o'clock." Then the older man lay down on his side, arm under his head and closed his eyes.

Chip was tense, listening. The howling,

drunken Indians seemed to make more noise than they had before. It was after midnight, Chip reasoned, before the noise in the canyon began to taper off. Chip crept to the side of his father.

The older man lay still, breathing lightly, evenly. He appeared asleep and Chip marveled at the man, stretched out on his side, completely relaxed except for the arm under his head which served as a pillow. Even in his impatience Chip knew this was the secret of his father's success as an Indian fighter—the ability to wait until just the right time to strike.

But Chip couldn't sleep, and when the moon dropped below the rim two hours later he crept again to the edge of the ledge and peeped over. The squaws were gone. Here and there a buck Apache babbled incoherently. As the noisy camp quieted down, Chip located the horses, up canyon from the camp.

Corraled 'em without letting them graze, thought Chip. *Damned horse thieves . . .* his teeth ground in anger!

Finally only one lone buck remained, sitting in the firelight, staring stupidly at the waning embers. Chip thought the time had come, and awakened his father. The older man was instantly alert at Chip's light touch. He had never moved from his position on his side, arm under his head. Chip saw his father rub the stiffness from from it.

"It'd awaked me up in 'nother thirty minutes," his father mouthed in his ear. His eyes gleamed as he listened for noise in the canyon. Then to Chip, "'Bout time!"

The older man studied the camp, then led Chip off the ledge. Chip followed him across the canyon, up the other side a way then sidehilling until they came to the trail that the Apaches had followed into Sycamore.

Halfway up this trail, his father stopped.

Chip felt his father's groping hand on his arm. It guided Chip's hand to his father's

side. The youth felt the other draw his knife.

Fear clutched him. Knives! He had expected it to be a shooting fight. Knives! Terror swept into his tightening chest and sickness bubbled up in him.

His father let go and glided up the trail. Chip trailed behind, his palm sweating on his own knife handle until he had to wipe it dry on his pant leg.

Chip realized the plan his father had in mind—to kill the sober guards at the head of the trail—then descent on the *tiswin*-stupified camp. The advantage would be theirs, coming up behind the sentries.

Were there one or two Indians? Or more?

Chip's muscles tightened so quickly he stumbled, scraping his foot. His father halted instantly. They were near the rim.

Chip felt his father's reassuring hand in the blackness of the night, calming him. The steadying hand pressed him down, and his father floated away in the void that was the night.

His father wanted to go on alone. Chip stood still.

DISTANTLY, FAINTLY a coyote ki-yoodled to the sinking moon in the west, already below the horizon. There was just the faintest glow of reflected light along the rim of the canyon. In spite of his father's warning, Chip crept slowly up the trail.

He held his knife poised, as his father had taught him, point forward, low, sharp edge turned up and in. His rifle hung in his left hand, ready to be dropped.

Chip sensed, more than heard, his father only a short few paces in front of him. Suddenly the youth froze.

A pebble rolled up on the rim ahead.

Chip crouched, trying to get more of the edge of the canyon against the dimly lighted skyline. Then he saw his father, creeping, crouching, moving slowly over the rim. The Indian-fighter's shadow blended into

the blackness that was on up-ended pillar of a boulder. Then it passed and came out of the other side. Even as the advancing man passed, another shadow detached itself from the boulder and slid silently in behind and toward his father.

Chip dropped his rifle and sprang up the trail.

As he leaped his quivering nostrils were filled with the pungent body odor of the Apache in front of him. He hurled himself onto the Indian's back bowling him to his knees. The buck rose strong, and whirled in his circling left arm and they were welded in straining, surging, noiseless combat.

Chip slid his left arm down and pinioned the buck's right arm, then the hand that held the warrior's knife. His own right wrist was clamped in the talon-like band of fingers of the struggling Indian.

Even in his desperate fight Chip saw another form rise from the ground alongside the trail and became one with his charging father.

Chip felt the surge of sinewy strength rise in the Apache, forcing him back. His heel caught, and he fell. The Apache swarmed up on him, whipping to get his knife free. Chip twisted violently, with all his strength, trying to pull the Indian under him as they fell. He all but succeeded. They crashed on their sides into the malapai boulders lining the trail. An up-jutting rock grazed Chip's ribs and smashed into his opponent's side. The shock loosened the Apache's grip.

Chip jerked his knife up and out. The Apache wilted in his grasp and gurgled in the darkness as Chip sprang to his feet to rush to his father's aid.

He saw the older man rise from the squirming, flaying shape that thrashed in the darkness.

They had killed both of the guards.

Then the toll of the tremendous exertion swept over Chip. He sat down. His father crouched near him and both sobbed for

breath as the sky lightened in the far east.

Chip knew they would have to hurry back into the canyon but before he could go he went over to the crumpled Apache that lay in the malapai rocks where he'd fallen. It was his father who saw it—the three fingers on the dead Indian's left hand. The thumb and forefinger were gone.

"You evened it up, son!" said Whispering Buckman. "You're sure enough a man—he's a tough one." The older man paused a moment "Was a tough one," he added pointedly.

Then they hurried down the trail, and Chip picked up his rifle. Above the sleeping Indian camp they quartered away from the descending, zig-zagging trail and side-hilled up-canyon. Quietly, carefully, they approached the rope-coral on the upper side, away from the camp. Chip and his father moved among the horses, calming them with soft whispers and gently stroking the muzzles.

He felt his father's hand on his knee and he leaned down to hear what he said.

"Take 'em up the canyon about a half mile. There's a break on the left. It'll take you right up on top." His father's

grip tightened on his leg. "I'll watch the backtrail."

Chip rode away, slowly, herding the drifting horses toward the break in the rim of Sycamore. The feeder canyon took them up fast, and in a short while they topped out.

His father was nowhere in sight at the moment.

It was a strong daylight, when Chip again looked back. He'd been watching for his father who had been a long time in one canyon. Then he saw him, topping a ridge. He was horseback!

Chip reined up and his father galloped down to him and pulled up his mount, an Apache's horse.

"They had one tied in camp," he explained to Chip's questioning look. "I just took it."

The youth spurred his own mount after the band of horses that had slowed to a walk. His father galloped up alongside.

"No need to run them," said his father casually.

As they jogged along, Chip saw him take a flat stone from his pocket and begin whetting his long knife. ***

Cattle Country Quiz Answers

(Questions on page 8)

1. False. The cry, "Give him air!" is given at a rodeo when the cowpoke is released to begin his ride.

2. True. A "half-rigged saddle" has a triangle of leather fastened on for a seat.

3. A person is in a "horn tossing mood" when he is angry at something.

4. True. A "horseman" is one who is skilled in horsemanship.

5. True. The term, "ladinos," has been used to designate outlaw cattle of the brush country.

6. A cowpoke would be suffering from "lead poisoning" when he has been shot.

7. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "mail-order catalog on foot," you should return with an over-dressed dude.

8. "Morral" is a Spanish word which refers to a food bag for horses.

9. True. The "outrider" is likely to be commissioned to ride almost anywhere to keep a watchful eye on his employer's interests and concern.

10. True. The "pickup man" picks up the horse of the rodeo contestant after the ride is over.

11. The cowpoke slang expression, "put the loop on" means "to rope."

12. True. "Rawhide lumber" is a term used in reference to unfinished slabs with the bark still on.

13. If the ranch boss sent you for some "red disturbance," you should return with some whiskey.

14. True. A "rosadero" is a sort of leather shield sewed to the back of the stirrup leather.

15. "Round-pen" is slang for corral.

16. True. "Shorthorn" is a cow puncher slang term used in reference to the tenderfoot.

17. True. Slip shooting is generally more accurate than fanning.

18. "Smoke wagon" is still another rangeland slang term for the cowpoke's gun.

19. A "sloper" is one who lives on the Pacific coast. Some have used the term to designate anyone living on the Western side of the Rocky Mountains.

20. True. In the old West, some camp cooks actually slept with their sourdough kegs as a means of hastening the fermentation of the dough.

LAW OF HELLFIRE RANGE



A gaunt-faced man
rose from some
bushes . . .

By
**GEORGE
C. APPELL**

*Up the long trail of the van-
quished Sam Quinby rode
back to Arapahoe . . . Only to
find he couldn't live down his
past—except by dying!*

THIS TOWN he was approaching, this town of Arapahoe that was a gray huddle of buildings in the heat of early summer, wouldn't hold much threat for Sam Quinby because the name he was riding under was not known here. Perhaps

he wouldn't be warmly welcomed, but he wouldn't be molested either. Unless he slipped.

Worn down to one hundred and fifty pounds by four years of war, he rode not with the triumphant assurance of the victor but with the cautious vigilance of the vanquished. It was a vigilance that he had learned dearly, in a crucible of smoke and flame, and one which he would never relax again, ever.

And so he rode, a narrow-backed young man with old eyes, astride a trail-worn horse heading for Arapahoe under a name of his own defensive choosing. Medary, he'd decided to call himself.

He hoped he wouldn't slip.

The warm drowse of the day had its enervating effect on him—Mississippi-born and new to this western part of the nation that had just conquered his South.

Or thought it had conquered his South, for already the rumors of more violence to come were running across the land with the winds. It was spoken through the hills that Jefferson Davis was organizing the Confederacy again, this time in Alabama, and that he would fort the place up and be damned with the paperwork at Appomattox. It was whispered that agents of the reborn South were already at work obtaining funds by force from the mines of the West.

And here in Arapahoe, those whispers were directed at the high and narrow shoulders of red-haired Sam Quinby himself, so that he was continually turning, as he rode into the street, to stare at pale, hostile eyes. His hat didn't show it, he'd bought that before he crossed the Missouri River; and his shirt didn't show it either, he'd picked that up from the wreckage of a wagon that had long since been abandoned. But his trousers did; resewn and patched and ragged as they were, they showed the cut and color of the Confederacy to a discerning eye. And something else showed it, too—the hard lines around his mouth,

where the flesh was channeled in eternal white grooves. Battle grooves, born of fear and nourished on determination.

Arapahoe was smaller than he'd expected, though no different from a score of towns he'd ridden through on the long, long road from the east. It was a rutted street fronted on each side by rickety buildings, a stage station that gave promise of occasional contact with the outer world, a few shabby stores, a lifeless hotel and a saloon.

Sam chose the saloon. It was pleasantly cool, after the furnace-like heat of the prairie, and it smelled of stale beer, stale tobacco, and stale clothing.

A bald-headed man with suspicious eyes stood immobile behind the bar.

"Yes?"

"Barley an' water, please."

"That'll be ten cents." The man waited until he saw Sam's money before he set out the drink. "Riding through?"

Sam started to say, "No," but held it back as he noted that all talk had stopped. Some silent men at the rear tables were waiting for his answer too. So he said, "I haven't decided yet."

What he wanted to say was, *How do you get to the Broken Key ranch from here?* But for some unaccountable reason he didn't dare, even though the Broken Key was his own property. A letter dated March 11th, 1865—last March—had apprised him of that. His uncle, his mother's only brother, had left it to him. Uncle Royce, of the Lockrey strain. A big, happy man who'd supplied the Confederacy with horses. So Sam told the bald man behind the bar, "Thought I might find work with Royce Lockrey."

The barman stared at him. Then a bearded man at one of the back tables said, evenly and slowly, "Lockrey's dead of the fevers."

Sam faced around, pretending great surprise.

"When'd that happen?"

"Three-four months ago." The bearded man was wearing a slouch hat and a leather vest. "You knew him?"

"I—" Sam faced around to the barman—"heard of him." He lifted his drink.

The barman said, "He left the Broken Key to a nephew, name of Quinby."

"Who's runnin' the spread now?"

The barman waited for several moments before he said, "Dave Drings." Then he said, "And he don't take to strangers."

An uneasy cough sounded from the rear; a boot scraped nervously. The bearded man said, "I don't suppose you'd know this Quinby? He was with the 18th Mississippi, according to the lawyer—You look like you'd served with the Rebs."

Quickly Sam said, "My name's Medary." He finished his drink and added, "I was with the 5th Texas." He waited, braced for trouble, but still it didn't come. The reputation of Sam Quinby, he realized, was already bad. It wasn't because the Broken Key was reportedly the base of operations from which the wagon trains were being raided for their mine assays, which were then sent down to Alabama for the Cause. He'd heard those things more and more frequently as he adventured west, and now that he was as far west as he wanted to be, all he was getting was suspicious questioning.

THE DOORS flapped open and a short, stocky man with blond mustache walked in and nodded to those at the rear tables. There were no answering nods. He leaned on the bar, ordered sour mash and appraised Sam with a glance.

"Ten cents," the barman said.

The talk at the tables was still dead. And then the bearded man rose and started toward the bar, fists swinging slowly backward and forward, face down and eyes raised. Sam thought, *Here comes trouble.*

The stocky youngster with the blond mustache paid for his drink but did not lift it. He was watching Sam and, beyond him,

the bearded man's approach. He asked Sam pleasantly, "New here?"

"Yeh. Lookin' for work. Name's Medary."

"Mine's Trask." He nodded toward the bearded man. "An' yonder you'll see Mitsu Quarles, the local peace officer." Trask added under his breath, "Careful, Med'ry."

Quarles was standing next to Sam now. His black eyes were luminous and his knuckles were gleaming white. There was no badge on his leather vest, but he wore a heavy gun strapped low on his hip.

"Medary, huh?" Quarles asked. "I don't suppose you know Dave Drings any better'n you know Sam Quinby."

"Drings?" Sam's heart was pumping loudly through his ears.

"The foreman at the Broken Key."

"Oh." Sam glanced at Trask for a hint of help. "No, I don't know him." He didn't either. Suddenly he asked, "Do you?"

Harsh laughter sounded from the tables, and the barman smiled behind his hand. Then Trask swigged his sour mash, cracked the glass down on the bar and said, "Leave him alone, Quarles."

Quarles glared at Trask.

"Keep out of this, Lardbelly. Why hell, if you'd give some of that hog fat of yours to Jeffie Davis, he'd probably live longer than he would on raw gold."

More laughter sounded—nervous laughter, with no gaiety in it. Trask stepped toward Quarles but Sam got between them, facing Quarles. The laughter stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

"Cook your temper somewheres else, Quarles. For a peace officer, you got a mighty low boilin' point."

Quarles studied him for a moment. There was no hatred in him, only anger.

He was confronted in Arapahoe with a situation that he didn't know how to control—the Broken Key raids—so he blustered, he challenged, he dared, in the hope of getting his hands on something concrete, on something beside rumors.

Sam could not dislike the man. In fact, while returning his stare he found respect for his courage and sympathy for his bewilderment. But Quarles would have had no use for those emotions, even if he had recognized them. He said, "If you're teaming up with Trask in any way, I'll know about it." His hand fell to his holster. "And when I know about it, I'll break up the partnership."

"Partnership in what?"

Quarles took a deep breath.

"In spotting assay trains for Dave Drings."

That was too much for Trask. His shoulder dropped and his hand blurred to his gun and he would have whipped it out if Sam hadn't grabbed his wrist and wrenched it down and around, leaving him helpless. Then he let Trask go and turned on Quarles, who had his gun out and levelled.

"Put it back, Quarles."

Quarles hesitated. He wasn't a coward and he wasn't a fool, but standing there with a gun on two men whose hands were empty made him feel foolish. So he holstered.

"You've been warned, so—"

A rider slashed past the racks outside and jumped down and flung himself through the doors shouting violently for Quarles. Then he saw him and pointed behind him with nervous jerks of his arm.

"The Marietta Mine wagons just got jumped an' burned south o' here! Whoever done it got away with a hundred sacks of unsmelted—"

But Quarles was running through the doors and the men at the tables were hurrying after him and the barman was gasping, "Land o' Goshen!" and Trask was nudging Sam and saying, "Come on, Med'ry, let's watch 'em go."

The street was empty except for high-flying dust that was swirling from the hoofs of a dozen horses that even now were galloping south.

"Maybe," Sam said, "we better go with 'em."

"Lissen, Med'ry, you're a Southerner like me. They'd never b'lieve anythin' we tried to do, or tried to tell 'em we did. An' I work for the Broken Key, which makes it worse."

Sam turned full on him, face alight with surprise.

"The Broken Key? Why, lead me to it, man."

"You sure you want to go? It's not the most pleasant place in the world since Royce Lockrey died."

Sam threw off the halter hitch and stepped into his saddle.

"This town'll be somewhat less pleasant than the Broken Key, once that posse gets back. Lead on, man!"

DAVE DRINGS was thick-set, bow-legged, and ham-handed. Arrogant black mustaches accentuated the high arch of his nose. He gave Sam no welcome, no invitation to sit; he merely listened while Trask explained what had happened in Arapahoe. Outside, a couple of riders were teasing a yearling toward the pens; a Chinese cook was cautiously rounding up a chicken. But those were the only signs of life that Sam saw.

Dave Drings considered what Trask had told him. He glanced angrily at Sam, almost accusingly, as if in that glance he could break through whatever deception might be in him.

"Medary?" Drings' eye wandered to Trask, and something passed between them, some glint of approval. Finally Drings nodded and said, "You're on at thirty a month, Medary—'til the new owner gets here, at least."

"When does the new owner get here?"

Drings shrugged irritably.

"He was last heard of in the Army. Name's Quinby, nephew of the late owner." He added with some bitterness, "Major

Samuel Quinby, 18th Mississippi." And he spat.

"D'you know him?"

Drings' nostrils stiffened.

"Never heard of him until last month."

"You don't seem to like him much."

The foreman frowned blackly.

"Why should I, when he'll come wad-dlin' out here full of wrong ideas about how to run a ranch? Why should I, when I've got the place paying all by myself?"

"By yourself? Or for yourself?" Sam wanted a showdown now, before the rest of the riders returned from southward. He was convinced that that's where they were, hovering near the spot where the Marietta train had been hit.

Trask said, "Come on, Med'ry, I'll show you the bunk—"

"Wait a minute." Drings stalked forward. "What did you just say?"

Sam grinned coldly.

"I said that maybe you had this place payin' for you, not by you. It looks awfully prosperous for a spread that's just wintered-up an' hasn't had time yet to brand or ship. It looks mighty clean, with only two pokes an' a cook to police it."

Drings reached smoothly and swiftly for Sam's neckerchief knot and held it.

"I don't answer questions here, I ask 'em." He shook the neckerchief once.

"Come to think of it, I'll save the new owner the trouble, and fire you right now."

He shook the neckerchief again and said through his side teeth to Trask, "You got hoodwinked. This man's no cowpoke, he's probably a sheriff."

Sam broke free and took a long step backward.

"Why should that worry you, Drings?"

He was still grinning, though there was no humor in him.

Drings's anger broke and he side-swept a fist into Trask's mouth and lunged at Sam and hatcheted him across the jaws and slammed him against the door and hit him brutally in the lower stomach. Trask

came at him from behind but Drings whirled and jabbed up a knee to break Trask's coming and sent him spinning into a table. Sam shoved himself away from the door and drove a right hook into Drings's ribs, crossed with a left and slashed him twice across the cheeks. Drings charged him and they locked grips and for twenty seconds grappled each other, flinging themselves in a mad dance that had no rhythm, no pattern. Then Drings tore himself loose and clawed for his gun and that's when Sam connected with a swift right hook to the jaw that laid the man flat on the seat of his pants with his eyes rolling white and his fingers twitching numbly.

"I hereby give notice," Sam Quinby growled. "Trask, you comin'?"

Trask disentangled himself from the wreckage of the table.

"Reckon I better. I figure we got five minutes, maybe less, to seek the realm of free movement, as Jeb Stuart used to say."

They catapulted the semi-conscious Drings and hit their saddles, spurred across the area and out through the gates and away toward the northern hills. On the first upgrade they stopped to blow their horses and listen for the signals of pursuit.

Trask rubbed his mouth tenderly and winced.

"That's one I owe him—Hear!"

Hoofs were drumming the hardpack trail behind them, coming louder.

"Trask, there's three of 'em anyway. What d'you propose?"

"Ambush." Trask blew out his breath and shook his head. "We're at our rope's end anyway, Med'ry, so there's no use runnin' any more."

But Sam didn't think son.

"We're near it, not at it. I propose we let 'em chase us aways. What's the old sayin'? 'He who runs to fight again—' Somethin' like that—Let's run to fight again!"

They spurred up to the higher bench and galloped across a flat, piny stretch and

pressed on up into the first timber. Behind and below them, Drings and two riders appeared on the bench. Three tiny fluffs of white smoke spurted and faded; the bullets slogged short. Trask fired and missed.

Then they were riding upward again, seeking deeper timber. The day was getting old and trees were turning from green to purple. Once, Drings shortened the distance at a crazy gallop on his patch-colored pony and fired four times and then circled back into the lower rocks; another time, Sam and Trask lagged until less than a hundred yards separated them from the pursuit, when each fired and one of the riders yelped and rose in his saddle and then sagged over the pommel, hanging onto it. His horse crow-hopped and threw him, and Sam and Trask whirled away through the timber and were gone.

It was twilight in the valleys though not yet on the slopes when they paused to rest their horses again, and to listen. But the pursuit had ended, and the dying day was quiet.

Trask nodded happily.

"With a wounded man to pack, they figured to turn back, an' damned glad of it I'll bet."

SUDDENLY HE yanked on his bridles and turned, staring below into a wooded vale where half a dozen canvas-topped wagons had been drawn into a quick defensive circle.

"B'God, Med'ry, there's the reason Drings didn't want to come any further!" He pointed. "He didn't want to spook his next target 'til he had enough strength to hit it."

Sam eyed him curiously.

"You know a lot about Drings, don't you?"

Trask looked away. His horse, switching its tail, suddenly tensed, came together and backed against Sam's animal, bumping it aside.

A gaunt-faced man wearing a blue kepi

and jackboots rose from some bushes and threw a Spencer on them.

"Well, boys," he twanged, "just what're you doin' up here all alone on the hot end of gunfire?"

Sam hauled his bits around and squinted through the dusk.

"We got fired off the Broken Key, that's what."

"Fired, is right." The man held the Spencer higher. "The Broken Key?" He grimaced with distaste. "I didn't know they fired men with Southern accents. You better come down an' explain—Get off an' walk, I'll be right behind you."

One by one, figures began to crawl from the wagons. The first were men with rifles; the last were females—two of them. The largest had gray hair tucked beneath a bonnet, a firm mouth and an understanding eye; the smallest had dark hair and lots of it, a smooth skin and sparkling blue eyes.

The man with the kepi lowered his Spencer and beckoned to a burly man wearing side-whiskers and a black coat.

"Peter, I flushed these two on the bench yonder. They say they just got kicked off the Broken Key."

Peter Meservey examined Sam and Trask with great care.

"Where'd you come from?"

"We just told your outpost, here." Sam went on, "You sound as if we're culprits. Let me ask a question—where'd you come from?"

The bonneted woman made clucking noises and climbed back into her wagon. The younger woman, the pretty one, continued to stare at Sam.

"We're from California," Peter Meservey said firmly. "We teamed up two days ago with the Santa Maria Mining wagons, here. We're leaving them at the town of Arapahoe, where we hope to settle." He cleared his throat. "That satisfy you?"

Sam, nodding, dragged his eyes from the pretty girl.

"They're Davis agents, Peter. That's my guess."

The girl folded her arms across her breast and eyed Sam balefully.

"You'd think that folks'd realize the war is over, and that they'd stop all this shooting and robbing—intelligent folks, that is."

Sam winked at her, but before she could say anything her mother called her into the wagon. Her father, Peter Meservey, tugged at his side-whiskers and cleared his throat again.

"We have no evidence against them, we'll have to let them go. But mind you—don't get caught skulking!"

The man with the Spencer cocked it, and Trask made a move for his own gun. But Sam pushed him toward their horses.

"Odds're too high. Let's pull foot."

They trotted off into the deepening dusk, pointing toward town. Trask stayed mad for a mile, then began to soften.

"It does seem kinda crazy, keepin' the war goin' on an' on, with all this country to build up."

"Yeh," Sam Quinby agreed, "it sure does." They rode in guilty silence for another mile, when Sam asked, "You were with Jeb Stuart?"

"Until Richmond. I got hit with a Minie ball at Yellow Tavern, the mornin' Jeb was killed, an' I never did go back—war does strange things to folks, don't it?"

"Yeh." Another mile, and the stars were low and bright and brittle. "Like makin' 'em support a new one— Sounds crazy." Sam swallowed uneasily. That girl back there had had an uncommon effect on him.

"Crazy for sure, tryin' to continue fightin'." Trask was obviously impressed with this rich land, with its warm fallowness and fertile promise. When the lights of Arapahoe were in the distance, he asked, "You aimin' to meet that girl in town?"

Sam was shocked.

"I'm aimin' for a steak an' onions! I've

been on Army rations for so long that I can't remember what good food tastes like."

"Where, suh," Trask inquired, "did you say you served?"

"With the 18th Mississippi— Come on, let's get that steak."

BUT THEY didn't get it. All they got in Arapahoe was a grim-lipped greeting from men with hostile eyes—men who had just packed the charred bodies of the Marietta wagon train drivers into town. The tarpaulin burial sacks were on the plankwalk in front of the stage station.

Quarles carried a lamp from the saloon and held it high over the heads of Sam Quinby and Trask.

"Broken Key riders, returning to check up on the results, eh?" Without turning he called, "Pike! Grease up a rope and choose a tree! We'll hold court in the barroom."

The man called Pike spun out a riata and shook it a few times, then coiled it in; others crowded the two accused men from the rear and hazed them into the saloon.

Trask had a chance to murmur, "Med'ry, maybe we should've ambushed Drings, after all."

"Maybe we still can." Sam leaned backward against the bar, elbows on the wood, legs crossed. The ring of faces confronting him in the smoky lamplight was like a silent jury from hell. The man Pike was seated in a corner, greasing his riata.

Quarles thrust his way through the crowd and opened the indictment with a few short words as to how Trask had been suspect since he'd begun riding for the Broken Key the week before, and how he'd contrived to meet Medary, here, on the very day of the Marietta raid, those two taking care to be seen in town at the time of the raid.

"But," Quarles added, "they planned it for Drings."

Sam held up a finger, schoolboy-fashion.

"Can the accused speak?"

"Briefly," Quarles sneered distastefully.

"Well then, that's a pretty story, but you can't prove it. It so happens that Trask an' me just got run off the Broken Key by Dave Drings, for askin' too many questions. Your proof, Mist' Quarles, lies with Drings, not with us." A rough murmur of agreement answered that; but the man Pike continued to grease his riata. Sam considered tipping his hand all the way and disclosing himself as owner of the Broken Key, but quickly rejected it. The nephew of the man who had sold horses to the old Confederacy would automatically be condemned of furthering the fortunes of the reborn Confederacy.

Quarles looked at the faces for support.

"If we visit Drings again, all we'll get is the same old lullaby. I say, let's string these two now as an example to all the others."

Sam Quinby played his last card on a long chance.

"If you want to visit Drings, you'll find him at dawn in a vale about twelve miles north of here, fixin' to jump a wagon train that's bedded for the night." It got the surprise that he wanted. "It's a Santa Marfa Mine train, bound past here for the river, and some Californians are with it. If they ever reach here, they'll settle here."

Even Trask was startled to hear that. Quarles studied his jury again, and knew that he'd lost. The men wanted to ride. But still Quarles delayed with, "There's no proof of what Medary says. He's probably decoying us into the hills so Drings can hit somewheres else."

And Sam got angry.

"At the risk of my life? Is Drings worth that to me?" He pushed with his elbows and confronted Quarles. "If your proof lies with Drings, so does mine!"

The jury was for it. Men were already striding out to the racks to take their horses. Quarles suddenly whipped out his gun and held it on Sam.

"You'll ride right in front of me, all the

way." He waved the muzzle toward Trask.

"And you'll ride beside him, all the way."

Trask stared accusingly at Sam and in his expression was written, *Now look what you've done.* . . .

Sam muttered, "You know more about Drings's habits than I do." He was indifferent to the accusation, he had more reason for returning to that wagon train than he had for staying in town.

As they filed out of town into the darkness, Pike kept flicking the end of his riata at the prisoners, as if to get accustomed to the feel of their skins. He kept doing that until Quarles, surly of mood, commanded him to stop it. The rest of the posse was strung out behind, their horses heaving and straining on the steeper grades, hoofs clicking and girths whispering.

Sometime after midnight they came to the place where the man with the Spencer had thrown down on them. Below in the vale, weak moonlight showed the wagon hoods as gray blobs.

"Well," Quarles whispered, "where's Drings?" He motioned to Pike, who closed up with the rope.

"He'll be here before dawn." And Sam added silently, *I hope.* His thoughts went to the dark-haired girl who undoubtedly was sound asleep in a wagon bed, wrapped in a dream fabric of a new home this side of the mountains. He wondered if she had thought of him at all, the young Southerner who'd winked at her when a Spencer was aimed at his back. He supposed not. He told Quarles, "The best thing to do is lay for 'em here an' then cut 'em off. That way, the gun fire'll be diverted from the wagons." He didn't want that girl to get hurt.

Objects were becoming distinct now. Tree boles shone with the dawn dampness; hides glimmered brownly. Quarles's features eroded from the grayness—nose, beard and shoulder, cut there like stone. Then a rasping, "Hsst!" ripped from the further trees. Every man braced himself,

knees straight down along cinches, guns out.

There was movement to the south, in the direction of the Broken Key. Men were leading horses on foot, then stopping and milling; then mounting at a whispered order.

Dave Drings was a squat lump on his patch-colored range pony. His undertones were rowel-sharp, "Pick off the guards first, then the others . . . Stampede the remuda . . . Ed, you and Utterho and Max cut in and snag the bullion . . . Get the women if you can, they make good hostages . . . All set?"

THEY STARTED forward, horses' heads held high on tautened bridles because of the steep slope of the vale. Sam was suddenly aware that Quarles was watching him, was waiting for him to open the ball. So he filled his lungs and let go with the Rebel yell—"Hi-yi-yi-yi-yi!" and plunged out of the trees and crashed down through the underbrush into the flank of the raid. Trask was beside him, bouncing and twisting and trying to find a clear target. Guns flared through the dawnlight and the raid buckled, broke and collapsed back into itself. Bullets whickered sickeningly close and a horse went down, thrashing, and a man shrieked wildly and there were more flashes, yellow stabs of flame sparking back and forth. There were no battle lines, only a weird jamboree of pirouetting figures and churning hoofs and colliding horses, only the deafening blasts of gunfire that chewed across the dying dawn. Then there were other flashes, and the clump of a Spencer, and a nasal cry. Peter Meservey's bull howl came from below; bushes broke and feet thudded up the slope.

And quite suddenly, with the suddenness of a cut off nightmare, it was over, and there were nothing but sprawled forms in the stained bushes and the acridness of gun-smoke and the frightened running of horses.

Sam found Dave Drings lying blue-faced and quiet in the trampled dirt, his glazed eyes not seeing the coming day. There were others—Ed and Max, Quarles said; and one named Utterho, who'd been handy with the torch.

"And that," Quarles intoned triumphantly, "just about finishes the Broken Key."

Trask knelt to Utterhoe and spoke urgently to him, even as the man was dying;

(Continued on page 110)



GUN THIS MAN DOWN!

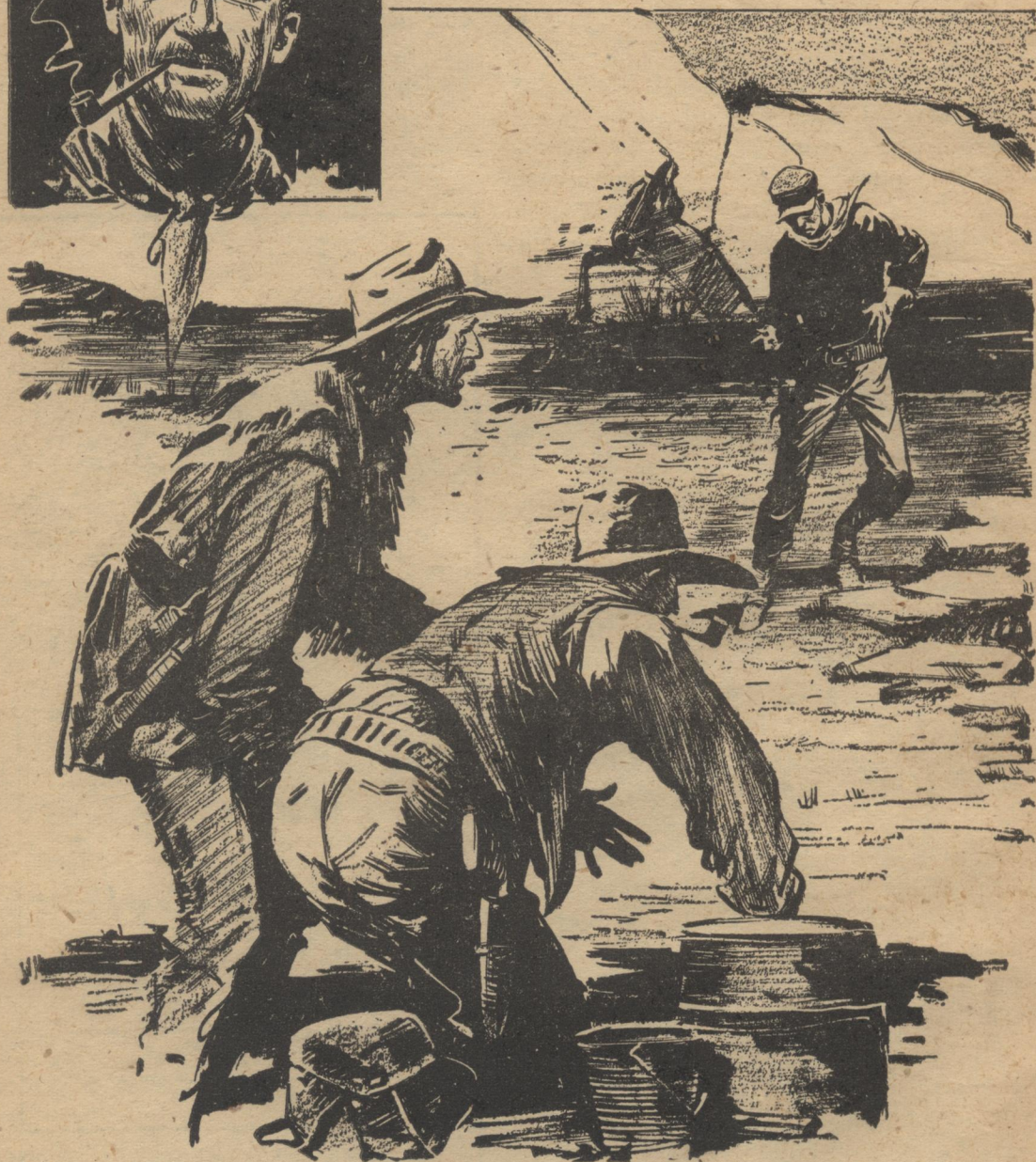
By Lewis B. Patten

They called Matt Hurst wolf-whelp, rustler, killer, renegade — and when he rode into town, they had a welcoming party ready for him—with a noose sized to fit his neck! Don't miss this thrill-packed story of a lone outcast who had to prove himself a man—against a blood-mad town!

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WAR AT



Framed and cashiered, Dane York used bloodless silence as his weapon of truth until impending massacre and a merciless sun demanded testimony—and a vengeful saber did the talking!

SPANISH WELLS



Clifton whirled to fire from his hip.

By

GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

THE PUFFED white clouds drifted lazily, high over Spanish Wells. The sun lanced down between them in long rays that seemed, pillar-like, to support the sky. To the southeast the Harcurvar Mountains floated in a plum-colored haze. Across the flats a vagrant wind-devil danced its aimless, whirling reel only to vanish and then reappear half a mile farther on. Ocotillo, saguaro and prickly pear stippled the slopes that squatted beneath the somber, brooding Buckskins.

Dane York sat in the slight shade of a rock and filled his pipe. Below him, encircled by rock walls, was the big rock *tinaja* filled with water. Hank Mooney, his partner, watered the horses and the pack-mule from the rock pan. Dane lit his pipe and studied the thread of dust far to the northeast. There was still time to water up and then head into the Buckskins before the Mohaves reached Spanish Wells—if they were Mohaves.

Dane touched the heavy Spencer carbine that leaned beside him. The two of them could hold off a small party, but the Mohaves were up in force from Fort Yuma north to the Mohave Mountains and east as far as Wickenburg. It was best not to take chances.

Dane looked down at his faded uniform trousers. It was all he had left from his ten years' service on the frontier, other than his Castellani saber, now wrapped in cham-ouis on the back of the packmule. Whipple Barracks was far behind Dane now, with its memories of formal retreats and the brass tongue of the trumpet to regulate his life. Hank Mooney was the only friend he had left from all the comrades he had known.

"Captain Dane York," he said quietly "Cashiered." The word rolled on his tongue like gall. He had known other officers who had been cashiered and others who had been washed out by the Benzine Board of 1869. The incompetent and the unfit; the drunkards and the gamblers. Seven hundred and fifty of them had gone down by the boards, with a year's pay in their wallets; resigned or dismissed for the good of the service. "For the good of the service," he said aloud. It covered a multitude of military and moral sins.

Dane walked slowly down the hill. He whistled *The Rogue's March*.

Hank Mooney looked up from the well side.

"Botherin' you again, Dane? To hell with it."

Poor old soldier,
Poor old soldier,
Tarred and feathered and sent to hell
Because he wouldn't soldier well.

Dane's baritone sent the old words ringing back from the rock walls surrounding the *tinaja*. He grinned at Hank.

"Sorry," he said.

Hank cut a chew from his plug and stowed it in his mouth.

"Just what did you do with that three

thousand dollars from the squadron fund, Dane?" he asked, with a twinkle in his faded gray eyes.

Dane rubbed his gray's neck. "Spent it on red-eye and the hurdy-gurdy girls on Whiskey Row, Hank. Didn't you know?"

Hank chewed. "I wonder who did get all that *dinero*?"

Dane shrugged. "Any one of two hundred men and officers at Whipple Barracks. He covered his tracks well, whoever he was."

"And left you holding the bag."

"Forget it. It's all over, Hank. We've got some prospecting to do."

Hank nodded. The veteran scout, who had ridden with Dane's Troop C for three years, had been the only man who had remained friendly to Dane in the whole mess. Rough, uncouth and sometimes quarrelsome was Hank Mooney, but his loyalty to Dane had never been questioned. He had left government service as civilian scout to join Dane in his new fortunes.

"There's dust to the northeast, Hank," said Dane, as he filled his canteen.

"Mohaves?"

"*Quien sabe?*"

Hank grunted. "You want to push on?"

"Yes. We've got enough water to reach Osborne Well, haven't we?"

"Plenty. We can travel all night and get there after dawn."

"Fair enough."

Hank padded to the entrance to Spanish Wells and shaded his eyes, studying the dust.

"White men, Dane," he said.

Dane came up beside the scout. He didn't question the man. Mooney had an instinct that was almost miraculous until you knew him well. He weighed and analyzed every scrap of evidence and then made a flat statement. He was seldom wrong.

Hank slanted his battered hat lower over his eyes.

"Soldiers," he said. He glanced at Dane.

Dane tamped his pipe. Soldiers riding

from that direction might be from Camp Verde or they could be from Whipple Barracks.

"You want to pull leather, Dane?"

For a moment Dane almost said yes. He relit his pipe and eyed the dust-shrouded riders. The sun glinted on brass.

"No," he said quietly. He didn't want to leave Arizona Territory. He couldn't go on forever avoiding the military. He would be known wherever he went, for he had served at a good many of the scattered posts of the Department of Arizona. Hank slapped Dane's back and went back to the horses. There was no need to say anything.

DANE WAS cleaning his Spencer when he heard the clatter of hoofs on the rock of the passageway that led into the wells. Dust-hoarse voices echoed between the walls. With a jingle and a clatter the troopers rode into the wells and drew rein as the officer leading them thrust up a gauntleted hand. He eyed Hank and then glanced at Dane. His back seemed to stiffen. He pulled down the yellow scarf that was bound about his nose and mouth. The black eyes of First Lieutenant Stuart Clifton held Dane's. He had been second-in-command of Dane's C Troop. Behind the officer were eight men of the troop—the old familiar faces—the thirteen dollar a month faces. Corporal Dennehy, with a prodigious thirst and a Congressional Medal of Honor to show for eighteen years' service as a yellowleg. Hagan, Rustames, Blanchard, Hardin, Kerr, Schmitz and Shorrs—snowbirds, drunks, teetotalers, gamblers and fools some of them, as well as hard riders and expert marksmen. There was no expression on their saddle-leather brown faces as they looked at their former troop commander.

But it was the rider just behind Stuart Clifton that centered Dane's attention—Marion Lake, only child of Colonel Sabin Lake. Perched on her auburn hair was a

forage cap, ornamented with the crossed sabers of the cavalry. Her blue military style, riding habit was gray with dust. Her mare nickered and thrashed her forefeet as she smelled the water but Marion's gloved hands brought the horse under control with the touch of a perfect equestrienne. Her gray eyes clouded a little as she saw Dane.

"Hello, Dane," she said quietly.

Dane stood up. He pulled off his hat.

"Marion," he said. She was another of the memories of Whipple Barracks—the most poignant of them all.

Stuart Clifton turned in his saddle. "Water up, Dennehy," he said curtly. "We've a long way to go before sundown."

The troopers swung down at Dennehy's command and led their horses to the *tinaja*. They grinned as they saw Hank. Dennehy wiped his red Irish face.

"Would ye be havin' a bottle, Mooney?" he asked softly, with a surreptitious glance back over his shoulder at Clifton. Hank winked and nodded.

"You've come from the barracks?" he asked the non-com.

"Aye, and a damned hard ride it has been."

Dane finished cleaning his repeater and slid it into its sheath. He slowly filled his pipe, watching Marion as she sat down in the shade. There had been a friendly rivalry among the officers of the squadron for Marion's attentions when she had arrived from the East the year before. Slowly Dane had gained the inside track. Stuart Clifton had gradually become bitter about Dane's success with Marion, to a point where he barely spoke to Dane other than in line of duty.

Clifton was said to have cut quite a swathe with the ladies at Fort Lowell, until he had been transferred suddenly to Whipple Barracks. The gossip had it that Clifton had been involved with the wife of a higher-ranking officer at Lowell. He was the typical picture of a cavalry officer.

Wasp-waisted and broad-shouldered, darkly handsome—a man who loved good liquor and high stakes in his gambling. There had been no love lost between Dane and Stuart.

Dennehy appeared from behind a rock outcropping with a smile on his face. He had been at Hank's bottle.

"So ye see, Mooney," he was saying, "Mister Clifton thought it wiser that we leave the trail near Antelope Peak and come this way."

Hank spat noisily. "You're headin' for Fort Yuma this way? The Mohaves are on the loose, Dennehy. With but eight men he's takin' a hell of a risk."

Dennehy shrugged. "I am only a two-striper, as ye well know, Mooney. I do not give the orders—I take them."

Dane lit his pipe and walked over to the two. Dennehy flushed as he saw Dane. They had been friends as well as officer and enlisted man. He glanced at Clifton. The officer had walked to the entrance of the wells.

"Hello, Captain York," Dennehy said. "By Heaven, 'tis good to see you!"

Dane grinned. "Call me Dane, Dennehy. The rank is gone."

Dennehy shook his head. "You'll always be captain to me, sir. As for that dirty business back at the barracks. Timothy Dennehy will never believe you had anything to do with it." He grinned. "Corporal Dolan said differently one night down in Whiskey Row and I had to change the contours of his ugly face. Would you believe it, sir? He's uglier than ever now."

Dane puffed at his pipe. "Thanks, Tim," he said quietly. "The odds are against you in believing in me."

The Irishman waved a meaty hand. "I know men, sir. It has been my trade for eighteen years. I still believe in you."

Dane glanced at the saddle-weary troopers. "You're pushing on this afternoon?"

Dennehy spat. "Aye. 'Tis hell on the horses. But there is a black dog riding the

lieutenant's back. He's anxious to get to Fort Yuma."

"You might have done better going the other way."

"The Trail of Graves? 'Tis no picnic that way either."

Dane shrugged. "There's much more traffic. You'd stand a better chance traveling with others that way."

DENNEHY took out his pipe and Dane handed him his tobacco pouch. "Thank you, sir." He quickly filled his pipe as Clifton came back to Marion. "There's something going on I do not like, Captain York. 'Tis best we stay here this night where we have a chance to rest and can defend ourselves if the Mohaves come. But, as I say, there is a black dog riding with the lieutenant, sir." Dennehy handed Dane his pouch and went to inspect the horses.

Hank rubbed his jaw. "Wonder what he means, Dane?"

"Clifton is taking a long, long shot, even for a gambler like him, going this way. I don't like it."

"Corporal Dennehy!" called Clifton, "Boots and saddles!"

Dennehy took his pipe from his mouth and walked over to the officer.

"A word, Mister Clifton?"

"Speak up."

"The men and the horses are worn thin, sir. Hank Mooney says there are Mohaves between here and the Colorado."

Clifton waved a gauntleted hand.

"There are always Mohaves between here and the river."

"But there is war, sir. We did not know too much about it at Whipple Barracks. Mooney says it's very bad, sir."

"Mooney? From the company he keeps I wouldn't believe in his stories."

Dane bit his lip as he turned away. The troopers were standing to horse. Some of them glanced at Dane.

Dennehy hesitated. "If the lieutenant will listen, sir! We cannot fight a large

party of hostiles. We cannot outrun them with the horses tired as they are."

"Damn you, Dennehy! You question me? I'll rip those stripes from your arms!"

"It is your privilege, sir," answered the veteran quietly.

"Boots and saddles."

"Yes, sir!" Dennehy turned on a heel. His face was tense with restrained rage.

Dane took his pipe from his mouth. "Stuart," he said.

Clifton ignored Dane and turned to Marion. "You'd better mount, Marion."

Dane walked forward. "A word with you, Stuart," he said quietly.

Clifton turned. "What do you want?"

"A few words—no more."

Clifton smiled thinly. "All right. But not here. I have my position to keep." He walked quickly around the rock shoulder beyond the rock tank. Ten pairs of eyes swiveled toward Dane as he followed the tall officer. A hundred yards from the tank and out of sight of those beside it, Stuart Clifton turned.

"Well?"

"You'd best listen to Hank, Stuart. He knows the Mohaves as few men do."

"Probably had a Mohave squaw," sneered Stuart.

"I wouldn't know. He was paid double for his services against the Mohaves three years ago and received a letter of commendation from the department commander himself. He knows his business."

"So?"

"Stay here for the night and rest your men and horses. Push on several hours before dawn and hope to God you don't get ambushed."

Clifton rubbed his jaw. "So you can talk to Marion, is that it?"

Dane flushed. "I have no axes to grind, Stuart."

"Marion is to catch a steamer at Fort Yuma for passage down to Port Ysabel to pick up ship for New York. They won't wait for her at Ysabel."

"It would be better if she did have to wait rather than fall into the hands of the Mohaves. That's plain, isn't it?"

Clifton laughed. "Get out of my way, you thief."

Dane gripped the tall officer by the front of his shell jacket.

"I've killed many men in the last ten years, Stuart. Don't push me too far."

Stuart's right hand slapped across Dane's face in a quick one-two. Dane shoved him back. Stuart fumbled with the flap of his holster. Dane drove in a left to the gut and followed with a jolting right cross that sat Clifton down hard on the ground. Dane placed his hand on the butt of his Colt.

"Don't try to draw, Stuart," he said quietly. "I have nothing more to lose in this life. Killing you would mean little." He turned on a heel and walked back to the tank. The troopers eyed him. Clifton appeared a moment later. His face was white and set.

"On the way, Dennehy!" he shouted. "Mount!"

Butt's smashed against saddle leather. The men eyed their commanding officer enigmatically. Marion Lake stood by her mare. Hany Mooney squatted in the shade ten feet from her, stolidly chewing his cud.

"Marion?" asked Stuart as he stood by his horse.

"I'm not going on, Stuart. Those men are worn thin. I'm tired. Don't you think we'd better wait until tomorrow?"

"You, too?" Stuart shot a bitter look at Mooney. "I suppose you shot off your big mouth, Mooney?"

"I did."

"I've a good mind to straighten you out."

Hank shifted his cud. "Now ain't that nice? What with? Fists? Rifles? Pistols? Broken bottles? Knives? Or maybe a shot in the back?"

Stuart Clifton's hands shook. He looked back at his men. There was not one friendly look among them. Dennehy wiped a grin

off his face as Clifton swept the squad with hard eyes.

"Are you coming, Marion?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Please be reasonable. Stuart."

"We march!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Noose Tightens

MARION LOOKED at Dane but he had nothing to say. Hank got up and climbed like a goat up to a place where he could see all around the wells. Marion swung up on her mare. Clifton thrust a hand up and led the way from the wells. Dane looked at Marion and then turned away.

"Clifton!" Hank's hoarse voice sounded from high up. "Don't you think you'd better change your mind?"

Clifton did not answer. He reached the entrance. Suddenly he drew rein and sat there, staring to the southwest. A thin thread of smoke hung against the sky like a warning finger. To the west another thread of smoke arose. Dane scrambled up the rocks and stood beside Hank. Slowly he circled the surrounding landscape with his eyes. Smoke drifted up from the northeast, to drift away in the dry wind. He whistled. Hank nodded.

"That bright boy ain't goin' nowheres unless he's crazy, and I ain't so sure he isn't."

A cold finger seemed to trace the length of Dane's spine. He had fought against many Indians—Mohaves, Apaches and Navajos—and still he never could eliminate that cold feeling at the sight of their smoke signals. War signals. Silent messages across a wild land which was hostile enough in itself without painted death in the form of raiding Mohaves to make it worse.

Below them in the passageway the troopers turned their mounts and rode back into the rock enclosure.

"Dismount!" commanded Clifton. "Un-saddle and picket! Dennehy! Four man guard to be changed every two hours!"

Hank shifted his cud and winked at Dane.

"My, my, the fire eater has been wet down a little. How many times did you wallop him, *amigo*?"

In the darkness before the rise of the moon there was an uneasy tension about Spanish Wells. Men spoke in whispers and any of them who made an unnecessarily loud noise was softly cursed by the others. The men who stood guard, one of them at the entrance passage and the other three perched up on the rock rim surrounding the wells, strained their eyes in the darkness, imagining every bushy-headed clump of brush as a painted Mohave intent on reaching the wells without setting an alarm. A canvas fly was set up for Marion in a hollow in the rock wall.

As the moon swung slowly up the tension seemed to ease. Trooper Shorrs, who had always been somewhat of a trouble-maker in C Troop, called to Hank Mooney.

"You ain't earning your keep, Mooney! Where are the Mohaves?"

Hank rested on one elbow while lying on his blankets.

"You mulehead! A Mohave kid could walk up behind you and steal your britches. By God, I don't think even the draft would let you know what had happened."

Shorrs spat as the other troopers laughed.

"Hell! I ain't never seen a Mohave, or any other Indian, that could do that."

Hank rubbed his jaw.

"Then where the hell are your britches?"

Even Dane had to grin as Shorrs looked quickly down at his legs. The grin faded as Stuart Clifton came up to the small fire.

"Put that out!" he said. "And watch your language! There's a lady here!" He looked at Hank as Trooper Kerr threw sand on the fire. "You know better than to let a fire be lit. The Mohaves could see that

reflection against the rocks for many miles."

Hank yawned. "You ain't payin' my way, soldier. Besides, them Mohaves know you're here. You raised enough dust to warn the whole damned Mohave nation."

Stuart flushed. "Well, just watch your language."

Hank yawned again. "Miss Lake was raised on a parade-ground, sonny. She listened to Dennehy whipping rookies into shape with that acid tongue of his afore you left grade school. I ain't likely to say anythin' to displeasure her. She's army. That's more'n I can say for some of you hombres."

Clifton leaned forward. "Who's putting you up to this lip?"

Hank got up and leaned toward the officer. "Me."

Stuart stepped back. "Listen, Mooney. I am placing Spanish Wells under military law. Be careful what you say."

Hank bowed. "I will, commander. Now get away and let me alone. I don't feel too good as it is."

Dane walked over to Hank and squatted beside him as the scout lay down.

"What the hell has got into you, Hank?" he asked quietly. "You keep riling Clifton every chance you get. He's got his hands full with his detail."

Hank filled his pipe. As he lit it his gray eyes studied Dane over the flare of the lucifer.

"You ever see me do anythin' without a damned good reason for it?"

Dane shook his head. "You usually don't waste any effort on non-essentials."

"Then you sit tight and don't worry about me. You talked to Marion yet?"

Dane shook his head. "Why should I? She wouldn't have anything to do with me now."

Hank puffed at his pipe. "You know where the old dry *tinaja* is? Farther in among the rocks? The one with all the old writings on the walls?"

"Yes."

"You be there after the men are asleep."

"Why?"

"Never you mind. Will you do it?"

"Yes."

"*Bueno!* Now beat it. I want to smoke a pipe and get some sleep. I might have to do some scoutin' before long."

THE MOON was high when Dane reached the old tanks, now dry as a bone. It was the old Spanish Well of long time past. Inscribed on the soft rock of the walls were the so-called writings Hank had mentioned. Indians, Spaniards, Mexicans, Californios and Americans had used it in turn. Warriors, *conquistadores*, priests, traders, soldiers and herders had known the place well. Dane looked closely at the inscriptions.

"What are you reading?" the quiet voice asked from behind him. He turned quickly. It was Marion. Her long auburn hair flowed about her shoulders.

"Are you surprised to see me?" she asked.

"Hank told me to come."

"I asked him to."

"Why don't you forget me, Marion? My career is blasted. You're army and always will be. Stay with your own kind."

She placed a hand on his arm. The touch quickened his pulses.

"You are still army, Dane. You are my kind. That's why I wanted to speak with you."

"So?"

She sat down at the edge of the dry tank.

"I have never believed you used that money. It is so unlike you."

He laughed harshly. "You and Hank are the only two people who believe that. What proof do you have? None!"

She shook her head. "Father never has believed it either, but the evidence at your court-martial was overwhelming. What could he do?" He couldn't influence the court."

"True. I hurt him deeply. He had faith in me."

"Perhaps he still has."

He looked quickly at her. "What do you mean, Marion?"

She lowered her voice. "In the month you have been gone he has never stopped trying to uncover more evidence."

Dane looked away. Sabin Lake had been like a father to him. He had never forgotten the look in the old man's eyes when the charges had been brought against Dane.

Marion looked up at Dane. The moonlight brought out the soft contours of her face.

"Why didn't you stay and fight for a new trial, Dane?"

"What use would it be? Corporal Dennehy testified he had been on guard that night and saw me in the troop headquarters with the money. Trooper Shorrs was on guard near headquarters. He testified there had been a faint light in the squadron office and later he had seen me leave the office. Stuart Clifton testified he had seen me gambling in Prescott with a great deal of money. Charley Moulton, the gambler, wrote a statement that I had been heavily in debt at his gambling hall."

"All of it is circumstantial, Dane."

"Yes. But all of the evidence pointed against me. I was in troop headquarters counting money, but it was payroll money. First-Sergeant Kelly was ill. He couldn't make out the payroll. I made it out and checked the money. It was that money that Dennehy saw. I took the payroll to Sergeant-Major Adams for a re-check and saw a light in squadron headquarters. It went out as I approached and I was seen by Shorrs as I left the vicinity. I was gambling in Prescott, but with my own money. I had hit a streak at Moulton's and was trying to run it up."

"What about Moulton's statement?"

Dane held out his hands. "A deliberate lie. I was deep into Charley, deeper than any one knew. Charley wrote that state-

ment to get me out of the way so that he wouldn't have to pay me off. Some day I might trip him up."

She shook her head. "Charley Moulton was murdered three days after you left Whipple Barracks. Shot down in his room. The killer was never found."

"Then there isn't much chance I can clear myself."

Marion stood up and came close to him.

"You still have friends. Most of the men in the squadron still don't believe you did it. Hank doesn't and neither does dad. Above all, I will never believe it."

Dane swept her into his arms and kissed her hungrily. She returned his kisses and clung to him. She buried her face against his neck.

"Please, Dane. Don't stop fighting for your career, your very life, and for me as well."

They sat down at the edge of the tank and she rested her head against his shoulder.

"Why were you leaving Arizona?" he asked quietly.

"There was a reason. I can't tell you now."

He held her close. If there was only a way to keep her with him, but he knew he couldn't ask her to follow a man who was in disgrace.

"I have a feeling about us, Dane. We'll be together many happy years."

She stood up, cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. She turned quickly and left him. Dane stood up and touched his face. She had faith in him. He resolved to fight for his future, hopeless as it seemed. He turned and climbed up a fault in the rock wall. The desert was bathed in silver moonlight. A coyote howled far to the north. There was a furtive movement below Dane. A man stepped out of the shadows near the entrance to the old tank and padded silently back to the camp. There was no mistaking the lean, gangling figure of Trooper George Shorrs.

Hank Mooney was gone when Dane returned to the camp. Dane went to his blankets. Dennehy came over and squatted beside him.

"Hank has gone off a scout," he said, "You have been talking with Miss Lake?"

"Yes. Did Shorrs tell you?"

"Shorrs? How should he know?"

"Never mind. What's bothering you, Dennehy?"

Dennehy hesitated. He glanced back at the canvas fly sheltering Marion and then at Stuart Clifton, asleep close beneath the rock walls.

"Be careful, Captain York. Watch your back if the Mohaves come."

"Meaning?"

Dennehy stood up.

"A word to the wise, sir."

He turned on a heel and went to his blankets. Dane eyed the sleeping troopers and then looked up at the three men standing guard atop the rock walls. He drew out his Colt and placed it close at hand.

THE CAMP was astir when Dane awoke. It was an hour before dawn. A cold wind searched the camp. The tall figure of Stuart Clifton stalked through the camp, lashing the surly troopers with his bitter tongue. Marion sat by the fire with a tin cup of coffee in her hand.

Clifton turned as Hank padded silently into the camp leading his sorrel. He dropped the sorrel's reins and leaned on his rifle, eying the troopers who were saddling up. The firelight shone on a bandage bound about Hank's left wrist. Dane threw back his blankets and hurried over to the scout.

"What happened, Hank?" he asked.

All eyes turned toward the scout. Hank rubbed his jaw.

"You ain't figgerin' on pushin' on, are you, Mister Clifton?" he asked.

Clifton turned quickly.

"Why not? We've got a good hour to get out of the valley before dawn."

Hank shook his head. He talked loudly.

"The Mohaves are at the valley mouth near Standing Rock. One of them got at me with a knife." He held up his left wrist.

Clifton cursed. "How many of them are there?"

"More than I've ever seen before. They chased me to within a half mile of here. Warriors with repeating rifles. Damned near got me."

"I've got enough men to get past them."

Hank spat. "You won't get half a mile I tell you! They're on all sides of us now."

Clifton looked up at Trooper Schmitz. The German was looking to the north.

"What do you see, Schmitz?"

"Dere was a flash uf fire, Mister Clifton. Half a mile from here nod more dan fifteen minutes ago."

Trooper Hagan called down from the south wall.

"I seen some fire 'bout half a mile south of here an hour ago, sir!"

Clifton cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted up at Blanchard who was leaning on his carbine looking to the east.

"Have you seen anything, Blanchard?"

"Yes, sir. Looked like a burst of flame about a mile away."

"When did you see it?"

"Couple of hours ago, Mister Clifton. Right after the moon died."

The men looked at each other. Clifton paced back and forth. Dane eyed him. There seemed to be an unholy haste in Stuart Clifton. Marion emptied her cup and stood up.

"We had better stay here, Stuart."

"We must go on!"

"I won't go."

"And if I order you to?"

She smiled. "You have no authority over me, Stuart."

Clifton turned to Dennehy.

"Keep the horses saddled. All of you men get up on those rocks and keep your eyes peeled. Shoot if you see anything sus-

picious." He walked quickly to his horse.

The hours drifted past. The men sank down under cover as the sun rose to beat down on the wells with intense heat. Dane climbed up beside Trooper Schmitz. The German silently pointed at a column of smoke rising from the hills not two miles away. Then he pointed toward the valley mouth, miles to the southwest. A thread of smoke hung against the clear sky. "Mohaves," he said, "Dere must be many uf dem, sir."

Dane nodded. There was an uneasy feeling in the air. Schmitz looked down at Clifton. "Mister Clifton iss very upset, Captain York. He has been a very devil on dis detail. Mein Gott! I haf never been rawhided so much since I enlisted in Saint Louis tree years ago."

Clifton was pacing back and forth, seemingly oblivious of the scorching heat. *What was it Dennehy had said? "There is a black dog ridin' the lieutenant's back."*

At noon Corporal Dennehy come slowly down the rocks. His face was flushed with the intense heat. He walked slowly to Stuart Clifton.

"Sir," he said quietly, "the men are having a hard time of it up there. There is no protection at all."

Clifton looked up and for a moment it seemed as though he did not see the Irishman.

"What was that?" he asked.

"The men are in a bad way, sir. Hardin is almost passed out. Kerr is ill. They can not stand so much of this sun."

"Do they want the Mohaves in here?"

Dennehy pushed back his campaign hat. The collected drops of sweat ran down his face.

"Perhaps if we relieved some of them? For a time at least, Mister Clifton?"

"Get back up there!"

Dennehy turned. "Trooper Shorrs has left his post. He is down by the old well in the shade. Shall I place him under arrest, sir?"

"No, dammit!" His eyes flamed fiercely.

"The men say he should be up there too if they are to stay."

Clifton stood up.

"Shorrs is there with my permission. Now will you get out of here?"

Hank Mooney looked up from the shade.

"He's right, Clifton," he said. "Let some of them come down or they won't be able to."

"Mind your business. It was you who spread those wild stories about the Mohaves being out there."

"Maybe you'd like to go out there and look yourself?"

Clifton turned on a heel. "Get out of here, Dennehy!"

"I'll have to send some of those men down, sir. It is inhuman to do otherwise."

Clifton whirled. He drew his Colt and cocked it.

"Get up on those rocks!"

"Sir, be reasonable. I will keep enough men up there for a good watch."

Clifton's finger tightened on the trigger.

"Are you going up there?"

"Not until you agree to do as I ask."

The Colt crashed before anyone could do anything about it. Dane leaped to his feet and ran toward Clifton. Dennehy swayed, gripping his left side. There was an amazed look on his face. Clifton turned toward Dane.

"Get back!" he shouted. "Damn you! Damn all of you!"

CHAPTER THREE

Saber Clash

HANK JUMPED to his feet. Clifton whirled to fire from the hip. Dane snatched up a rock and threw it. It glanced from the pistol barrel. The gun crashed and the slug whined from the hard earth. Dennehy fell forward on his face as Dane closed with Clifton. They struggled back and forth silently. Sweat broke out on Dane as he gripped the pistol wrist and

forced the weapon upward. It roared again. Hank ran toward them but behind him appeared Trooper Shorrs. As Hank closed the gap Shorrs swung his carbine. Hank went down as the steel-shod butt hit him behind the ear. Shorrs leaped over the fallen scout and rammed his carbine muzzle in Dane's back.

"Let go," he said between his teeth, "or I'll hole you up with this."

Dane let go and stepped back. For a moment blind hate appeared on Clifton's face and then he jerked his head at Shorrs.

"Take over as corporal, Shorrs. Keep this man and Mooney under guard."

Marion stood at the edge of the canvas fly, her hands at her throat. Then she ran to Dennehy. She knelt beside him.

"He is badly wounded," she said.

Dane turned toward her. "I'll help you," he said.

"Get back here!" shouted Shorrs.

Dane ignored him. He knelt by the Irishman.

"Get the medical pannier," he said to Marion. "I'll have to probe for the slug."

It was pitch-black before the moon rose. Dane sat beside Dennehy. The Irishman's harsh breathing seemed loud in the stillness. Marion looked at Dane.

"Will he live?"

"I doubt it. The slug smashed three ribs. I am afraid there is a hole in his lung from one of them."

Trooper Rustames leaned on his carbine behind them.

"Dennehy is a good soldier," he said. "He was trying to help us."

Dane shook his head at the trooper.

"Be careful. You are supposed to be guarding me, Rustames.

Rustames spat. "That Shorrs," he said, "the swine. He is in good company with Mister Clifton."

Dane leaned close to the Irishman. "Tim," he said, "can you hear me?"

"Aye."

"How does it feel, Tim?"

"It is all over with me, Captain York."

"You'll live, Tim."

"No. I have seen too many men hit this way." Tim coughed. "There is something I want to tell you, sir. Where is Mister Clifton?"

"Up on the rocks I think. He expects the Mohaves."

"I almost hope they come and take his scalp." Tim gripped Dane's wrist. "There is something I must tell you. Listen well—I lied at the court-martial. I never saw you at the troop headquarters. I was drunk on guard that night. I never saw anyone there. I could not remember and I was told you had been there. I said you had come from squadron headquarters with something in your hand. I never saw you at all that night. I was afraid I would be drummed out if they knew I was drunk on guard. I was willing to swear to anything to get in the clear. I thought you had done the dirty deed. My evidence did not seem to add much. It saved me and helped to finish you."

Dane looked up at Marion. She leaned over Tim.

"Who told you to testify, Tim?"

"Mister Clifton. He had threatened to drum me out before if I drank on duty. The army is the only life I know. I was weak. It was a terrible thing to do."

Dane stood up. He looked through the shadows. A cold feeling of hate was in him. He walked toward the *tinaja*.

"Where are you going, Dane?" called Marion. Dane did not answer. Rustames made no move to stop him. Dane went to Clifton's pallet. The officer was not there. He walked softly through the rock passageway. Two men were standing there. A horse was behind them. Dane faded into the darkness. It was Clifton and Shorrs. Shorrs was talking.

"No, Mister Clifton," he said. "The deal was for five hundred, I'll admit, but I've done more than my share. I want an even split."

"Damn you! You'll get five hundred. No more."

"Supposing I tell Colonel Lake about lying at the court-martial? Supposing I shoot off my mouth about who did Charley Moulton in? You did, you scum! He was in to you for two thousand and you didn't have it. He threatened to go to Colonel Lake. I worked with you to pin the theft on York. Now pay off or you won't pull out of here tonight."

"Get out of my way, Shorrs!"

Shorrs cocked his carbine but Clifton moved fast. He jolted home a right to the lean trooper's jaw. As Shorrs went down Clifton snatched his carbine from his hands and reversed it. The butt crashed down once, twice, three times and Shorrs lay still.

Clifton placed a boot in the stirrup, Dane came out of the darkness. Clifton turned and kicked out at Dane, knocking him down. He jerked at his Colt but Dane locked a foot about the tall officer's right ankle and kicked out at the inside of his knee, driving him back. Clifton rolled to his feet and slammed home three punches, slamming Dane against the rock wall.

He swung up on his gray. The horse reared as the steel sank home but, instead of running out toward the desert, shot down the passageway back toward the wells. Clifton cursed and sawed at the reins but the horse leaped the *tinaja* and clattered into the darkness of the inner-well area.

Dane swayed a little as he ran after the officer. Hank Mooney was tied to a rock. "Watch him, Dane!" he called.

Dane jerked his saber from the packsaddle lying beside the tank. He splashed through the shallow water of the *tinaja* and reached the narrow entrance to the inner well. A gun cracked in the darkness. The slug sang over Dane's head. Hoofs clattered and the *gray* raced past Dane out to the desert.

"What the hell is going on?" shouted a trooper from up on the rocks.

The moon was lighting the top of Span-

ish Wells. The gun split the quiet again. Dane stood behind a rock, stripping the chamois cover from his saber. Clifton moved in the darkness. Dane threw a rock across the passageway. Three shots roared out and the passageway filled with whining lead. Silence again, broken only by the scuffling of boots high on the rocks. Dane crouched and ran up the passageway, diving behind a rock as the Colt spat flame again. Then he waited.

THE MOON began to light the big rock enclosure. Dane looked up from the shadows. Troopers were lining the top of the rock walls, peering down into the enclosure.

"What the hell is it?" shouted Blanchard.

The voice of Trooper Rustames came from the other side.

"Mister Clifton tried to make a break for the desert. He has the money stolen from the squadron. Captain York is down there. Don't shoot."

Dane stepped out of the shadows. There was no shot. Something clattered on the rocks. It was Clifton's Colt.

"Get back, York!" he called. "I've got my saber! I'll gut you!"

Dane edged forward as the moon began to flood the area. Stuart Clifton came out of the shadows with his bared saber in his hands.

"Get out of my way, Dane!" he said.

Dane stopped twenty feet away.

"Give up, Stuart," he said quietly. "It's all over."

Clifton smiled thinly. "It might interest you to know I was the saber champion at the Point, York."

Dane move in. Clifton thrust out his saber, point down. "Don't come any closer," he said.

"Surrender, Clifton," Dane repeated.

Clifton looked up at the silent troopers. "Shoot him down!" he called.

A trooper answered. "You left us up

on these rocks to cook while you sat in the shade and thought of the money you'd use to get out of the territory. Fight your own battle, Mister Clifton."

Clifton leaped forward, thrusting hard. Dane parried. The blades grated together and rose high in the air. Clifton shoved Dane back and slashed at his head. Dane met the blow with one of his own. The tip of his saber pinked Clifton's chest. He cursed and retreated, weaving a pattern of defense. Dane followed.

Clifton stopped and then closed in. The blade ripped high and then dropped to slash low. Dane parried but the saber grazed through his left sleeve, cutting the flesh. He retreated as the saber gashed his left thigh.

Clifton grinned evilly and rushed Dane with a fierce series of cuts and slashes. Dane stopped him with a short thrust that ripped through the left side of his shell jacket. Clifton circled slowly. He touched his left side. His eyes were wild in the bright moonlight. Dane followed him cautiously. Clifton closed in, slashing steadily. He brought up a knee into Dane's groin and then smashed his saber guard against Dane's jaw.

Dane went down, his saber clattering on the rocks. Clifton shouted triumphantly. As he leaped in for the kill, Dane thrust his saber up. The tip of the blade sank through cloth and flesh and grated on bone. Stuart Clifton dropped his saber and gripped his gut. He turned slowly sideways.

"I—I . . ." he said softly and then pitched forward on his face.

Dane got up. He rolled the officer over. Clifton stared sightlessly up at the bright moon. Dane turned away and walked slowly back to the outer rock enclosure. Hank Mooney was standing beside Marion with his arm around her shoulders. She ran forward with a cry and held Dane close.

The moon was high overhead. The coffee pots steamed on the fire coals. Dane sat

stripped to the waist, bound with bandages. The troopers sat around the fire. Hank Mooney puffed at his pipe.

"It was a plan, Dane," he said quietly. "Colonel Lake told me to go with you to keep an eye on you. That was why I never wanted to go farther than fifty miles from the Barracks. Clifton was jittery after we left. He wanted Marion to go with him to Yuma and take ship for New York after which he could resign. Marion agreed. Shorrs and Dennehy were assigned to the escort on purpose."

Schmitz grunted. "What a chance to take with the rest of us, with the Mohaves on the warpath."

Hank waved a hand. "One thing none of you know—no Mohave will come near Spanish Wells."

"Why?" asked Marion.

Hank grinned. "You see that inscription in there? *Company C, First California Volunteer Cavalry, 1862?*"

"Yes."

"I cut that in there. During the war this was a hell of a place, beggin' your pardon, Miss Lake, for white men. The Mohaves massacred a supply train here. They shot up every trooper or civilian anywheres around. I guided the company in here one night. We laid an ambush and wiped out thirty Mohave warriors including their chief. They've shunned the place ever since."

"Yeh," said Trooper Hagan. "But what about the signals, Mooney? Them red devils were all over the place."

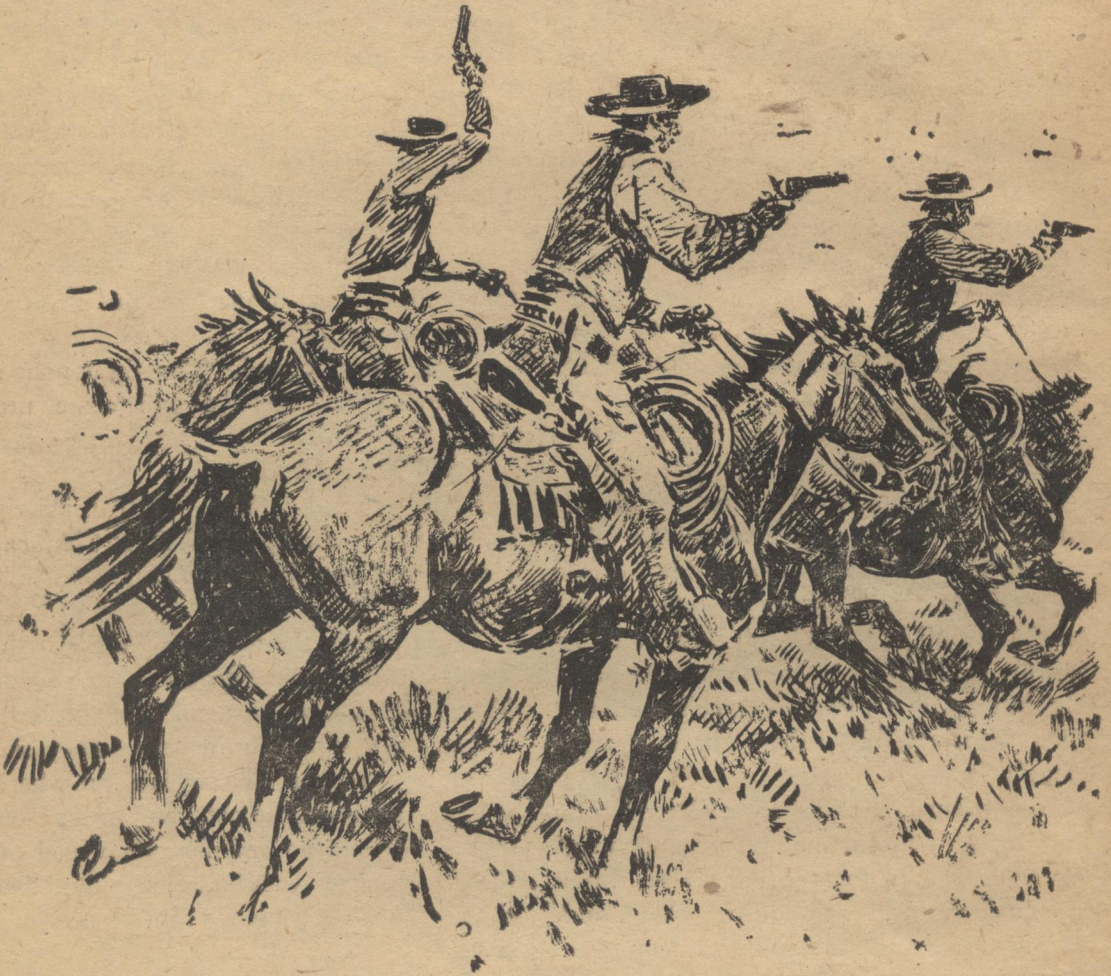
Hank shook his head. "Those smoke signals you saw the first day here were probably theirs. The night I went out to scout I set those fires and started a brush fire in the hills to carry out the fraud."

"Yes," said Kerr. "But you were cut up, you said."

Hank stripped the bandage from his wrist. The wrist was unmarked. "My own idea," he said with a grin. "I figgered

(Continued on page 111)

RIDE THE



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Before his father's lonely prairie grave, young Dan Wyeth took a grim oath in blood: "Live fast, Duke Harbison, for you won't live long."

WILD TRAIL

By WALT COBURN



Their battle cry rose harshly above the war whoops of the painted redskins as they charged.

NIGHT CLOSED in on young Dan Wyeth, and he knew it was time to make the desperate move he and his father had talked about before the old man died. Jim Wyeth had died with his boots on there in the nest of granite rocks, where the Harbisons had trapped him and his son two days ago.

A queer sort of smile had twisted his

grim-lipped mouth as the last rays of setting sun lighted his bloodshot eyes. His gun hand gripped that of Dan, his youngest son, and the only one left of three grown boys. Both Tug and Bill had been killed by the Harbisons.

"You're the last Wyeth left, Dan," his father told him through pain-stiffened lips that were cracked by sun and thirst. "I'll

be follerin' Tug and Bill directly. You'll be the only Wyeth left—against the Harbisons, 'cause we didn't git 'em all. Duke's still left, for one, the damned snake, but he's in Mexico, I reckon. But young Dorf, mebbe he's around—not countin' the pack of their shirt-tail kinfolks . . ."

The dying man paused, breathing hard. Then his fingers tightened on Dan's. "Too many for you to fight alone, son, so I'm askin' you to take your mother and pull outa Texas. We owe it to her, Dan. Your mother's life has been a hard one. Losin' Natalie like she did was almighty hard. When Nat run off with that no-good Duke Harbison it was worse than if Nat had died. Then, with Tug and Bill gettin' killed right there at the ranch last week— She won't expect me back alive, so the shock won't be anything she ain't expectin', and she'll have you, Dan. You're her youngest, her favorite next to Nat, who broke her heart. You'll have to make up to Ma for the rest of us.

"Her brother Luther is up north somewheres—Montana or Wyoming. Him bein' a preacher, he never thought much of us Wyeths. Mebbeso he was right in turnin' ag'in your ma for marryin' me. Luther Gregory's a good man, even if he is a fire an' brimstone preacher. Take her there amongst her own kinfolks. Don't never leave her, son. Never. Promise."

Young Dan Wyeth was only eighteen, and until last week he had never seen death strike with the swift, deadly cruelty of a lightning bolt. He was dazed from the sudden, numbing shock of it all.

"I'll take her away," he promised.

And for the first time he could remember, the leathery, grim-jawed face of his cowman father had softened; the bloodshot, gray eyes had lost their steel-like hardness.

So Jim Wyeth had died, with Harbison lead in him, with the knowledge that Harbisons were out there in the deepening twilight, their guns ready for the last Wyeth.

Only the thought of his mother kept Dan

from staying in the rocks and fighting it out with the bushwhacking Harbisons till his last cartridge was used. Then he'd have fought them with his hands till they finished him.

But there was his mother waiting. Her hair had whitened too soon, and her face was etched with tiny lines around the mouth and eyes, lines which—Dan instinctively knew—did not belong on her gentle face.

Maybe work eased the grief left in her heart when her only daughter had run away, three years ago, with Duke Harbison. Natalie had left behind a tear-stained note telling her mother that she loved the handsome, hard-riding, gambling man and cowpuncher—the quick-triggered range dude of the Harbisons.

He remembered hearing that Duke was in Mexico or South America. He'd turned outlaw. And Nat seemed to have vanished from the earth and from the life of her wild mate. Dan's mother always spoke of Nat as being dead.

Dan thought of Nat and his mother now. One last look at the pile of boulders that marked his father's lonely grave. Then he crawled through the big granite rocks and down the slope through the pinons. Worming his way, snakelike, on his belly, using every bit of stealth he had learned from stalking wild animals on hunting trips, foot by foot he made headway over the uneven ground.

Then he heard voices nearby. The Harbisons were so certain of killing their trapped quarry that they made no attempt to be quiet. They were formed in a scattered circle around the nest of boulders, calling out to one another, cursing the Wyeth name and quarreling among themselves.

A match flared in the shelter of some brush not a hundred feet from where Dan lay motionless on his belly. In the light of the cupped flame that lit a cigarette Dan saw the long-jawed, thin-lipped face of young Dorf Harbison.

Dan could have killed Dorf now. He still wore the scars of a knife-licking Dorf

had given him two years ago when they were just kids, after Dorf had mentioned Nat's name in a sneering way.

The thumb of Dan's hand started to press back the hammer of the six-shooter. Then the match flame went out, and the darkness seemed thicker than ever. Dan lay there for a while, shaking a little. He had almost taken a shot at Dorf—a bushwhacker shot, a coward's shot. He wondered numbly if he was a coward. If he was afraid of the lanky, hard-bitten youngest male member of the Harbisons.

"Hell," called an impatient, half drunken voice from somewhere near, "let's close on them Wyeths and kill 'em off. I got a bronc tied up at home that'll be needin' feed an' water. Close up on them two skunks, boys. No use spendin' the night here. My jug's about empty. So's my belly. . . ."

Dan Wyeth crawled on. Minutes dragged. He made out several saddled horses standing tied to a pinon tree. Nobody guarded them. He untied the one nearest him and cautiously rode away.

DAN WYETH had never seen a woman who had lost her mind. The shock of seeing his mother stare at him, her dark eyes blank, without recognizing him, brought a cold sense of terror to the youngster.

He found her sitting in her old armchair in front of the cold fireplace, her hands picking aimlessly at some tiny baby clothes in her lap.

When Dan finally made certain that his mother's mind was gone, he had need of every shred and ounce of his grit and strength. Mechanically he went about getting things ready to move.

Loading in a light democrat wagon what few belongings he figured she'd want to take along, he put in grub and a camp outfit and helped his mother up onto the seat. She did not seem to realize just what was happening.

Dan found a big five-gallon can of kerosene with which he soaked the walls and

furniture in the old house. He touched a match to it, and for the last time closed the front door of the house where he had been born.

Then he tied the two saddled horses alongside the team and with his carbine across his knee, cartridge belt filled, his father's six-shooter in its holster at his thigh, set out in the first gray of dawn.

He whipped up the team to round the bend in the river and shut from sight the burning house, his heart heavy as a lump of lead. Besides him sat his mother, her black shawl over her head, her hands clutching the little bundle of baby clothes.

From a letter Dan found among his mother's effects he discovered that his uncle, the circuit-rider preacher, Luther Gregory, lived at a place called Wagon Wheel, in Montana.

And with only this meager but of information to guide him to the remote place in Montana, hundreds of miles north, with an invalid mother to burden his going and doubtful welcome awaiting him, they set out.

At the little cowtown of Pecos, Dan found a wagon train being made up. A tall, raw-boned man in dirty buckskin was in charge. He had sandy hair that came to his shoulders, and a sandy beard that reached almost to his small gray-green eyes. His high-bridged nose peeled constantly from wind and sun.

Now he was a little drunk and displaying his marksmanship with a pair of long barreled six-shooters to a crowd of men and boys back of the stockade corral. Nearby the canvas-covered wagons were drawn up, trail fashion, in a large circle. The target was a battered army canteen hanging by a rawhide thong from a tree limb.

As his two heavy guns roared, the lead slugs tore through the canteen. It danced and jerked crazily. And while the firing of the two guns was rapid, and the heavy lead bullets kept the target dancing, Dan reckoned that only about a third of the bullets was hitting the mark.

"That's Beaver Smith," a man told Dan.

"Government scout, He's pilotin' the wagon train north. He's the man to tackle if you want to join. He'll take you, if you got the price."

"I kin do a hell-heap better'n that, if the target's Injuns!" Smith said in the nasal drawl of a Missourian. The man's voice, hawk nose and pale eyes reminded Dan of the Harbisons. They were Missourians, too. But this was no time for foolish prejudices. He had to go up the trail. He had to take his mother to her brother, Luther Gregory.

On closer inspection Beaver Smith appeared even dirtier, more unkempt, than at a distance. His long, hairy hands were caked with old grime, scabbed by brush. His belt had a double row of loops filled with brass rifle and six-shooter cartridges. From it hung his two big Colts and a Bowie knife in a beaded scabbard. Dan noticed several tufts of long black hair tucked there, too. Beaver Smith jerked them from the belt and dangled them before the eyes of the crowd.

"Three Comanche and two Sioux," he chuckled. "I had more, but I give 'em to the gals at Santa Fe. Too bad that Mexicans don't wear long hair. I'd have enough to wad a pillow." And he took another long, gurgling drink.

Dan took the first opportunity to speak to the unsavory-looking plainsman who was organizing the wagon train.

"I'd like to go up the trail," Dan told him.

Beaver Smith, who stood six feet five in his moccasins, looked down at the boy, contempt and amusement in his pale-green, bloodshot eyes.

"The hell! Would you now, sonny? Too bad, because I ain't riskin' trouble by harboring runaway young 'uns. I'll be too busy to look after you. We ain't got a wet-nuss in the outfit." And his high-pitched laugh struck Dan's eardrums like the rattle of shot.

The crowd roared with laughter. Dan stood there, white-lipped, his hands clenched

into hard fists. He was hating this sneering, drunken man, hating him as he hated the Harbisons.

He wanted to say something that would wipe the sneering grin from the lanky man's bearded lips. But words would not come. He was trembling, not from fear, but from a white anger that burned his nerves.

DAN TURNED away and started for his lone camp, a hundred yards or so down the river. He was still shaking a little, and his heart thumped against his ribs. Beaver Smith had made a fool of him before all the crowd.

He had left his mother sitting in the shade beside the canvas-covered wagon, the little bundle of baby clothes in her lap, that heart-pinching, weary little smile softening her lined face.

She had gotten a little better during the past week, while they were on their way up the Pecos. She called Dan by name and pattered around the camp and drove the team while Dan rode ahead on horseback. But she did not ask about Dan's father, nor did she seem to realize quite what was going on about her. She just smiled and answered questions, her eyes blank and expressionless.

Dan's booted feet lagged. His anger gave way to a heaviness of heart. Fate seemed to be treating him in a scurvy way. It would be weeks before another wagon train would be organized. And by that time summer would be gone, and winter would block the trail until next year.

He neared his camp and was surprised to see two or three men moving around. His mother sat beside the wagon, watching them with dull eyes.

Dan saw one man crawl from the rear of his covered wagon, and then jump down, holding something in his hand. The other two went over to him, examining whatever it was. Dan started to run. He suddenly remembered leaving his wallet, with what little money he and his mother had, in a

carry-all box he had made and nailed inside the wagon.

One of the three sighted him as he came running down the slope of the bank. They scattered, each running a different direction. Dan took after the one nearest him—a tall, lanky youth who ran with ungainly awkwardness towards the crowd around the corals.

Dan overtook him as he halted, tugging at a gun. Dan was on him before he got the long-barreled Colt clear of its holster. They went down in a cloud of dust, fighting. The crowd, eager for any sort of excitement, gathered around them.

The thief was bigger than Dan. He fought hard, gouging, kicking and biting. And Dan, finding a sudden outlet for his pent-up anger, welcomed the combat.

Dan was strong, cool-headed and quick as a cougar. Even so, his opponent got him with a forearm about his throat. As Dan was breaking the hold, the thief reached with his left hand and whipped a short-bladed knife from his belt. Dan struggled, trying to get to his gun, but it was out of reach. He clamped his fingers about the wrist of the man on top. Then, with a quick pressure of his strong fingers, he wrenched the knife from his enemy's hand. It dropped to the dust, and Dan had broken out of his choking grip. With swift, punishing blows he battered the thief's face. There was the crack of a broken nose and a howl of pain. Dan smashed another blow into the bloody face, shoved a handful of dirt into the squawling mouth. Then twisting the big, threshing form over with a hammer lock, he sat on the youth's back and with his free hand ground the thief's battered, bleeding face into the yellow dust.

A man tried to jerk Dan off the choking, howling opponent. Dan shook free of the grip on his collar and his gun covered the intruder.

"Get away from me or I'll kill you!" Dan panted. And the man recoiled from the gun as if from a rattler.

Dan leaped to his feet and kicked the sputtering youth to a standing position.

"Now dig down in your pocket and give me the wallet you stole outa my wagon," he panted, or I'll finish the job I started pronto, you dirty snake."

"I ain't got it!" slobbered the tall youth, spitting blood and dirt from his torn mouth. "So help me, I ain't got it. One of the others taken it off me. Don't kill me!"

"If I don't git that wallet and every dollar in it, I'll shoot your belly off! Git goin'."

"I don't dast! They'd beat the head off me if—"

Dan had shoved his six-shooter back into its holster. He took one quick step forward, hit out with a straight, clean left that dropped the gangling youth in the dirt. As he crouched his bent arm covering his bleeding face, Dan stood over him."

"Are you goin' to take me to 'em?" he gritted. "Or will I kick your face in?"

Beaver Smith pushed through the crowd. He looked at the blood-smeared youth, then at Dan. His pale eyes held an ugly gleam.

"What do you mean by half killin' one of my men?" he snarled at Dan.

"He stole my wallet out of my wagon," said Dan, his hand on his gun as he faced the towering plainsman. "Him and two more sneak thieves. I caught this 'un. Any man in the crowd that ain't scared to talk the truth, will tell you the same. They watched me ketch him and beat the truth outa him. I want my money.

"You might be the boss of the wagon train, mister, but you ain't the law here at Pecos. I ain't afraid of you and your guns. This ain't your affair. You keep out of it."

Dan's guns slid from its holster with a smooth, swift movement that came from long practice—the training of his father, Jim Wyeth, Texan.

For a long moment the buckskin man glared at Dan. Then he stooped down and yanked the slobbering, battered youth to his feet.

"If you stole anything, give it back," he

CHAPTER TWO

Wagon Wheels West

said. A sound of feigned determination filled his large voice.

"I ain't got it, Beaver. They taken it off me. I ain't got it."

"You heard what he said," Beaver Smith said. "He hain't got your damned money."

"He'll git it," said Dan, "or I'll kill him." He turned to the whining thief. "Are you goin' to git my wallet, you thievin' snake?" Dan's anger increased.

The lanky youth nodded, wiping dirt and blood from his face with the torn sleeve of his shirt. "I'll fetch it back to your wagon."

Beaver Smith turned the thief loose with a shove that sent him staggering.

"One thing I won't stand for is stealin'!" he blustered to the crowd in a swaggering effort to ignore Dan's challenge and the gun Dan still held in his hand.

"Is he one of your outfit?" asked Dan quietly.

"What if he is, youngun?"

"I might need a wet-nurse, like you said. But I was man enough to take him to a whuppin'. And if he'll fetch his two partners, I'll take 'em both on. I'm not too young and weak to point a gun—and I savvy which end of it to take a-holt of!"

At a fair distance the battered, bullet-torn army canteen still swung from the six-foot rawhide thong. Dan saw it.

"Anybody kin hit the canteen from where you was shootin' at it," said Dan, taking advantage of his moment, "but I'm wonderin' if you kin cut the rawhide that it hangs by, standin' here?"

"Meanin', sonny," leered the lanky man, spitting a stream of brown tobacco juice in the dust, "that you think you kin cut that rawhide with a bullet?"

"I was askin' you if you could," said Dan quietly, "but since you're passin' the buck to me, I reckon I'll have a try."

The big gun in Dan's hand seemed to shoot before it was aimed. The battered canteen dropped to the ground with a tinny clatter. Dan's bullet had cut the rawhide thong.

IT WAS shooting. Mighty fine shooting. And every man in the crowd was willing, eager to say so. The lanky Beaver Smith stood looking at the severed thong as if he were seeing something of magic.

"The lad goes with us," roared a drunken man.

"He shore does!" said a cowhand who sat his horse with some other dust-powdered cowpunchers who had ridden up. "If you don't want him with your slow-poke wagon layout, the button is plumb welcome to string along with us. I kin use a extra cowboy. Young feller, if you kin set a bronc half as good as you handle that hawg-laig, you done got a job. You don't need to pay your way, neither. How about it, young feller? Want a job?"

"I'll tell a man," grinned Dan. Then he remembered. "But I reckon I can't. I ain't alone. I got my mother along. She's at the wagon. Only for that, I'd be sure proud to hire out to you."

The cowpuncher rode up alongside Dan, his weight in one stirrup. He had a snub-nosed broad face that was covered with huge, dark freckles. A stubble of fiery red whiskers covered his square jaws. From under his dust-covered hat showed a shock of badly trimmed red hair. His eyes were the bluest Dan had ever seen.

"I'm Red Riley," he said, grinning so that his big white teeth showed. "I'm in charge of the Bar R trail herd that's comin' up the river a few miles back yonder. I seen the whole damn play from the time you jumped them three coyotes at your camp. Us boys was ridin' up that direction and seen you whup that long-eared button. And heard you talk right up to the buckskin boss-man of this wagon spread. I'm short-handed and kin use you. But if you got a wagon and your mother, that kinda puts the kibosh on it. Son, if you want to go along

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

with this here wagon train, you're goin'. It's Red Riley that says so, and he's got some Bar R hands along with him that votes the same ticket. Hear that, buckskin feller?"

"You run your outfit," said Beaver Smith. "I'll run mine. The young buck goes along with the wagon train if he wants." He turned his long legs and strode away, swaggering with gangling strides.

Red Riley's broken, battered pug nose wrinkled. "Smells like a mixture of skunk, muskrat and bad likker. Bet he ain't had a bath since the year the big flood raised the Missouri River over her banks. Them might be scalp locks he totes in his belt, but they look like hunks of horse's mane from where I'm settin'. Boys, I bet he's the bad man from the head of Bitter Crick, so don't cut his sign till you got your prayers all said and your last will made out!"

Red Riley and his cowboys rode up the street. Dan's back was slapped and his hand pumped by some of the very men who, an hour ago, had laughed at him. He had won his spurs. He was accepted as a member of the wagon train.

Dan and his mother had finished supper when Beaver Smith showed up. He appeared inside the glow of firelight with the silence of an Indian. He handed Dan the old leather wallet that had been his father's. His manner was ingratiating, apologetic.

"Count it, young feller, and see if it's all there. I put the fear into them three scalawags. They won't steal another thing again in a hurry. I won't stand for no stealin' in my outfit." Beaver Smith was half drunk and reeked of whiskey and old sweat.

Dan counted the money. Four hundred and fifty dollars. Twenty-five dollars was missing, but he made no mention of it. The three thieves, or possibly Beaver Smith had taken that.

"I'm satisfied," Dan said, and folded the wallet, tying it with its buckskin string.

"I'm chargin' a hundred dollars for every man or woman I take up the trail," said

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Beaver Smith. "That's dirt cheap, considerin'." Piloting a wagon train is worth ten times that. . . ."

Dan counted over two hundred dollars. Beaver Smith put it in an already stuffed buckskin pouch which he carried inside his shirt by a heavy thong looped around his unwashed neck.

"Is your ma ailin'?" he asked, his small bloodshot eyes peering from under overhanging brows at Dan's mother who was dozing, her back to the wagon wheel, her toil-worn hands clutching the little bundle of baby clothes.

"She's wore out," said Dan shortly. "You got your money. Good night. I'll be gittin' my sleep."

Beaver Smith uncoiled his crossed legs and lit the foul-smelling Indian trade pipe. He filled the air with smoke—a mixture of tobacco and *kinni-kinnik* which the Sioux smoke.

"You belong to the wagon train now, sonny. I'm your captain and you take my orders or draw out of the train, forfeitin' your ante. Saddle your horse and go on guard at midnight, standin' your regular two-hour watch."

Dan said nothing. The firelight showed the leering grin on the buckskin man's bearded face, and the glint in his greenish bloodshot eyes. Eyes that reminded Dan of the Harbisons.

Beaver Smith left as silently as he had come.

Dan had a feeling of defeat, a premonition of trouble and danger that was to come, and he knew that he had made a crafty, dangerous enemy in Beaver Smith. Beaver Smith, who was to be their only guide across the great unknown wilderness to the north.

DAN WYETH stood third guard that night, riding around the cavvy of work horses and saddle stock. Letting them graze, throwing back those that were trying to quit the remuda and hit the trail from their

home range. It was a hard bunch of horses to hold and it took constant riding by Dan and the three other men on guard to keep the cavvy from scattering too far.

"We need some bells," Dan said to one of the other men on guard. "If we put bells on the leaders that are bound to drift and lead the others, we could keep track of 'em in the dark. There ain't a bell amongst 'em. And there ain't any twenty-five head out of this cavvy that come from the same place. Till they get used to the trail and grazin' together of a night, they're goin' to scatter like dust in a norther. We need about ten bells in this cavvy."

"So I told Beaver Smith. And he cussed me out. Said there'd be no bells to attract Injuns on the trail and guide 'em to the remuda. He said we'd hold these horses without bells and spend what time we had to huntin' what we spilled. Bells attract Injuns, Wyeth." He chuckled.

"I don't savvy Injuns like Beaver Smith does," replied Dan, "but from what I've heard from old-timers, and from what common sense tells me, almost any Injun could locate a cavvy of two hundred head of horses without bein' guided by bells."

"Meanin' Beaver don't savvy his business?" said another rider who had joined Dan and the other men on guard. He was a young cowboy and Dan looked at him hard, wondering if he could have been one of the three who had stolen his wallet.

"Meanin'," said Dan hotly, "that I wasn't talkin' to you. And that if you're pickin' a quarrel you kin have it—when we git off guard. Is that what you're askin' for?"

"Lordy, ain't you a fightin' cock? I ain't talkin' fight. But I kin tell you this much. You can't win every fight like you did that first 'un. There's better men than you in this outfit. And you won't be long finding it out." He rode off, whistling.

"Be careful how you talk around this outfit, Wyeth," said the cowboy who had been talking to Dan. He was an older man who had a family and two wagons. "Beaver Smith

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

has his own little bunch of followers among us. They'll have both ears cocked and will run to Beaver with every word they hear. That young whelp you licked was one of Beaver Smith's pets. That young feller that just rode off is another. Personally, I don't put too much trust in Beaver Smith, but this is the only outfit that will be going up the trail for weeks to come. I'm old enough to be your daddy, and I'm advising you to talk easy if you want to keep out of trouble. Ride your temper with a spade bit, Wyeth."

"Thanks, mister. I'll shore try to. I ain't quarrelsome. But I was taught to stand on my own feet."

"There's times when even the bravest of men take water. It ain't cowardly to keep your mouth shut."

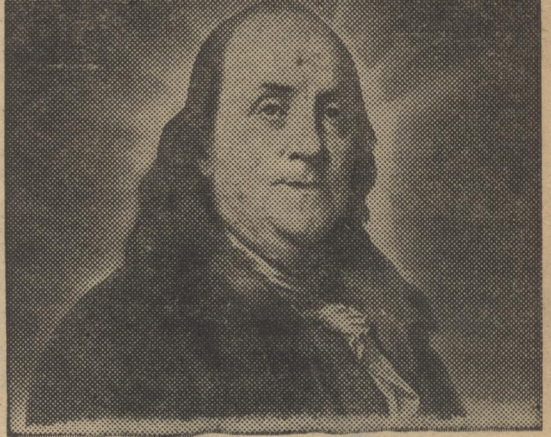
"I reckon you're plumb right. I'll do my best."

And Dan meant what he said. But the next morning, at the first gray of dawn, when he was catching his horses out of the corral to hook them to the wagon, Beaver Smith confronted him. With the buckskin man were several of the younger cowboys whom Dan spotted as being the followers and bootlickers the man on guard had warned him against. Among them was the young fellow who had quarreled with Dan on guard.

"Understand right now, Wyeth," said Beaver Smith, "I'm runnin' this wagon train. If you got any kick comin', fetch it direct to me. No damned talkin' behind my back. I give orders, you take 'em. If you don't like the way I handle things, pull out." He walked away, his saddle rope in his hand. The young cowpunchers grinned and made remarks to one another. Dan led his two horses on to his wagon.

Dan kept his mouth shut and bided his time. It was about a week later when luck favored his plans and he caught the young cowboy who had told Beaver Smith about the bells. He met him while they were hunting some horses that had strayed.

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"Step off on the ground," Dan told him. "Lay your gun down. Beaver Smith and your friends ain't around to help you. I'm goin' to give you a little taste of medicine that'll be good for your white-livered system. And if you tell where you got it, I'll repeat the dose. Step off your horse."

The cowboy was older than Dan, big and well muscled. But he was no match for Dan, who had been well taught by his two older brothers. Dan punished him till he begged for mercy.

"If Beaver Smith or any of your wallet-stealin' coyote *amigos* ask you how you got skinned up, you tell 'em your horse throwed you. Savvy?" and he slapped the cowboy's bleeding face with his open hand.

"I won't tell anybody, Wyeth. I got my medicine."

"And if you squeal, this ain't nothin' but soothin' syrup to what I'll hand you the next time."

Dan picked up his gun from the ground and dusted himself off with his hat. He rode back to camp feeling much lighter of heart.

AT CAMP he found some men and a group of women gathered around his mother at their wagon. A cold fear clutched Dan's heart, a fear that was swiftly banished as he saw his mother, a happy smile on her face, holding a small, golden-haired girl about three years old in her arms. The child's face was tear-stained and one of her chubby legs was bandaged above the ankle. But she was laughing shakily and clinging to Dan's mother, who was crooning to the youngster. Some of the women looked as if they had been crying. So did the weather-beaten, delicate-looking bearded man who pushed his way through the crowd toward Dan.

"Your mother has done a brave thing, Wyeth," he said huskily. "A rattlesnake struck my little girl in the leg. Your mother was the only one who did not lose her head. She cut the place open with a knife and

sucked the poison out. Killed the rattler, too, with a stick. She had the presence of mind and the courage that the others lacked. I tried to thank her but she did not seem to understand what I was saying. . . . My name is Conway. I'm a school teacher."

"My mother is—sick, sir. She's had a heap of trouble that has sort of numbed her mind. I remember hearin' 'em tell how she'd saved my sister Natalie's life once the same way when a sidewinder bit her. A long time ago. . . ."

"She calls my little girl Natalie," said Professor Conway. "My wife died a few months ago. My little one seems to have taken a remarkable fancy to your mother. There is just myself and two little girls. I have some money. I'd be glad to pay your mother a bit for looking after the children."

"We couldn't take money for that. And my mother might be a heap happier if she had the little girls to care for."

The man pumped Dan's hand vigorously, too overcome to speak. And that night, for the first time since Dan could remember, he saw his mother happy. He heard her laugh aloud, heard her sing softly to the sleepy child as she put the youngster to sleep. A hard lump came in Dan's throat.

Dan Wyeth, a few days later, rode over to the Bar R trail herd that was several miles behind the wagon train. He found Red Riley riding up on the point of the long-horns that were strung out for miles, hidden in the dust.

"Howdy, young feller," grinned the red-haired trail boss, his puckered blue eyes looking from under the slanted brim of his dust-powdered hat. "Don't tell me you're fetchin' me Beaver Smith's scalp. Because I don't want anything that lousy around me."

"I came to tackle you about that job," said Dan. "My mother is travelin' with friends—a man and two little girls. She's plumb happy and don't need me now all the time, like she did. I'd be proud to work for you."

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

"Hmmmmm. How you and Beaver Smith bittin' it off?"

"He leaves me alone. But he don't like me any more than I cotton to him. I don't trust that long-gear'd snake and he knows it."

"Which is some dirty, son." And Red Riley's keen blue eyes seemed to be studying Dan shrewdly. They rode for a way in silence.

"I had an older hand in mind, but there ain't any man I know travelin' with the wagon train, so I'm givin' you a chance at it. But you don't need to be ashamed to take it. Even many a brave man would turn it down, because if Beaver Smith ever suspects, your life ain't worth a counterfeit Mex peso."

He shook his head. "And I don't know, son. I'm afraid you're too young. Nope, I reckon I was raisin' my sights too high. It takes an older head than yours, son. You ain't got the wrinkles on your horns. Plenty of sand, but no kind of experienced or seasoned judgment."

"I kin hold my temper and keep my head," pleaded Dan eagerly. "I would shore be proud to tackle it. I'm a heap older in a lot of ways, my dad said more than once, than lots of growed men."

"I'll tell you what it is, Dan. And we'll talk it over after you git a look at the cards." He rolled and lit a cigarette, then went on, the smile gone from his freckled face, his blue eyes hard as new steel.

"Beaver Smith is playin' an almighty dirty game. Leastways, that's what I was told at Pecos by a man that should know. He's playin' in with some rustlers from the No Man's strip near Indian Territory. I don't know who the outlaws are, but they're bad 'uns."

"Somewhere along the trail, Beaver Smith is goin' to slip word to the outlaws that are cold-trailin' the wagon train and the Bar R trail herd. He'll send back word that the sign is right, and one night they'll attack. They want the cattle I'm fetchin' up the

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trail. And mebbby they'll even attack the wagon train if there's any plunder rich enough to warrant their risk and trouble.

"Like as not the attack will be made somewhere in the slap-dab middle of the Injun country. And the outlaws will like as not be in cahoots with some of the renegade Injuns. They'll try to kill me and every man in my outfit. And if there's plunder enough in your wagon train, they'll wipe it out, complete—kill the men and either kill the women or take off the ones that's young. Burn the wagons and steal the horses. And after a time the news will reach the nearest towns that the Injun war parties has wiped out another wagon train and run off another trail herd."

The trail boss tossed down the butt of his cigarette.

"This won't be the first time such things has happened, son. This won't be the first deal of its kind that Beaver Smith has had his dirty hands into the blood up to his elbows. There's a story that might or might not be true. That somewhere hid on his stinkin' person is the scalp of a white woman. She had long, yaller hair. He killed her after he'd stolen her from a wagon train him and some renegade Injuns wiped out. That's the story I heard at Pecos, after your wagon train pulled out.

"Your job would be to keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut tighter than a sprung wolf trap. And when you hear anything, let me know. Likewise try to git on the good side of Beaver Smith. Git him to cut you into his coyote pack. He's got half a dozen or so with him. Two-three young squirts like the one you ketched stealin' your bankroll. And some others, older hands, too. Mebbe you could git him to count you in, though not likely. He's sharp, that way. And he'll cut your throat some night if he ever ketches onto you. That's how dangerous the job it. It takes an old hand to outfox Beaver Smith."

"I'd be proud to tackle it," said Dan quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

Renegade Wagon Boss

THEY CALLED it the Whiskey Wagon.

And now, two weeks along the trail, the secret of its existence became an open one. Beaver Smith, never quite sober, no longer put up an sort of pretense of trying to put a stop to the peddling of whiskey or to the gambling that was going on every night.

As a matter of fact, Beaver was the real owner of the big covered wagon that hauled the barrels of whiskey. And he took a percentage of the winnings from the gambling games.

The wagon train was getting into the worst part of the Indian territory. There had been several skirmishes with small war parties. The horse guards were doubled and every man slept with his gun.

The older men, men with their wives and families, were becoming more and more worried and fearful. And they talked among themselves, discussing the matter.

The wagon train, men, women and children, were at the mercy of Beaver Smith. He told them so, when a committee of sober, decent-minded men came to him with their protest against the Whiskey Wagon.

"I'll pull out if you force me to, but I ain't refundin' your money. And I ain't goin' back in any way on my contract with you to pilot your wagon train up the trail to Montana. There's nothin' in my agreement that forbids takin' a drink or playin' a game of friendly cards. If there's drinkin' and gamblin' goin' on, as you claim, then I reckon you better send for a sky pilot to show the errin' sinners the straight and narrow trail. I'm a scout and Injun fighter—not a psalm-singin' preacher.

"If you ain't satisfied with the way I'm goin', pay me off and let me go. Hell, this ain't no damned picnic for me, ridin' herd on a pack of wimmin' and squawkin' brats and men that's scared of their shadders and thinks there's the devil's poison in a swaller

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

of good corn likker. Gimme a hundred dollars apiece, each of them as wants me gone, and I'll pull out. But before you let me go, look yourselves over and pick out a man to take my place. An Injun fighter and scout that knows the trail north, daylight or dark, and knows where to find water and when to make dry camps and how to deal with the Injuns like them yonder that you see sky-lighted. They been trailin' us night and day, but they're scared to attack because they know that it's Beaver Smith that's captain of the wagon train. Think 'er over keerful, gents, before you let go your guardian angel, Beaver Smith!"

And he swaggered off in the moonlight to the Whiskey Wagon.

They went back to their wagons, these men who had put their trust in Beaver Smith and had been betrayed by the whiskey-guzzler in buckskin. They went back to their wagons with a beaten look in their eyes, to face their women-folk.

Among them was Professor Conway, who looked white and tired. He was not made for the rigors and hardships of the trail. He saw Dan's mother with the little golden-haired girl she called Natalie, though the child's name was Bess. And he thought that perhaps the woman's affliction of mind was, just now, a blessing in disguise.

It was his sixteen-year-old daughter, Lee, whom he dreaded facing. Lee was a tom-boy who wore boy's clothes and had taken shears and cut her waist-length blue-black hair so that now it was a mop of unruly curls that made her look more than ever like a boy.

She rode up now on the horse Dan had given her. Dan liked Lee because she was different from the giggling, whispering girls he had known, and because she had an uncanny knack with horses. He had caught her riding his bald-faced stocking-legged Chili horse bareback. And Chili had thrown every man that had ever tried to sit him. Thus Lee had gained the lasting respect of the



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girl-hating Dan. And incidentally she'd fallen heir to Chili.

"Well, Dad, did your committee tell that unwashed son of a snake where to get off at?" Lee asked, her white teeth flashing a quick smile.

"Beaver Smith is all you so inelegantly term him," Professor Conway smiled wanly. "But he holds the whip over us, I'm afraid."

"Don't let it worry you, Dad. Hang and rattle."

"Eh? Hang, Lee?"

"That's what Dan said when I told him that you were calling for a showdown with the polecat. Dan's the only man in this spread that ain't afraid of that two-legged wolf. And Beaver Smith knows it. Dan's a stem-winder and he don't need to swill a gallon of forty rod for a bravemaker, either . . ."

"Your vocabulary, Lee, is . . ."

"Is improving. But I don't know any of the best words, yet. Whenever I get within earshot, they quit cussing."

"Who?"

"Red Riley and the Bar R cowhands—I forgot. Dan would skin the hide off me if he knew I'd let it slip. You needn't say a word to anybody, but I slip off at night sometimes and go over to the Bar R camp. They're about five miles back of us with their herd. I trailed Dan one night when he slipped over there. Almost got shot. He recognized me just in time. Dad, I'll cut you in on the secret, but don't spill the beans, or Beaver Smith will kill Dan. I'll tell you this much. If Beaver Smith thinks he has us where he wants us, he's loco as hell. Beaver Smith ain't the only man in the world that's crossed the plains before. Red Riley could go up the trail blindfolded. But it's your game to keep on looking and acting scared as a cottontail."

AT FIRST Lee Conway seemed a problem. She had followed Dan to the Bar R camp one night and Dan, knowing that someone was following him in the dark, had

almost taken a shot at her. But as Red said, the kid was close-mouthed and loyal as hell and might even come in handy to carry a message to Red in case of a fight.

So Lee had been taken a little ways into their confidences. Her gameness, her lack of girlish nonsense, had won over Red and the Bar R cowpunchers. To a man they would have died for this dark-eyed youngster who clung to Dan's heels, as Red put it, like a coon dog.

"When her folks named her for General Lee, they didn't make no mistake," said Riley.

Red Riley, who had fought with the Southern cavalry, could have paid the youngster no finer tribute. Lee had overheard Red telling it to Dan and the Bar R men, and had flushed with happiness. And that night she had dug into a trunk and from among her dead mother's effects had taken a small revolver which from then on she carried hidden under her shirt.

A dim light burned inside the canvas-topped Whiskey Wagon, from which came the buzz of low-pitched voices. A guard dozed outside, his back propped against the front wheel of the wagon, his gun across his lap. It was past midnight.

Dan should have been on guard. Instead he was within earshot of the Whiskey Wagon, flattened, Indian fashion, on the ground, behind a greasewood patch.

He could not make out the words of the two men talking inside the Whiskey Wagon. One of the men was Beaver Smith. And as Dan recognized the voice of the other man his hand gripped tighter the butt of his six-shooter, because the voice could belong only to one man. That arrogant, mocking, yet soft-toned voice was Duke Harbison's!

Cold sweat bathed Dan's body and the palm of his gun hand was moist. And he was remembering the words of his dying father, to use the cedar-handled Colt to kill Duke Harbison. Dan remembered his sister Nat. His mother's heart-breaking grief that had dulled her mind. His thumb

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

was caressing the hammer of his gun.

Then Duke Harbison's voice rose.

"You're a 'low-down, crawlin' thing, Beaver. I ought to kill you. I will, if you don't obey orders. I don't fight women and kids. And if there's one harmed in this train I'll have your dirty body staked out naked on an ant hill and daubed with sorghum. I'm after the Bar R herd and what plunder you got here. But I'm holdin' you responsible for every woman and kid in the outfit. I'll let you know when the sign is right.

Dan saw Duke Harbison leave the Whiskey Wagon, get his horse that he'd left a hundred yards from the camp, and ride away. And in spite of his hatred for the handsome Duke, that old feeling of admiration for the hard-riding, fast-shooting Mis-sourian, crept again into his heart.

Duke was the lone wolf of the Harbisons, and the most deadly in a fight. Hell, Dan couldn't shoot a man like Duke from ambush. He couldn't kill anybody, not even a crawling snake like Beaver Smith, from the brush. The Wyeths didn't fight that way.

Dan went back to the remuda and rode the grazing horses until he met one of the riders.

"Where you bin, Wyeth?" asked the man.

"If Beaver Smith had bells on these run-away geldings," Dan said with a fine pre-tense at sullen anger, "a man wouldn't be chasin' 'em all over hell. The Injuns will grab 'em one of these nights. And if you're one of Beaver's pets, you can tell him I said so."

"You know damn well I ain't one of his bootlickers, Wyeth. And if you was fetchin' any horses back to the remuda when you showed up, you had 'em covered with magic blankets to make 'em invisible. Now don't git hot, partner. I don't give a hoot where you've bin, either, the past half hour. Only there's one of Beaver's pet monkeys with us on this guard, and he knows you've bin gone. And the excuse of stray horses

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mightn't work. Better think up a better 'un. He'd believe you if you'd kinda hint that you'd slipped off in a coulee to meet Lee Conway. Don't hit me, you hot-headed idiot! Don't, Dan!"

"That kid's like my own sister," said Dan, releasing his hold on the young cowboy's shirt collar, "and I'll beat the head off any man's shoulders that says a word about Lee."

"Hell, don't I know it? Don't every man in camp know it? Here comes that monkey flea-picker of Beaver's. Keep your temper. I'll do the talkin' for you. Now tuck in your shirt tail."

When they met the rider, an older hand who hung around the Whiskey Wagon a lot, Dan's companion spoke first.

"Got anything on your hip? Any of Beaver's tarant'lar juice? Dan's got a bad case of cramps from the alkali water. And he thinks he's too proud to drink Beaver Smith's cure-all. Let's have the loan of your fire-water. Wyeth, quit bein' sullen like a whipped bull and take a stiff snort. It won't pizen you."

He took the bottle the cowpuncher had reluctantly produced, pulled the cork with his teeth and shoved the bottle at Dan. Dan took a drink. The suspicion in the man's eyes gave way to resentment.

"Needn't take it all because it's free, Wyeth. You're too high an' mighty to buy it yourself, but plenty willin' to guzzle it when it don't cost nothin'. Cramps? You ain't the only one that's got 'em. But we don't go off in a coulee and lay down on account of a belly ache. If you want more likker, you know where to buy it."

"I'll pay you for it with a new bottle," said Dan, silently thanking his quick-thinking companion for inventing the ruse that had worked so well.

The man with the bottle rode on. Dan grinned at his companion. The young cowpuncher grinned back.

"You got more friends in this outfit than you figure on, Dan," he said. "Before long

there's goin' to be trouble. A lot of us are about sick of Beaver Smith. We'd like to count on you."

"You all know where I stand," said Dan cautiously. He was trusting nobody, falling into no trap. "I'm obliged to you for what you just did. That was fast thinkin'."

"The dirty flea-picker," said the cowboy, using the term by which the unsavory Beaver Smith's followers were known, "has his own suspicions just the same, and he only half believes the excuse about cramps. You'd tear his head off for what he suspects. Don't git hot, Dan. You can't go killin' men for what they're thinkin' in their snake brains."

THE COWBOY was right. But as they parted and Dan rode alone he scowled into the shadows. He hadn't thought of Lee as a girl. And she had tagged him around like a kid sister or younger brother, getting in his way sometimes and taking his rebuffs as a matter of course when she made mistakes and he talked to her as he'd talk to a younger boy. No, Dan hadn't ever treated Lee as a girl. But she was a girl, nevertheless. And if Dan didn't realize it, other men did. And some of these men were as coarse in their manner of thought as they were in their way of living.

But in a few moments Lee was gone from his mind. Dan was thinking of Duke Harbison and what he had overheard Duke telling Beaver Smith. It was Duke who was trailing the Bar R herd. Duke and his Mexican renegades. Duke had cussed out Beaver Smith but they were in cahoots. Duke had said he'd let Beaver Smith know in a week or ten days, when the sign was right, and the attack would be made. Dan would get word to Red Riley.

But the next morning when the horses were being caught out of the remuda, Dan saw Beaver Smith talking to the Whiskey Wagon guard and the man who had given him the drink last night. Their covert glances kept sliding toward Dan and he

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

reckoned they were talking about him. Dan was ready for anything when Beaver Smith swaggered over to him.

But Beaver's line of talk was foxy. He made no mention of Dan's faked cramps, or the Whiskey Wagon episode.

"You happen to be any kinfolks to the Wyeth outfit on the Pecos that's been feudin' with a outfit named Harbison?"

Dan suspected that Beaver knew the answer to his own question.

"Jim Wyeth was my father. The Harbisons killed him. Likewise they shot down my two brothers from the brush. The Harbisons are murderin' snakes."

"So I've heard tell, Wyeth. Didn't your sister run off with Duke Harbison a few years back?"

"That's none of your damned business," said Dan. "Keep your dirty tongue off my sister's name. If you don't, I'll kill you." Dan's temper flared, white hot. And his hand was on his gun in a swift, unbroken movement.

"When the sign is right, sonny, I'll make you use that gun you're always makin' a play for. But the sign ain't right, yet." And Beaver Smith walked away, leaving behind him the faint stench of stale sweat and animal and whiskey.

Dan was being watched by Beaver Smith and his fleapickers. There was no chance to get word to Red Riley. And because the wagon train had been spotted by Comanches and the nights were marked by fire signals of the gathering war parties of the Indians, the train was kept under close guard. And they were Indians, not renegade whites, who trailed the wagon train as a mountain lion stalks its prey.

CHAPTER FOUR

Where Gun Trails Cross

DAN WONDERED what had become of Duke Harbison and his renegades. Had they tangled with the Indians? Or were

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they friendly with the Comanche war parties? Not likely, for the Comanches hated all white men.

Red Riley rode up out of the sunrise. He hailed Beaver Smith as he came up.

"Heard the news, greasy shirt?" he called. "Your Indian *amigos* have cleaned out some Mormons. Four-five of the wagon train got away. My bed wagon is fetchin' two wounded men, and there's one woman. Got a doctor in your outfit?"

Professor Conway stepped forward. "I had two years of medicine. I've a fair supply of bandages and medicines."

"You'll need 'em. Smith, go easy on that booze. Them Injuns mean business and you can't do much dead-drunk."

"Mind your own outfit. I'll run mine," snarled Beaver Smith.

"Shut up. I know all about how you run wagon trains, you yellow-bellied coyote. My boys are comin' with the cattle as fast as they kin haze 'em along. There's women in this wagon train. They're a heap more valuable than cattle. I'll turn my herd loose if I have to, to help save your wagon train. But you're takin' orders from Red Riley. Is that clear in your coyote mind? Or do I have to whup it into your skull with a gun barrel?"

Beaver Smith nodded sullenly. Red Riley reined his horse and rode over to Dan, who stood apart from the crowd.

"Howdy, Dan. You heard what I told the skunk feller. It's on the level. There's Injun fightin' comin'. You kin see the dust of my herd comin' up. And my remuda will be here directly to throw in with yours. Any news?"

"Duke Harbison and his outlaws is planin' to steal the Bar R herd, Red. Duke was here three nights ago."

"Figured it was Duke, right along. Mexico got too hot for him. But the Comanches has him and his rustlers dodgin' fast. The noble redskin upset his apple cart and has him on the run. If I ain't badly mistook, Duke will be runnin' to us for protection.

"Keep an eye on Beaver Smith. Some of them renegade Indians are his *amigos*. If he shows signs of turnin' traitor, kill him like you'd kill a rattler. I'm leavin' you as sort of straw boss, Dan. Ride close herd on Beaver Smith. So long."

Red Riley was hardly out of sight when the Bar R bed-wagon, drawn by four stout Spanish mules, came into sight. Two dusty riders flanked the wagon. As they came nearer Dan saw that one of the riders was a woman. The other was a man who did not belong to the Bar R. One of the Mormons, Dan reckoned.

Men and a few women crowded around the wagon. The men were helping two wounded men from the wagon.

But Dan wasn't watching them. He was staring like a man in a trance at the woman who sat her sweaty horse. She wore a soiled, torn, blood-spattered riding habit, a divided skirt and jacket of fringed buckskin. Her hat was gone and thick, copper-colored hair tumbled about her face that was white and drawn beneath its tan. Her dark gray eyes swept the crowd. Then she was looking down at Dan. With a sharp, hoarse little cry she slid from her horse, leaning dizzily against the animal.

"Nat!" cried Dan hoarsely.

"Dan! Little Danny!" She clung to him, her arms around his neck, her thick hair all but smothering him. She was laughing and crying at the same time. A big lump came into Dan's throat that kept choking back the words he was trying to say. And there must have been tears in his eyes because he could not see the white face of Lee Conway looking from the canvas opening of her wagon.

She was staring at Dan and at the girl who was hugging him tightly and talking to him in broken little sobs. Lee withdrew her head with a jerk and pulled the canvas closed.

Natalie's mother did not know her. Dan saw the stricken look in his sister's eyes, saw her start back as if struck when her

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mother did not return her swift embrace.

"She's sick, Nat," whispered Dan when she recoiled from the blank look in her mother's eyes. "Her mind is sort of numb. Dad and Tug and Bill got killed. And the shock of it sort of put her mind off kilter. Professor Conway says she might get all right with a long rest and plenty of quiet."

Natalie Wyeth saw her mother gather in her arms a little golden-haired girl. Heard her mother call the child Natalie. She turned away, her face white.

Dan led her around to the other side of the wagon and into his small tepee where her grief broke in a flood of scalding tears. Sobs racked the girl's body. After a time she became quiet.

"My baby would have been the age of that child, if she'd lived," said Natalie. "She was killed in an Indian raid almost a year ago. Dan, tell me, was it my running away that made Mother—like she is?"

Dan lied splendidly. He wasn't going to hurt Nat, whom he loved. She'd been hurt too much already. Nor did he ask his sister any kind of questions. That was not Dan's way. And Nat understood.

WHEN NAT'S tears were dried and she had plaited her thick copper hair in two braids, they went out of Dan's tepee. As they rounded the wagon Dan heard the harsh tones of a man talking.

"... So I say unto you,, all ye sinners, prepare to meet thy God?"

Dan saw a tall scarecrow of a man, a bloody bandage about his head, his long gray hair moving as he swung his head on its skinny neck. His rusty black clothes were soiled from dirt and blood and torn in places. One arm was in a sling, his other arm was across the shoulders of Dan's mother who stood there dazedly, her eyes blank, not understanding what was being said, what was going on about her. Then the scarecrow's gaze fell upon Dan and Natalie. And his long arm left the shoulders of Dan's

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mother to point a long, bony forefinger at Nat.

"You!" he shouted. "Witness the result of your sinning! Behold the handiwork of your erring ways! Aye, the sins of youth are suffered by those poor, unfortunate parents who brought them into the world. Behold your mother, shameless hussy; I say to you . . ."

Dan's face went white as he understood the preacher's harsh words were directed at Nat. He leaped forward and would have laid rough hands on the man had not his sister thrown her arms around him and held him back.

"It's Uncle Luther, Dan!" she said tensely. "Don't fight him!"

But Natalie had another champion. A wounded man on a home-made litter struggled to a sitting posture. He and the preacher had been brought here in the Bar R bed-wagon, refugees from the Mormon wagon train.

"Hold your long tongue, you blackleg shikepoke. And thank that girl for savin' your life. Only for her, your lousy scalp would be hangin' from a Comanche belt. She found you unconscious and risked her life to get you to the Bar R camp!

"This girl you are accusin' warned our train that the Comanches were comin' a week ago. Gave us the chance to get our women and children safe to Trinidad. Say another word against her and I'll shoot you."

Luther Gregory's long arm in its rusty black cloth dropped slowly. The fire went out of his bloodshot eyes. His long frame seemed to wilt like some gaunt reed gone limp. He sat down weakly on the wagon tongue, as Beaver Smith, half drunk, came pushing through the crowd.

A stifled cry came from Natalie as she shrank behind the wagon, pulling Dan with her. "That man in buckskin, Dan," she whispered. "What's he doing here?"

"He's the captain of the wagon train—Beaver Smith. What ails you, Nat? Did Uncle Luther . . ."

Nat shook her head. "Dan, that buckskin man was with the Indians who raided a wagon train I was with, a year ago, when my baby was tomahawked and scalped. He was smeared with war paint, but I knew he was no Indian. I'd swear it."

"Red Riley told me how to read his brand," said Dan. "Think Smith will recognize you?"

"I don't know. The raid was at night. He wasn't the only renegade white among the Indians. I fought for my baby. Your Beaver Smith was the leader."

"He's due for his dose of strong medicine when Red Riley and his cowhands git here."

"Red Riley is coming here now?"

"Sure thing, Nat. He's fetchin' the Bar R herd up the trail. Didn't you see him at their camp? Didn't anybody tell you who was ramroddin' the Bar R outfit?"

"No. We were all too busy to talk, Dan. You don't have much time for introductions during an Indian fight." She smiled faintly. The color had come back into her face again.

"You ever meet Red Riley, Nat?"

"I've met him, Dan. . . . If there's going to be fighting, I need a rifle and some cartridges for my six-shooter."

Dan wanted to ask Nat more about Red Riley, but he sensed that his sister didn't want to talk about the red-headed trail boss and he wondered why.

And now the unpleasant nasal voice of Beaver Smith could be heard.

"Git the wagons drawed up in a tight circle. All stock corraled inside. Git a hump on you, and quit millin' around like scared sheep. I'll go in amongst you with a bull whip, if you don't rattle your hocks faster. Grab hold of them wagon tongues and pull the wagons by hand. Close up the gaps in between with rocks and brush and stuff from your wagons. Use everything that'll stop a bullet or arrow. You, you, an' you, stand guard. No more stock inside the circle exceptin' our own."

"Yonder comes the Bar R remuda, Beaver.

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

"We got to let 'em in." His voice quivered. "Who says so? To hell with the Bar R remuda and the men that belongs to the trail outfit. We got all we kin do to look after ourselves. That remuda stays outside the barricade. If they won't turn back, shoot 'em."

"I'm takin' Beaver Smith prisoner, Nat," Dan said.

"And I'll tell 'em why, if they need a reason. Go git him, Danny!"

DAN GOT the drop on Beaver Smith. "Lift your dirty paws high, mister, and tell your flea-catchers to lay down their guns. If you or any one of your dirty outfit makes a bad move, I'm killin' you. Nat, they claim that Beaver Smith packs around the scalp of a white woman."

Beaver Smith had recognized Nat. His green eyes shifted like those of a trapped coyote. And Nat, leaning her rifle against a wagon wheel, had slipped a hunting knife from its sheath. There was a tight, cruel look about her mouth that made the buckskin man shiver. His bearded face seemed to sag, its jaw muscles loose. His grimy hands shook unsteadily in the air.

"I saw you scalp a girl with long, golden hair," said Nat, stepping towards Beaver Smith. "She was with our wagon train. She'd run away from a band of renegade Indians you trailed with. She told her story to me. She thought you were going to capture her again. She killed herself. And you scalped her. Killing is too easy for a thing like you . . ."

Nat reached up, grabbing the dirty buckskin string, cutting it free with a quick pass of her hunting knife. And she held, shuddering a little, a scalp mounted on a red plush bit of cloth. A woman's scalp, the hair long and faded.

A murmur swept the crowd of bearded men. Beaver Smith stood on long buckskin legs that were wobbly with fear. He tried to speak but no words came. Stark terror

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showed clearly in his bloodshot green eyes.

A bearded man in a red shirt stepped from the crowd. He had a saddle rope in his hand. A couple of strides and he was alongside Beaver Smith. The noose dropped over the head of the terrified man. The crowd surged around.

"Not that, men!" called Professor Conway. Slight of build, he was the last man among them you would expect to display leadership. And perhaps it was that very shock of surprise that checked the lynch mob.

"You're forgetting, men," he said calmly, "that there are women and children watching from the wagons. If such a thing must be done, let it occur after nightfall in the darkness. I'd suggest jailing him in his precious Whiskey Wagon—after destroying the barrels of whiskey, saving only what might be needed as medicine."

"Damned if the doc ain't right!" said one of the older, saner men. "No use in scarin' our wives and younguns. They'll see enough hell without that."

"Yonder comes the Bar R remuda. Let 'em in. And hooray for Dan Wyeth and the sorrel-haired gal in the buckskin dress. Dunno who she is, but she stands higher than a deck full of aces. My hat's off to you, lady." And he pulled off a battered hat with a sweeping gesture.

A shout went up from the crowd. As Beaver Smith was being hauled away and his flea-pickers roughly disarmed, the crowd cheered Natalie Wyeth.

But Beaver Smith, something of his first fright gone, was not done yet. With his giant strength he shook off the men who were holding his arms. Waving his long arms, he raised his rasping voice in a loud cry of blustering indignation.

"You're condemnin' me without a hearing. You're takin' the word of a young killer, Dan Wyeth, who was run out of Texas. And the woman with him is a wanton—a woman of the streets, a robber of drunken men. She's called the Six-Shooter Queen of

Abilene. If you don't believe me, ask the long-gear'd preacher that come from the Mormon wagon train! He'll give you her proper name and—"

The roar of a gun cut short Beaver Smith's words. He gave a wild scream of pain and blood gushed from his mouth. He plunged backward, screamed again, and then lay still.

The badly-wounded Mormon who had struggled from his improvised litter was standing on wobbly legs, a smoking six-shooter in his hand, a queer smile on his bearded, half bandaged face.

Then the gun that had shot Beaver Smith slid from his hand, as he swayed and fell to the ground.

Nat Wyeth, who had been standing near, white-lipped under Beaver Smith's loud accusation, ran to the Mormon and eased him back on his litter.

"It was a pleasure—to stop his mouth—with a bullet, ma'am. I got a wife and two younguns. Safe in Trinidad—thankin' your courage—God bless you—lady." And he was dead.

RED RILEY and three of his men were driving the Bar R remuda inside the circle of wagons. The red-haired trail boss rode up.

"What are you standing around for, men? You have work to do before the Injuns attack. Flour and sugar is good to eat but in the sack they make good breastworks to stop bullets. Fill the gaps between the wagons with the stuff. Where's Dan Wyeth? Where's that greasy thing that calls himself Beaver Smith? What's wrong here?"

Little Professor Conway acted as spokesman. Briefly he told of the exposure of the wagon train guide. And Beaver Smith's ugly accusations against the girl in buckskin. How the dying Mormon had shot Beaver Smith.

"Dan Wyeth took the girl into his tepee," finished Professor Conway. "The girl Beaver Smith called the Six-Shooter Queen of Abi-

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

lene." His glance covered Dan, then Nat.
 "He's her brother," said Red Riley. "Her name is Natalie Wyeth, or was, until she married Duke Harbison. As fine a little woman as ever drew breath. When her husband deserted her, before her baby was born, there at their ranch on the Arkansas River near Abilene, she stayed on alone. She stood off Injuns and rustlers, and her ranch was open to any traveler that needed grub and feed.

"There ain't a one of us cowboys that wouldn't fight the devil hisself for that little lady we call the Six Shooter Queen of Abilene. She stands for somethin' like religion to us boys. We give her that name because we found her with a six-shooter in her hand, alone, with her young baby, holdin' off a bunch of Injuns."

Red Riley whirled his horse and went at a run across the distance to Dan's tepee. He quit his saddle with a leap. Gathering Natalie in his arms from where she stood beside Dan, he began talking.

"You ain't runnin' away from me again, Nat . . . Dan, you're goin' to have me for a brother-in-law some day. Only a snake named Duke Harbison that I chased into Mexico stands in the way. And he won't be hinderin' us for long. Nat wouldn't tell you because she's too prideful, but he quit her. Duke Harbison's no better than the rest of his tribe, includin' his cousin Beaver Smith. Yeah, Smith belonged to the snake clan . . ."

Professor Conway broke into their midst, his face white, lips twitching. His eyes looked wild, as he grabbed Dan's arm.

"Lee's gone—she's gone, Dan! Her horse, the one you gave her, is gone."

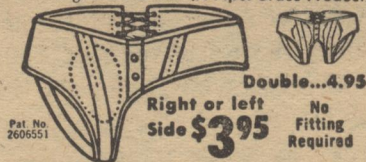
"My little Lee," he pleaded helplessly. "Is she out at the herd?"

"No. Does he mean our Lee gal, Dan? Our little ol' partner?"

Dan nodded dully. In the excitement he'd completely overlooked Lee's absence. He looked at little Doctor Conway, then at Red and at Natalie.

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"A slim girl in boy's clothes?" Nat inquired. "I met her only a little while ago, Dan, when you were out of the tent. She came from the wagon nearby. She looked like she'd been crying. I thought she might be sick, but when I said something to her she looked as if she wanted to kill me. I saw her ride off. That was an hour or more ago."

They looked at one another in puzzled silence. Then they were startled into action by the sudden rattle of gunfire. It came from back in the hills, not a mile distant.

"Come on, Dan," gritted Red. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Night of Battle

DAN, RED RILEY and every Bar R cowboy were riding with guns in their hands. As they left the herd they saw Indians pouring down from the hills. And they saw about fifteen or twenty white men in a bunch at a dead run for the wagon train. A wild burst of yelling came from the little bunch of spurring riders.

"Ay, Chihuahua! Ay, Chihuahua! They yelled their wild war cry.

"Duke Harbison," grinned Red Riley, his blue eyes hard. "Duke and his Chihuahua renegades. But now he's got half the Comanche Injuns in the world comin' at him. We'd orter let 'em lift Duke's scalp, but hell, he's a white man an' so's a lot of his Chihuahuas . . ."

And as they spurred ahead Dan rode stirrup to stirrup to cut off Duke Riley, charging the Indians who were riding to cut off Duke Harbison and his men from the safety of the wagon train.

Their battle cry rose harshly above the war whoops of the painted redskins who raced in a wide circle. Their bullets and arrows mostly going wild. Duke and his fighting renegades were making every bullet count. Their guns were piling up a deadly score.

The swift, unexpected charge of Red Riley and his Texans was now throwing the Comanches into wild confusion. They had counted on no open attack from the wagon train, and Red's sudden, fierce charge had them bewildered. Some of them raced for the safety of the hills. Others milled crazily. And into the melee Dan rode with Red at his side, into the tangle of clubbing, shooting Indians.

Lances thrust at him, war clubs of stone, tomahawks, knives, clubbed rifle barrels. Dan shot and clubbed and tried to keep on top of his lunging horse.

Then through the red chaos he saw Duke Harbison. Duke was on a big black gelding, a six-shooter in each hand. He was hatless and his thick black hair was red with blood. And even as Dan sighted the man he had sworn to kill he saw Duke twist in his saddle, reach down with one arm, and pull someone up behind his saddle. With a gasp Dan recognized the rescued rider whose horse had been shot down, just as Duke swung her up on his black gelding. It was Lee!

She was astride the horse, behind Duke's saddle, clinging to his waist. There was blood on her white face.

Duke saw Dan fighting his way through the tangle of Indians and horses. Duke's big white teeth showed in a sort of grin.

"Come and get her, Wyeth! Hurry! My horse is hit!" And as he yelled a bullet tore through his handsome face. But he was fighting, his two guns blazing as he swayed drunkenly in the saddle. Dan reached his side, as Duke's game-hearted black horse stumbled and went down. Dan's right arm, like a steel hook, swung Lee upward as the black horse fell.

Dan felt Lee's arms around him in a desperate embrace as she swung herself straddle of his horse. He shot squarely, and at point-blank range, into the painted face of a warrior who had lifted a heavy stone war club to brain him. The Indian reeled backwards. Then Red Riley was alongside.

RIDE THE WILD TRAIL

For a brief time they were hemmed in, Dan and Lee and Red Riley. Dan and Red were fighting like madmen to keep the yelling savages from closing in on them. And on the ground, standing on widespread legs beside his dead horse, Duke Harbison, his face a bloody mask, was making his last desperate stand.

The Texans and a couple of Duke's Chihuahua renegades fought through to them. Then the Indians broke and fled. But even as they went Dan caught a swift glimpse of something that he'd never forget.

A giant Comanche in the war bonnet of a chief, stood toe to toe with Duke Harbison. Duke lowered his two guns, making no attempt to guard the Comanche's knife as it came at him. Only when the long blade sank deep into his chest did Duke shoot. White renegade and red warrior went down together.

Red had seen it. And so had Lee. And afterwards, oddly enough, Lee was the only one of them who could give an explanation of Duke's action.

"Duke Harbison was a handsome man. The handsomest I ever saw. He had his pride in his good looks. With his face torn partly away, what could life hold for him?"

"Red," said Dan, as they rode back to the wagon train, "do you reckon I'm too young to get married? Lee ain't very old either..."

"Neither of you are what you might call gray-headed with the years. I'll talk it over with Nat. We'll let you youngun's know later. Then there's little Doc Conway to consider—of course, he's only the Lee gal's daddy—Of course you're old enough."

IN DAN'S tepee Natalie and Lee talked in low tones. Nat held the younger girl tightly in her arms. "I know just how you felt, Lee," said Nat, her fingers in Lee's mop of black curls from which she had washed the blood from a scalp wound. "How were you to know I was Dan's sister? And

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that our embraces were not what you thought they were—with Beaver Smith hol-
lering at the top of his lungs that I was a
bad woman? Of course you wanted to
kill me. And you ran away because you
were terribly hurt. I understand.”

“It was terrible, Nat. I meant to ride just
to the Bar R to talk to Red Riley about it.
But I got lost and scared green. Then that
young cowpuncher found me, that Dorf
Harbison. I didn’t know there were beasts
like that in the world. I tried to shoot him
with a gun I had. But he took the gun and
laughed at me. He had me powerless when
that other man—Duke Harbison—rode up.
They started shooting. Dorf shot first, but
Duke’s bullet killed him. Then Duke Harbi-
son put me on my horse.

“Duke said that he was going to take me
back to the wagon train if he had to ride
alone through the Indians. Then he asked
if you were at the wagon train. He told me
who you were—Dan’s sister. And he said
he reckoned he’d never see you again. And
to tell you he hadn’t meant to treat you so
ornery. The law ran him out of Abilene be-
fore he could get to see you. He tried to
come back, but Red Riley and other honest

men were too hot after him. He said you
were the only woman he ever really loved.
That the others didn’t count. And he was
sorry about the baby, and he wanted you to
be happy with Red Riley.”

“Duke Harbison is dead, honey. I love
Red. I’m going to be very happy in Mon-
tana on his ranch there.”

“Nat,” said Lee, holding the older girl
closer, “Dan—I— That is, we’re awful
young and—”

“So was I, honey. I think it will be
grand.”

Dan’s mother was laid to rest along that
cattle trail. She had died with her tear-
misted eyes looking up into the faces of her
youngest children, Nat and Dan. For in
that hour of death, before she closed her
eyes in eternal rest, she had recognized them
both, and her tired little smile had softened
with happiness.

Then the wagon train had gone on through
the dust and into the sunrise. Dan and Lee
rode on one point of the trailing cattle, Nat
and Red Riley on the other side. And be-
hind, somewhere, floated the song of a dusty-
throated cowboy troubador, singing a cow-
boy love song. . . .

HE WAS a horse thief and proud of it. He operated in the
Indian Nation with thirteen fellow-badmen—a gang that
wouldn’t shoot unless the odds were fourteen to one in their
favor. Indians and whites alike scorned them. But the scorn didn’t
bother them. The leader’s name was Bill, and he called himself Wild
Bill; after the late, famous Hickock. The moniker was a kind of
banner to this ornery bunch.

Sooner or later, as was bound to happen, a local sheriff cornered
the pack in its lair. Though the odds were in their favorite—fourteen
to one—somehow or other the gang didn’t have quite enough nerve
to draw on the tough old lawman. He knew where they were, and he
came back for them all with a detachment of militia.

Most of the men were given jail terms. For Wild Bill, the leader,
the most horrific punishment of all was reserved. Up and down the
territory from that time on, he was known officially, by court order,
as Tame B.”

He never stole a horse again.

SIX-GUNS SAY DIE!

(Continued from page 37)

office, Evers drew rein. He swung from the saddle and went slowly into the building. The lawman looked up from the desk where he was writing.

"You!" he said.

He said, "I'm Clay Evers."

The sheriff leaned back in his chair.

"Well," he said. "Well. That explains a lot. And Crandell thought he had himself some gunhawks!"

"I'm giving myself up," Evers said. "The charge is murder, in case you don't know—the Seven Rivers affair."

"You've been riding some deep out-trails, haven't you, Evers?" he asked. "A man misses the news that way. The territory got a new governor unexpected-like a month ago, and he granted amnesty to everyone mixed up in that Seven Rivers fracas?"

Evers stood there unbelieving, feeling vaguely angry somehow. He thought, *You're a criminal riding at night and shunning human company. There are men who will kill you on sight for the money in it. Then a man signs his name to a paper and all that's over. You're supposed to forget it and start being a human being again. But how do you start?*

And then Evers thought about what he had said to Mary Raines about taking the good breaks when they came your way and not thinking too much about why they came. That little gem of wisdom fit right now about as well as it was ever likely to. Mixing medicine wasn't the same thing as taking it, but he'd take it now.

"Now did the governor?" he said softly. "Well, I guess I'll be going."

Evers stepped into the saddle and started for Mary Raines's house, but half way there he swung around and returned to the hotel downtown. He was smiling a little.

She's seen enough of me for one day, he thought. I'll wait 'til tomorrow. ***

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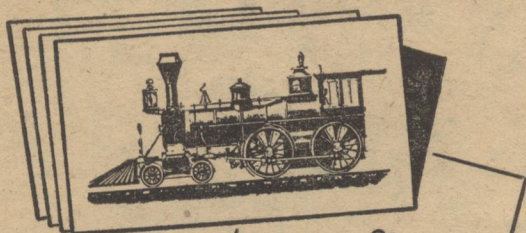


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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 67)

and when he rose he appeared satisfied, though he confided in no one at the moment. Peter Meservey was bawling orders to get coffee started, to get the spooked horses caught up and brought back, to cast for the best route out of the vale.

"Godamighty! They'd have caught us sleeping for sure! Glad you came back," he said to Sam Quinby, and thrust out his hand.

"Med'ry, I was thinkin' of returnin' to Alabama—huh? Oh, I thought you knew." He fished out a worn old wallet. "Mistuh Jeff Davis himself desired me to find out why Drings wasn't sendin' his stuff down to Montgomery, an' I just found out why. He was stashin' it away in the hills for himself, an' Utterho told me where. That's why Quarles could never catch him with it along the river." Trask took his officially sealed papers from the wallet and, after a long and appreciative look around the land, tore them into bits. "I don't think I'll go back to Alabama, though, 'cause Jeff won't get away with it twice, so I reckon I'll stay here—How 'bout you, Med'ry?" Then his eyes twinkled and he asked, "Or should I say, Quinby?"

"When I mentioned the 18th Mississippi last night, I figured you'd guess, but I still couldn't be sure about you."

"I couldn't be sure about you, either. When a man inherits a ranch, there's no tellin' what he'll do."

"No, there isn't." Sam swallowed and cleared his throat. "Mist' Davis desired me, in turn, to look into the matter of the Santa Maria train, an' I guess I followed his orders, though for the last time. I got a hunch he won't need me any longer. I'll need a foreman, Trask, if you're interested."

"What you aimin' for—steak an' onions?"

"No—for that girl." And Sam Quinby, ex-CSA, broke into a run. ***

WAR AT SPANISH WELLS

(Continued from page 81)

Clifton would get nervous sittin' here waitin' for the Mohaves. I was right. He blew up. You know the rest." The men exchanged amazed looks.

"Well I'll be damned!" said Hagan. He looked at Dane. "Welcome back to C Troop, sir. 'Tis too bad Old Dennehy was such a villain."

"To hell wid you, Hagan," said a weak voice from the shadows. "Old Dennehy ain't dead yet. I'll live to kick your butt through Stables many a day." The voice was a familiar one.

They all turned. Tim Dennehy had raised himself on an elbow. "And it's sorry I am that that devil drink made me make a fool of myself and harm my friend, Captain York."

Dane grinned. "With all your sins, Dennehy, Troop C would not be the same without you. You'll be broken, but if you hold your drinking to a minimum I'll see that you get Sergeant O'Neil's stripes next year when he retires."

Marion smiled. "It will be good to see you in uniform again, Dane." Her words were final assurance to him.

Hank stood up. "There is a good moon," he said. "Hagan, you were a stonemason in the old country. Give me a hand. We've got an inscription to add to the others." He smiled to Marion.

"And what will it be?" asked Hagan.


Hank looked at Marion and Dane. "Marion Lake-Dane York. 1878. Together forever." ☆ ☆ ☆

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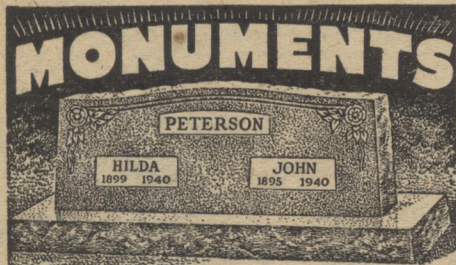
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 6)

It is necessary to have a working knowledge of the different kinds of common rocks in which ores are found, for certain ores occur in their own kind of rocks only—no others. An example is the rock called serpentine, a rather soft greenish rock usually mottled with blue, which occurs in dikes or belts easily recognized. It is in belts of serpentine that ores of chromite, platinum, and the type of asbestos termed chrysotile occur.

Textbooks on rocks and on minerals give detailed descriptions usually with illustrations often in color. But, note that these descriptions alone are not as a rule, enough, and study is made much easier if samples are at hand to compare with printed descriptions. Specimens of ores and minerals may be seen labeled in most city museums and State Bureaus of Mines. But better yet, mineral dealers now are scattered all over the country, where one may get boxed and labelled samples at a nominal price. One of igneous-and-sedimentary rocks will cost around \$1 or \$1.50. A larger box of commercial ores may cost \$3 to \$4 depending on size, number, and rarity.

In addition to this home study, many universities now give a short course in prospecting free of charge, usually in early Spring.

Now in addition to the list of scarce ores and minerals is another, to which our Atomic Energy Commission and Defense Minerals Procurement Administration give the highest priority, namely the ores of uranium. To date we have had very little of this vitally needed ore, and have imported most of what we've used mostly from Canada and Australia. But our prospectors have been getting after it in the last few years and some encouraging deposits have resulted in several different western states. With some primary pitchblende found, too.

This primary ore of pitchblende is what we need most, as it is the richest in uranium oxide and the only uranium ore which occurs in veins and can be depended on for years of high grade tonnage. Our other ores of uranium are classed as secondary ores. That is, as in the case of carnotite, they did not originate where found, but were probably carried by water from elsewhere—maybe a pitchblende deposit.

Our former uranium came from the carnotite deposits of the Utah-Colorado plateau region. But the percentage of uranium oxide is quite low and contains much less of the nuclear fissionable material. Recent exploration has resulted in some new finds of the secondary ores of torbernite and tyuyumunite, and only a few deposits of the badly needed pitchblende. But the fact that some were found seems to show a possibility of others, if enough rockhounds get out to really join in the search. The need is great and there's plenty of room.

And don't think uranium prospecting is too scientific, or handling a Gieger instrument too technical. Simple instructions take care of that, for it is much like handling a camera. And there is a fine book explaining in simple language all that is necessary to locate deposits of these vitally needed ores, which lists all of the 120 different radio-active minerals and fully describes them. Also it covers details of the four kinds of these

ores now wanted by our A.E.C., with the various types of Geiger instruments and how to use and take care of them. And there are plenty of illustrations.

In addition, the A.E.C. itself issues a booklet that gives federal regulations, licenses and permits, and rules governing sales, where to report new finds, where to send ore samples, or to get any kind of information needed, and much other data including full information about the \$10,000 bonus given for new deposits of pitchblende.

These two books cover the whole subject, so that with some study and practice in handling the instrument, the prospector is well equipped to get into the field and obtain immediate results. Finally, there's the point that's confused many amateurs and should be clearly understood at the outset. We must repeat that, of the 120 radioactive minerals, only four have so far any interest for the A.E.C. These are pitchblende, carnotite, torbernite, and Tyuyumunite. A license is required for thorium, but the A.E.C. is not buying any.

Query: It is my belief that primary minerals are, let us say, manufactured at certain distances radially. I wish you could tell me, as a check on my theory, at what altitudes and latitudes the primary mineral, uranium, is found in the United States. As you are well aware, there are plenty of low-grade minerals the world over. The objective of the machine I have designed is to provide a means of handling those low-grade minerals economically, without having to invest \$500.00 before a cent can be earned.

I am 73 years of age and have studied engineering subjects since I was ten. I am a machinist and engineer. Briefly, instead of trying to locate rich veins and pockets my machine will mine the low-grade minerals economically. Hitting a rich vein or nuggets would just be that much to the good.

John G. Findlater, Baker, Mont.

Reply by Victor Shaw: By the nature of your query, I judge your engineering studies did not include the genesis and formation of ore veins, which all came up by volcanic action in molten solutions of silica and other minerals. When they cooled our igneous rock formations were formed. These solutions flowed into the fractures created to form our ore veins, large or small.

You can see that latitude and longitude have nothing to do with any vein formation, including that of uranium ores.

However, we've found that pitchblende, the only uranium ore which occurs in veins, has thus far been chiefly associated with ores of high grade silver, and/or cobalt. Pitchblende is the only primary ore of uranium we know. The other radioactive ores like carnotite, torbernite and so on, are secondary in type and occur in rock seams, crevices, or mere surface films.

If your machine handles commercial ore successfully at lower cost than our present flotation process, why don't you contact some of your big mining men in Montana to sell it? ★★

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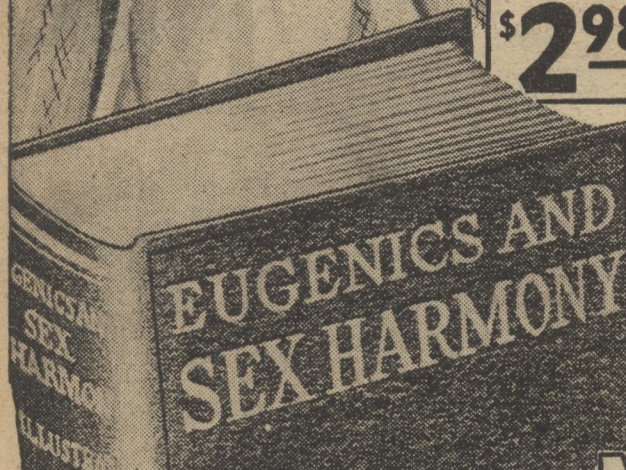
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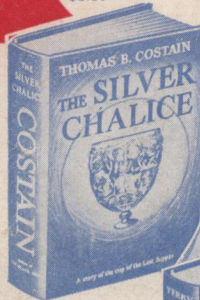
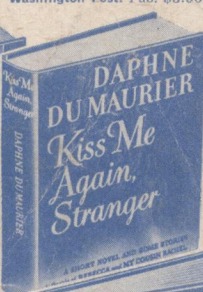
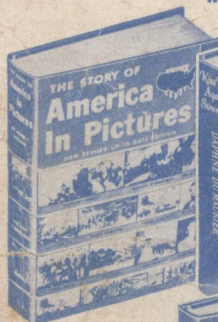
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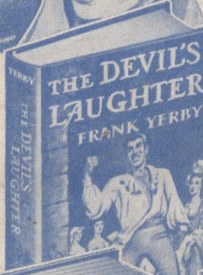
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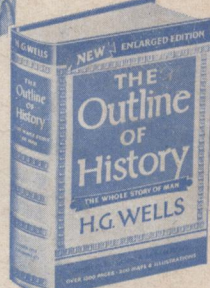
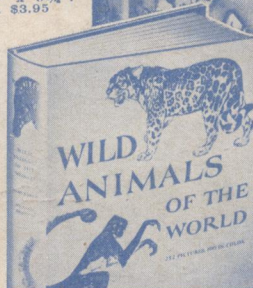
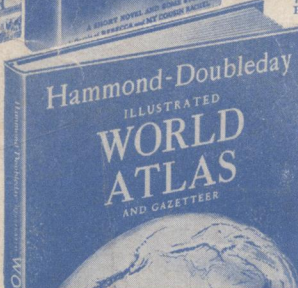
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