

JULY 1994

# LOUIS L'AMOUR

## WESTERN MAGAZINE

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### The Cloud Cracker

by Bill Pronzini

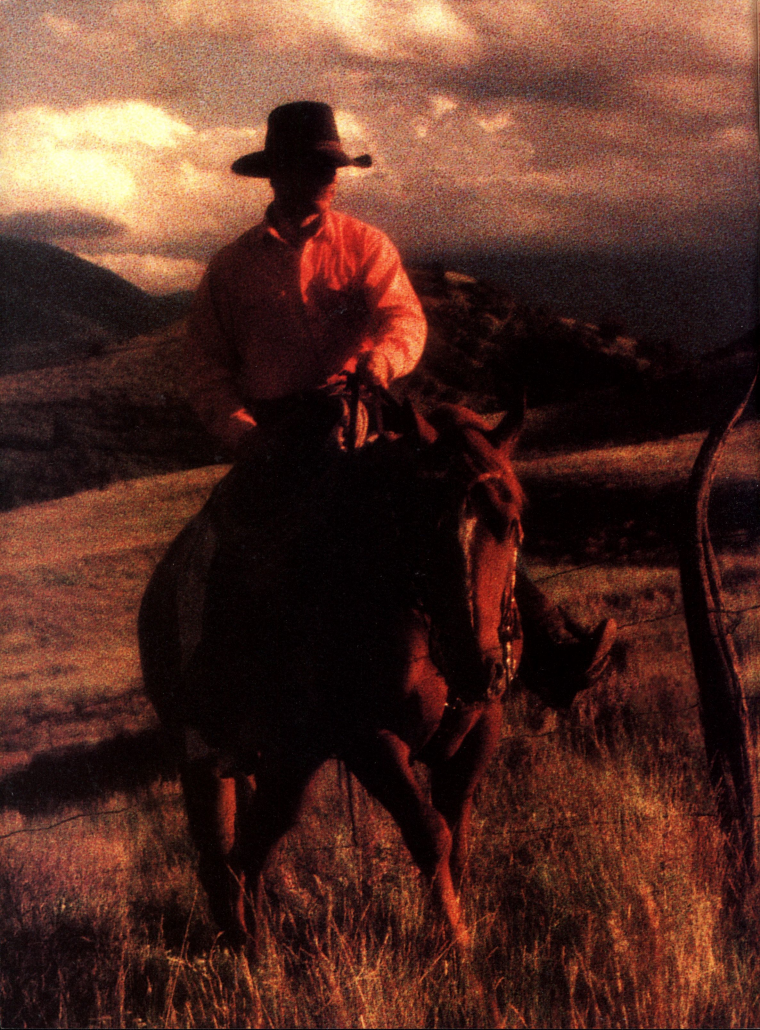
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*A cowboy's business is a business  
of silence. A hundred miles of fence  
gives a person time to think. To  
wonder about who he is. About what  
the world is coming to. Talk to a  
cowboy long enough and you'll get  
an opinion on everything. It's because  
he's had time to think about  
everything. Yeah, we know cowboys.  
Our jeans were invented by them.  
That's why the West is in us.*



*The Western Original*



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# CANADA AT ITS BEST

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In this holiday season,  
we wish you, as ever, our very best.

LIGHT,  
SMOOTH,  
MELLOW





## BY ELANA LORE

**W**e have used another piece of fine art on our cover this issue—we thought it lent a particularly festive Fourth of July air to the magazine. This portrait is by the well-known artist James Bama. If you would like more information on Mr. Bama's fine art prints, call 1-800-243-4246.

We have another reason to feel like celebrating. We have recently been notified that a short story in the first issue of the magazine has won the Golden Spur Award for Best Short Story of 1993 from Western Writers of America ("Lou," by Jane Candia Coleman, whose travel piece on Wyatt Earp Country appears in this issue). Two other stories in the premiere issue were awarded honorable mentions, one for Best Short Story ("Miss Shoshone," by Win Blevins); the other for Best Short Nonfiction ("Meriwether Lewis: Murder or Suicide?" by Hugh McCord).

Our mission is to bring you the best of the West, whether it is by publishing good short fiction and articles, or leading you to something good in another medium. So we would like to share with you the names of all the other winners of prestigious Golden Spur Awards this year:

**Medicine Pipe Bearer's Award for Best First Western Novel:** *People of the Whistling Waters*, by Mardi Oakley Medawar, Affiliated Writers of America.

**Best Western Novel:** *Friends*, by Charles Hackenberry, M. Evans & Co.

**Best Novel of the West:** *Empire of Bones*, by Jeff Long, William Morrow & Co.

**Best Western Original Paperback Novel:** *The Gila River*, by Gary McCarthy, Bantam (Domain).

**Best Western Nonfiction - Historical, to 1900:** *The Lance and the Shield*, by Robert Utley, Henry Holt & Co.

**Best Western Nonfiction - Contemporary, 1900 to Present:** *Rivers in the Desert*, by Margaret Leslie Davis, HarperCollins.

**Best Western Short Nonfiction:** *Nellie Cashman*, by Suzann Ledbetter, Texas Western Press.

**Best Western Juvenile Fiction:** *Leaving Eldorado*, by Joann Mazzio, Houghton Mifflin Co., and *Beardance*, by Will Hobbs, Atheneum Books for Children.

**Best Western Juvenile Nonfiction:** *Cowboys, Indians, and Gunfighters*, by Albert Marrin, Atheneum Books for Children.

**Best Western Motion Picture Script:** *Sommersby*, screenplay by Nicholas Meyer and Sarah Kernochan, an Arnon Milchan Production, Warner Brothers.

**Best Western TV Script, Fiction:** *Lonesome Dove*, teleplay by John Wilder, dePasse Entertainment and R.H.I. Entertainment, CBS.

**Best Western TV Script, Documentary:** "The Hunt for Pancho Villa," script by Paul Espinosa, Galan Productions, PBS, *The American Experience*.

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**A**bner Butler rolled Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and Peck's Bad Boy all into one extraordinary individual of a high intelligence that rarely seemed to be directed toward Christian enterprise. Folks in the neighborhood said he had to be a throwback—the result of some bad blood from an obscure and wayward ancestor in ancient history—that cropped up after several generations of godly men and women who had served the Baptists of Texas for a century.

I had to agree, for I knew him better than anyone else, and the escapades he roped me into all but stunted my growth. His imagination for devilment knew no bounds, and the originality of his foolishness was only exceeded by the examples of sin his father drew on for his hellfire and damnation sermons each Sunday.

**THE**

# Rookie

Sometimes, in the midst of a particularly frightening discourse on Hell by Brother Butler, I would look over at Abner, and if I saw that peculiar glint in his eye, I was never sure that I had not caught Lucifer himself sitting in the pew, instead of my best friend. Yet I finally learned that Abner heard his father's words, even if he didn't heed his advice.

The only thing Abner seemed to inherit from his



# RUSTLERS

BY  
**Riley  
Froh**

parents, other than their brains, was their good looks. But his sister Rachel, two years older than Abner and I, got good sense, beauty, and the gifts of kindness and thoughtfulness. She had been my true love from the first time I had seen her.

It was the lovely October Indian summer of 1936, our fifteenth year, when Abner sprung his most audacious scheme of crime, corruption, and sin on me.

ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD WILLIAMS



**“YOU REMEMBER THAT TRUCK DRIVER THAT SMELLED SO BAD?” ABNER ASKED. “HE’LL GIVE TWENTY DOLLARS APIECE FOR TWO STEERS, NO QUESTIONS ASKED.”**

He could usually manage to break most of the Ten Commandments in any venture he thought up, and though he would profit by this operation, as usual, it was the actual doing of the theft—the wrong itself—in which he seemed to take such pleasure, and not the gain. He was finishing up my history paper for Miss Sanford Heath (Abner could write better and faster than anyone else in the school, which saved time). Suddenly he looked up from his father’s massive desk in the somber pastor’s study with the devil in his eye.

“You know, Ol’ Miss Heath is always saying nobody in our class done nothing any ‘count for the Texas Centennial,” Abner mused. “I been thinkin’. Me an’ you could stage a cattle-rustling job—say, just a couple of steers to make the point, not a whole herd.”

As I protested, he outlined the felony, pointing out that the forty dollars we would clear on the deal would buy the .30-30 Winchester in the Austin pawnshop we weren’t supposed to go into. With a real deer rifle, we could do so much more in our poaching violations. And he reminded me how upset I had been over the deer we had wounded and lost with our .22 single shot. The larger caliber weapon would not only cut our losses, but also prevent suffering. I pictured the neat saddle ring on that old gun and voted for the project.

Just as I figured, Abner had already done the groundwork. Our geography was perfect for this neat little rustling job. In scores of square miles of lonely post-oak-covered rolling sand hills, our tiny community lay halfway between Bastrop and Waelder. It consisted

of the Baptist church and parsonage, my family’s general store and post office, the schoolhouse, and a few scattered homes. All roads were dirt, and Abner and I faced a three-hour ride just to see Hoot Gibson at the Wel-Tex picture show in Waelder on Saturdays—when we could get away and had the money. It was a little farther to Bastrop, but there wasn’t a paved road in between. Franklin Roosevelt was still busy getting electricity to bigger voting districts, so there was a darkness difficult to imagine today, when it is impossible to find a landscape not dotted with pesky lights. And if Roosevelt had ever heard Brother Butler denounce him for a liar and a thief for the sin of coveting the property of responsible citizens to give to the riffraff, and of fomenting sin by ending Prohibition, we never would have gotten power generated to the settlement in the first place.

Abner briefed me on the scheme: “You remember that truck driver who hauled watermelons to San Antonio the last two summers? You know, the one that smelled so bad? Well, he was buying gas over at your store last Saturday and we talked. He’ll give twenty dollars apiece for two steers, no questions asked, if they ain’t marked. There’s always some of those old steers on the Bonner place, up in that lane. We can drive ‘em out next Friday night with no trouble a’tall. Then herd ‘em down County Road 5 till it hits Highway 90, at that old pen and loading chute where we pick all them dewberries every spring. He’ll be by in that old truck about two or three Saturday morning. We’ll have ‘em in the pen, drive

‘em up the chute, and that’ll be it. Forty dollars and the Winchester’s ours for deer season.”

The simple part was that we knew the Bonner place, where we did most of our poaching, better than the absentee landowners out of Houston—the big oilmen who only came down to hunt and drink and consort with the cheap floozies they met at their headquarters. We could take our horses through the secret break in the fence, and exit the same way after the crime was done.

But I was troubled some by the grand larceny aspect. Our work had only involved petty theft to that point, unless you counted the trophy deer we took off the oilmen’s property. I pointed out that as an alternative, we could catch some cattle rustlers for the centennial and collect the reward. Miss Heath would be more impressed with an act we could take credit for.

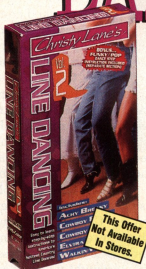
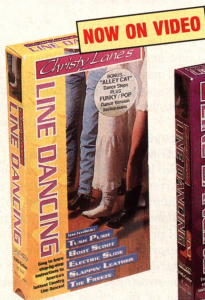
Abner countered that there were no other rustlers operating in the area, and that there would be no reward anyway. Then he added, with his usual irony, that we would soon take care of the fact that there were no rustlers in our district.

I agreed that we would have to be the criminals, but I insisted that we sign a document to the effect that when we became rich and famous from calf roping and professional baseball, we would anonymously pay the money back. I drew up just such a legal paper to place in the hollow tree where we hid our liquor when we could get it. Abner would only sign his first name, in case someone found the statement.

I signed my full name and

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# **T**HE ONLY TIME ABNER WAS EVER REALLY SERIOUS WAS WHEN HE WAS BREAKING THE LAW, AND HE TOOK CHARGE THAT EVENING WITH A DEADLY EARNESTNESS.

pointed out that anyone would know that the Abner was he.

"They might know it," he said. "But can they prove it?"

Here Abner showed those inherent tendencies that would boost him later into being one of the great crooked lawyers of Texas. To this day there are felons walking the streets who would either be in the pen or in their graves, had they not retained Honest Abner Butler to defend them.

That harvest moon Friday so long ago when we rustled our first cattle was perfect—a little hot in the day, so that the cooler night would peak in just the right amount of crispness. Everyone in our families expected us to take the coon hounds out that time of the month. In fact, had we not gone hunting that evening, they would have been suspicious that we were up to something. We built a fire in the spot we always used to wait till the hounds barked treed. Then we moved off to our isolated hideout at the farthest end of the Bonner place, away from the county road. Here we tied the hounds in the dark with enough soup bones to keep them silent all night. They were already slurping and chomping as we rode off. We'd rigged the fence for easy access, though it looked perfectly sound at a glance. The only time Abner was ever really serious was when he was breaking the law, and he took charge that evening with a deadly earnestness.

It was grand gliding through those post oaks side by side, with our horses sometimes touching and pressing together in a narrow passage among the trees. There is

no bond like that between two horsemen moving silently in time and space, and now and then coming together like a matched pair pulling a stylish buggy. But Abner, so full of mischief, had to break the mood.

Reining in abruptly, he assumed a statesmanlike pose and, with a remarkable imitation of his father's stentorian tones, invoked foul blasphemy. "Hold it, brother," he intoned. "Let us pause for a word of prayer for the success of our enterprise!"

Caught off guard, I almost bowed my head in reverence before the sharpness of his laugh brought me up abruptly. He knew full well the look I gave him and, slapping my shoulder good-naturedly he spurred his mount, moving forward in an easy swinging canter. I caught up with him and we rocked on with a light-heartedness that had been absent when we had first trespassed on the Bonner property that memorable night.

Suddenly we emerged from the tree line into a sloping clearing of soft winter needle grass, pale yellow in the moonlight and stretching some way across a gentle swale to where the trees commenced again on the next rise. Abner fished around in his battered saddlebags and withdrew a crumpled package of Chesterfields. Lighting one behind cupped hands, he resembled a classic western painting of a trail driver on night herd. I took a welcome swig from our bottle and exchanged the last of the contents for a cigarette. The peace was profound. Below us an owl swept noiselessly across the ghostly surface. A fox barked at our intrusion.

"We'll own all this some day," Abner declared. "Me and you. When we're flush from rodeo winnings and baseball salaries from the St. Louis Cardinals."

"Just so we don't get it from stealing cattle," I said. "This sort of work could become habit-formin'."

His rebel yell set my horse to prancing as he spurred forward in a smooth run across the clearing. My mount circled and followed, but before I could echo his vocals, Abner fired three shots in the air from his stolen .32 pistol. Noise and rustling hardly went together, but there was no controlling Abner when one of his moods struck him.

We slowed up before we hit the next bunch of trees and eased into the comforting darkness that men love when their deeds are evil. Weaving among the dark trunks, Abner made his professional judgments about our progress.

"Weren't no cattle bedded down in that clearing," he reasoned. "And we ain't seen or heard any since we been in here. They're probably up front where we want 'em. And if they are, we'll just cut two out up in that lane, put 'em in the road, and we'll be on our way to that forty dollars."

The forty dollars made me think of the forty thieves and I was glad the pay wasn't thirty silver dollars, a sum infamous in Christian history. "Let's not count our eagles before they hatch," I warned, and my caution brought the usual sharp snort of dismissal it always did from Abner.

Sandy Fork Creek was a magical sight when we broke from the trees onto its sloping pale banks. Even the quicksand surface



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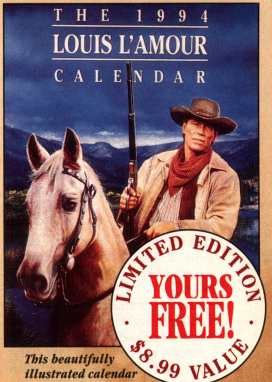
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## E EMERGED ONTO THE CLEARING OF THE LAST SLOPE AND THERE THE CATTLE LAY, SCATTERED IN BLACK LUMPS IN THE PALE YELLOW NEEDLE GRASS UNDER THE MOON.

within view at the broad curve back into the denseness of the trees reflected a pretty glow. The horses seemed to respond to the enchantment as they drew in some of the clear water, dripping sparkles back as they raised their heads.

"We get sucked into that bog, we'll drop right on down to hell," Abner reasoned mockingly.

"Don't worry," I told him. "The devil's already riding along with us."

"I hope so," Abner said. "We can use him to open some gates."

With that we splashed across the creek and into the forest. Now we would rise over the last hill. The next clearing would command a view of the county road, the fenced lane that we would use for a trap, and hopefully, the cattle bedded down where they usually congregated this time of year, in case one of the hands threw out a little feed from the road.

My mouth was dry as I contemplated the risky drive down the dirt thoroughfare to our rendezvous at Highway 90. I preferred to withdraw into myself to steel my nerve. But not Abner. He would take this time to begin to spout vile and indecent remarks about Miss Heath, to sing ribald lyrics in his clear and gifted tenor, and to quote poetry he had memorized from outhouse walls. His repertoire was remarkable, and had he not gone to law school to learn to lie and cheat and steal—talents he was already quite proficient in—he could have made a good living as a barker in a traveling girling tent show.

He moved on to his own composition, a paraphrase of Robert Frost:

*Whose woods these are I think I know.*

*The s.o.b. lives in Houston, though.*

*He will not see me stopping here  
To steal his cows and poach his deer.*

He was about to launch into his most blasphemous stage when our finely tuned ears caught the haunting sounds of geese, high above in the clear night, changing leaders in their V southward. We would be driving our contraband south also, I noted—not going in the direction of the traditional trail drives our ancestors had made, but in that of early Texas rustlers' runs across the border to Mexico.

We sat our horses in silence and let the music of these powerful and graceful creatures fade. Abner and I frequently did our share of staining the natural beauty of our locale with our misconduct, but we never ceased to understand and enjoy our good fortune of time and place. Historians of the Great Depression do a great disservice in emphasizing only the poverty of that decade. Abner and I always had a good time with the resources at hand, and I think a good many more folks who now think that they didn't enjoy their youth did, too. They have just let people tell them the times were worse than they were and confuse their memories. I must admit that it is rare that I find anyone with the imagination Abner and I seemed born with, however.

I wanted to quote the comforting closing lines from William Cullen Bryant's "To A Waterfowl," but the nature of our project precluded the effort. I only hoped

that Abner would not think of the poem, for he would definitely see the irony and spout forth more irreverence. One thing I will say for Miss Heath, the memory work she required on the great poets never left one without a handy word if needed for dramatic effect.

At last we moved on, for we had important work to be done before the morning's light, and we got to it, eventually emerging onto the clearing of the last slope overlooking the county road and the usual bed ground of our quest. And there the cattle lay, scattered in black lumps in the pale yellow needle grass under the moon. I had half hoped that we would find empty fields so we could call the whole thing off. Abner pointed out a number of dark forms in the fenced lane to the gate on the road. All we had to do was ease down to the lane entrance, where one of us would stay to haze the cattle back while the other cut out two unmarked steers into the road. I took the easy job of plugging the hole, leaving the better horseman the cutting work, which he accomplished in short order. He was already starting them toward Highway 90 when I caught up with him.

"We got it made now," Abner bragged—a little too soon, I thought.

Nervous as a cat, I glanced back over my shoulder and my heart sank. Showing over the rise in the road about a mile away loomed the glow of headlights. I knew it was the illimitable Texas Ranger Frank Hamer following his usual stakeout—letting the guilty set their own trap. But he wouldn't be merciful and drill us with his Browning automatic rifle. Oh, no.



# **T** HE AUTO TURNED INTO THE SIDE ROAD BY OUR PLACE OF CONCEALMENT AND STOPPED. THE COUNTY BADGE ON THE FRONT DOOR TURNED MY KNEES TO WATER AND MY SPINE TO JELLY.

He'd parade us around the town in handcuffs as an example before leading us off to the Huntsville pen. I could feel the hot shame and see Miss Heath shaking her head as if to say, "I told you so."

But Abner, the man of action, was moving and shaking. "Get them horses out ahead of them steers," he ordered. I spurred my mare along after him in the bar ditch, around to the front of the placid, pacing bovines. Thinking we were making a run for it I passed Abner, only to hear his sharp command.

"Get around here and help me turn these cattle," he shouted. I did so. "Now, leave the talking to me," he explained. "See, we're out huntin' with the hounds. They run somethin' out of earshot and we're ridin' the roads lookin' for 'em and we just happened to find these cattle loose. We're just drivin' 'em back home." He would later win many a lawsuit and acquire many a dishonest dollar with just such a concoction. Falsehoods at short notice were his specialty. Of course, he could lie just as well with a little time to prepare, but pressure seemed to squeeze the best out of him.

To my great relief and Abner's profound disappointment, the vehicle turned off at the T in the road at the corner of the Bonner place. "Well, let's go back to stealing these cattle," Abner sighed. We reversed them again, but they were spooked, so we slowed our pace to get them settled down.

My nerves calmed down along with the process, and we were soon caught up in the spirit of the thing again—two old and best friends locked in an effort that would draw us closer together

than ever. How I wish we could ride those lonely roads again by moonlight, my dainty mare picking her way around and over washed out places in the gravel. I had the sensation at times of floating among the shadows of the oak limbs that reached overhead and stretched to touch halfway above the lane, making little comforting tunnels of freckled darkness.

We had just finished our snack of salt pork and apple when we sensed the ribbon of asphalt marking Highway 90 ahead in our yellow moonlit world of make-believe cowboy West, the circumstances of which were real enough for the risks involved. Abner sent me ahead to force open the rotting gate of the rundown pen, an old landmark that had not been used for a decade and which was held up mainly by wild grapevines and other growths that encircled its crossplanks. I tried to turn our four-legged cargo into the trap, and of course they wouldn't go. They caused us to do as nice a piece of cowboy cutting work as we ever did, holding them between us on the roadway until we could pen them. Had we been doing honest toil on some ranch, those steers would have surely got by us, demonstrating so clearly the intensity required for criminal activity.

We got our horses into our ancient fortress also and settled down to await further developments. Abner's inscribed pocket watch, which he had won at the state spelling bee, showed 2:00 A.M. But an hour's wait was no problem with the midnight concert a mockingbird provided us and the conversation of two barn

owls inquiring of each other, "Who? Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you?"

The horses and I heard it coming first, but Abner pointed out that it was a car and not a truck. It was I who realized that it was slowing down. Not only did the auto turn into the side road by our place of concealment, but it also stopped. The county badge on the front door and the huge bulk of Sheriff Barragan stuffed behind the wheel turned my knees to water and my spine to jelly. I could already see us in the filthy cells of the county jail next to the courthouse, put on display as a warning to others before being transported to the even grimmer walls of the state pen.

But instead of leaping out brandishing a firearm, Sheriff Barragan levered his rolling form from under the steering wheel and stomped to the front of the car. At the same time, his passenger lumbered out onto the road. To my amazement, there stood Marguerite Reynolds, the pleasingly plump wife of the night jailer, her bottle-blond hair a mess. She adjusted a Southern Select beer in her hand and weaved to the rear of the car, out of our line of vision. The sheriff set a bottle of Pearl on the hood, worked diligently around his ponderous stomach, finally extracted his quest from his fly, and arched a great stream of reprocessed beer into the bar ditch. The shock of a grown man urinating in the presence of a woman nearly knocked me off my feet before Abner's quick ribaldry sobered me.

"I'll bet he ain't seen that thing in twenty years," he whispered far too loudly.

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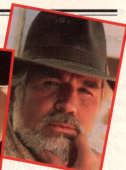
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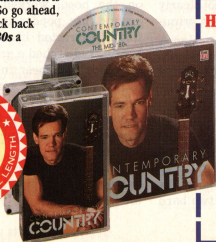
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# **T**HE OFF BEAT OF A DEFECTIVE TRUCK MOTOR WOKE US WITH A START, AS OUR MIDDLEMAN IN CRIME WORKED TO BACK UP TO THE FRAGILE LOADING CHUTE.

I didn't have to stifle a laugh of relief long, for a more startling scene was yet to come. I heard the rustle of a dress being raised, silk being lowered, and the hump of a large form squatting. The flow of a veritable flood of urine hitting gravel sounded on my ears. It increased mightily and then slowed to a trickle, which continued interminably. What enormous bladders women must have, I thought.

In the meantime, the sheriff had somehow concluded his business and rebuttoned his fly. "Hurry up, Marguerite," he said. "I done finished five minutes ago." "Yeah!" she yelled back from her undignified crouch. "You made better use of that thing up there than you ever done with it in the back seat of this here car."

"Izat right!" he countered. "How come you're always a moanin' an' a groanin' when we're at it? Huh?"

"It don't hurt to fake it to keep you happy," she countered. "My husband works for you, ya know, and we need that job."

With that they began to laugh and sputter in unison as they stumbled and fumbled their way back into the front seats, knocking both half-filled beer bottles from where they had left them on their perches as they did so. The shock of so powerful an exchange of verbal coarseness reduced me to a state of disbelief. That two grown, semi-respectable people could hold such a foul discourse was beyond my ken. Surely I had not heard what I had just heard! Barragan backed the auto onto Highway 90 without looking, drove for some time on the wrong side of the road, finally turned on his lights, and was gradually

weaving to the correct half of the highway as they faded out of sight.

"That was horrible," I gasped.

"That was sin," Abner grinned. "It's what Daddy preaches about every Sunday, or ain't you noticed? He's agin it!"

"He don't exactly endorse what we're doin', either," I mentioned, much to Abner's delight.

"He ain't logical," Abner mused. "You have to give up happiness to find happiness, according to his lights."

"Nervous as I am, I sure ain't happy," I ventured.

"You'll perk up as soon as we get our money," Abner reasoned, but I could see that he was in ecstasy already. The risk, the danger, the excitement—all of it was like a tonic to him. Abner was always extremely good-looking, some said beautiful, and when engaged in his favorite pastime of tasting forbidden fruit, his finely chiseled features sent a chill down my spine in their very reflection of wickedness.

We lapsed into silence and probably dozed off a bit, as was our habit on our many boyhood hunting expeditions, following one set of hounds or another. It is not as easy to lose sleep when you are young.

The off beat of a defective truck motor woke us with a start, as our middleman in crime worked to back up to the fragile loading chute. He had dealt with Abner before during watermelon season, and he figured he'd be there. Abner came alert, immediately taking control.

Body odor preceded the trucker through the gate—a foul, sour smell that rose above the horses

and cattle and their fresh waste. "Ain't no marks on them steers, are they?" he wheezed.

"Clean as a whistle," Abner bragged. "And that's more 'n you can say for some people."

Our contact missed the allusion to his own fumes, which somehow appealed to Abner, who enjoyed speaking above others' heads with his subtle humor. Many a time over the years Miss Heath had whacked him across the mouth with a ruler for just such a double entendre.

"Well, let's git 'em in the truck," our odorous companion suggested.

"Not till we get our money," Abner replied.

"You'll get your money when the gate's locked on them steers," came the buyer's counterproposal.

"For God's sake, let's get it done and get out of here," I cried. "Let's all get the hell out of here 'fore someone drives up."

"I'll work the truck gate," Mr. Smell-bad said. "You all run 'em in there."

In its day, the old pen was a marvel of construction. We easily got them into the small trap leading to the chute. Then, with much swinging of hickory limbs and quirts, we beat and scared them up the rotting planks, which their hooves broke through on occasion. The truck gate slid shut with a rusty click and our part of the sor-did bargain was complete.

"I'll get the money out of the glove compartment," B.O. Plenty grunted, immediately arousing Abner's suspicious nature.

But the pungent thief was already releasing the emergency brake, rolling down the incline, letting out the clutch, and lurching forward in second gear as the motor caught and turned.



Abner was out of the chute running, his revolver ready, as the truck went into third gear toward San Antonio. Abner took aim and gut shot a poor steer in his first attempt. I heard the sickening thwack of the bullet into the animal's midsection. Abner squeezed off his second round, shattering the rear glass of the truck.

"You've killed him," I screamed, watching in horror as the old Ford veered and zigzagged a ways before roaring forward, floorboarded by a frightened but very much alive driver.

"He won't smell no worse dead than alive," Abner laughed. "And if he done anything in his pants, it'll only improve his condition. Besides, I'm out of bullets."

I was already moving toward my horse, and even Abner sensed that we were pushing our susceptibilities to the limit, but he still took the time to carefully close the

old gate and to kick away some of the tracks and marks by the opening.

We galloped for a quarter mile and then loped another quarter before slowing to a walk, after echoing across a wooden bridge with the best sound effects of a Republic western. In the crisp air it took a while for the horses to settle into an easy gait. For a time we moved along feeling a sort of pride of accomplishment, just having reached that point in one piece. We rode like two movie stars in our own minds, totally unconscious of the cracked leather of our thirdhand saddles and the patched straps of our piecemeal headstalls and makeshift bridle reins.

We were still broke for all our efforts, but we had rustled cattle, gotten involved in a gunfight of sorts, and chalked up another adventure about which we could

reminisce, even if we couldn't brag about it locally to others. The only reason we got away with so much over the years was our strict code of silence in town and at school. Of course, at Baylor University in Waco, we could pretty well top anybody's lie in a dormitory gab session.

Even in my exhilarated state, I could tell that Abner was growing morose as he swayed in the saddle. And I was quite surprised when, for the first and only time in our friendship, he seriously quoted one of his father's excellent sermons.

"You know," he concluded, "Daddy's right. You remember Sunday before last, when he preached on Proverbs? Them very scriptures warn against making a deal with a lowlife: 'If thou hast struck thy hand with a stranger, thou art snared with the words of thy mouth.' See, we got to deal with higher class crooks, or else sink even lower and even use politicians, maybe, 'cause 'a companion of fools shall be destroyed.'"

I was about to point out the selectivity of his quotations by reciting the lines he had omitted from his discourse, when Abner's next admonition from the Book of Maxims, about our particular vulnerability as long as we were on that road, hit home. "Let's ride, *paisano!*" he whooped. "Let's get back through that gate and into them woods. 'Deliver thyself like a roe from the hand of the hunter, and like a bird from the hand of the fowler.'"

With that he was off and running, and like the fool that I was in those days, I touched Lady lightly with a rusty spur and went galloping after, ready to follow him in his next malfaeasance, whatever it was, while the state bird of Texas scolded and mocked the whole affair from high above in a live oak in the clear and rare moonlight. ☐

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
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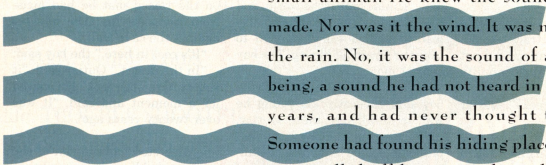
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# WATER



Qutiar heard a noise outside the mouth of his cave. It was not the noise of a bird, or lizard, or small animal. He knew the sounds these things made. Nor was it the wind. It was not the rain. Ha! the rain. No, it was the sound of another human being, a sound he had not heard in over twenty-one years, and had never thought to hear again. Someone had found his hiding place.

He rolled off his mat and stood. "Still," he said quietly to himself, "the pain." After so long a time, he spoke aloud to himself. The hip had not gotten any better. It ached as it did every time he stood now or walked. For a short time, over two years before, he had hoped it would get better, but now he knew it never would. He had done nothing to injure it. The dull ache would be his faithful companion until he died. He limped the first two steps to the entrance of the cave.

BY W. M.  
SHOCKLEY

# THE BOY HAD RECOGNIZED THE SOLUTION TO THE WATER PROBLEM, AND HE HAD FOUND QUTIAR, A THING NO ONE ELSE HAD BEEN ABLE TO DO.

His visitor was a dark-skinned boy—a fine-looking boy of about twelve years. He had climbed from the valley by himself, using a twisted walking stick as an aid. He was confused—walking back and forth outside the mouth of the cave, not seeing what was so plainly visible to Qutiar's trained eye.

"Yes," Qutiar said, "you have found me." He did not make himself visible, preferring to remain hidden—teasing the boy, perhaps. He saw the boy's eyes widen in surprise, but not fear.

"Good," the boy said. "I knew I had found the track."

So, the boy was brave enough to follow an unknown track—something those in the village did not recognize; and smart—a quality the village despised.

"Whom do you seek?" Qutiar asked.

"The old one of the water system," the boy said, turning toward Qutiar's voice. Qutiar wondered if that was what he was now called in the village. *The old one of the water system*—appropriate. Was his name anathema, forbidden by Zuniac, or had he simply been forgotten? He had no relatives left to keep the memory of it. And Zuniac, after all the years, would—would what? How could he strive to make people forget Qutiar?

"Why do you seek an old fool?" Qutiar asked. The boy had found him now, though he had not seen him, and approached the cave.

"The rains have failed again," the boy said. He stopped suddenly a few feet in front of Qutiar—discovered at last!—and dropped his

walking stick. A sign of respect? Qutiar wondered. Qutiar knew about the rains. The rains, ha! Let them fail again. They had failed him once before, so he would no longer depend upon them. Using a system like the one he had devised for the village, Qutiar had more than enough water for his own use. Let the village go dry, live by the scant waters of the erratic river. Zuniac had decreed that the old ways were best. Let him—let them—live by the old ways. Or die by them.

"So?" Qutiar asked. "The rains have never returned as in the old days. Zuniac fouled the world, and the rains never returned." He leaned against the cave wall to take the strain off his leg. The boy did not move.

"You can save the people," the boy said earnestly. So young he was to think one man, Qutiar, could do anything to save the people. The people had chosen Zuniac. Let Zuniac have the glory of saving the people.

"No."

"You can," the boy said. "You can. You can fix your water system, and then one or two rains will be enough." Indeed, thought Qutiar. One rain would suffice. Indeed, this boy was smart—smarter than the elders. He had recognized the solution to the water problem, and he had found Qutiar, a thing no one else had been able to do. Not that they were looking. As far as the village knew or cared, Qutiar had died over twenty years before, when he had gone over the rim.

"No," repeated Qutiar.

"You can."

"I could, yes," Qutiar confirmed, "but I will not." The boy stepped back from Qutiar, away from the cave. He bent and picked up his stick, turned, and walked away. Smart boy, Qutiar thought, to know when not to argue. But the smart boy stopped and turned again.

"Why not?" he asked, anger and plea together. No argument.

"Come into the cave," Qutiar said. "It is a long story." The boy followed Qutiar into the cave. Qutiar stopped about halfway in, where the floor rose. No use in giving away all his secrets. He sat on the raised mat he had made from cactus strips. The boy sat against the cave wall.

"It's cool in here," the boy said.

"In the desert," Qutiar said, "it is best to remain cool." He paused for a moment and said, "It was over twenty years ago..."

Qutiar stood at the rim of the canyon, holding his daughter's hand. The ground was too dry, too dusty to tell any story. Whatever evidence had been here was gone, blown away in the sere desert heat. Had the rains come yesterday, then there might still be a trace. He had not expected to find anything, and yet he had—a rabbit-skin moccasin. It was the mate to the one still on Zuliot's foot. He had picked it up and hidden it from Qunian's eyes. She did not need to see it, was too young to understand its meaning.

From this high up the village shimmered in the heat. Why, Qutiar wondered suddenly, did things shimmer in the heat? He had always noticed it, but had



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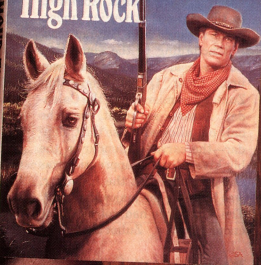


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## QUTIAR KNEW THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING ZUNIAC WANTED—SOMETHING FOR WHICH HE WAS AFRAID TO ASK.

never stopped to think about it. He did not know. He knew no one in the village would know, or even care, or question. The children would care, but they would not know. This would take some thinking. The village looked like the toys he had made himself when he was a boy, not much older than Qunian was now. Eight years she had been with him; eight years he had been without Quzoan. Soft, lithe Quzoan—as unlike Second Wife as water is to rock. Rock—that was the best way to describe Second Wife. Solid. Cold. Inactive. Dead, except in body only. And when compared to Quzoan . . . He remembered losing Quzoan as if it were yesterday; as if he were losing one of his own limbs—the two midwives trying to keep him away, the screams . . . Saving the baby, losing the mother—in the end, it had been his idea, his only choice.

"Will it rain?" Qunian asked, her shrill voice disturbing Qutiari's morbid thoughts.

"Yes, little bird, it will rain."

"I mean, soon. Will it rain soon?"

A difficult question. According to the signs that Qutiari understood, it would rain. But not soon. But according to the signs that Zuniac read, the time of rains was upon them. Qutiari knew that Zuniac was misreading the Calendar. Zuniac, as priest, was the only one allowed to use the Calendar—the carved Calendar in the big kiva. His new apprentice was not yet trained in the Calendar, was learning the major rites first. The apprentice had not had time enough since Zuliot's sudden

death to learn everything—had barely had time to learn anything. If something happened to Zuniac—what would happen to the knowledge then?

The Rock Calendar—anyone who knew could use that. It took an hour's trip north and the knowledge. Zuniac thought he was the only one who knew the ways of the Rock Calendar, but Qutiari knew exactly how it worked, had known since he was a boy. He had spent many days as a boy in the Rock Calendar. On certain days only at dawn or sunset, the sun would shine its light on certain drawings on the ceremonial walls. On other days, the sun at noon would light certain deep wells. After a few years, Qutiari could tell the day by looking at the sun's position on the walls. He still spent a great deal of time in the Rock Calendar, alone, thinking.

The rains would come later than Zuniac said.

Why was Zuniac lying about this?

"Zuniac, the priest, says the rains are to begin soon," he answered his daughter.

Even at eight years, she was not easily fooled. "What do you say?" Qutiari wanted to know whose question that really was. Second Wife worked as a spy for Zuniac. This Qutiari knew as fact—he had told her and only her about his water systems, and that had come back to him from Zuniac. "The old ways are best," Zuniac had intoned. The old ways were not the best—not if it could be shown that a new way would make water plentiful before the rains.

It was better to be safe, even with Qunian, so he answered her question with an evasion. "I say we'd better go on back down. The way is long, and the time is growing short." Not that there was anything to worry about. Qutiari knew that Qunian could find her way home off the rim, down the walls, even on a dark, moonless night. Every child of the village could. Qutiari had seen to this, taking them to the walls and down often as he worked on his water system. It was nearly finished. Zuniac ignored the new ways. Qutiari liked being with the children. It was the adults he could not abide. The children had the capacity to learn, to try new things. Qutiari knew, too late, that he should never have taught Zuliot—Zuliot was too eager to learn. And now he was dead, having fallen from this very spot on the cliff wall, leaving one moccasin behind. Surefooted, agile Zuliot. Zuliot was proof positive that it was not wise to be smarter than the teacher, Zuniac. Where had Zuniac been yesterday when Zuliot had fallen?

"Will you make me another . . . what did you call them?" Qunian asked.

He knew the toy she wanted, a raft. It was made of tiny pieces of mesquite wood tied together with jackrabbit sinews. She floated it in the water during the rainy time when there was enough water to waste on play. If he could use his system, water would never be a problem again; the children could swim whenever they wanted.

"Yes, little bird, I will make you another raft."



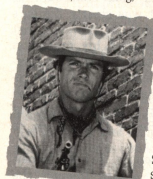


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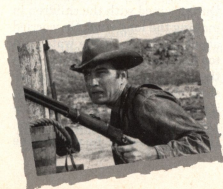


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"THE RAINS ARE LATE," ZUNIAK SAID, "BECAUSE  
THE WORLD IS OUT OF BALANCE. THERE  
IS ONE AMONG US WHO DOES NOT BELONG."

She scurried down the face of the cliff as if it were level ground, bounding happily. "Raft, raft, raft—that was it, that was it." The heat did not seem to bother her one bit. Qutiar followed at a more leisurely pace.

He did not wish to follow Zuliot's path to the valley floor.

Dressed in his finest beads, Zuniak lied to his people at the evening fire. Qutiar alone knew he was lying and said nothing of it. He would allow Zuniak to play out whatever scheme he wished. And then, if Zuniak's scheme hurt the people, Qutiar would speak.

"The rains," Zuniak intoned, "are overdue."

The statement caused a stir in the assembly. "What if they fail to come?" "How can this be?" "They've never been late before!" "How can we plant our corn?" "What can we do?"

Zuniak sat next to the fire. The flames danced eagerly off the beads around his neck. "I shall consult the gods," he said.

Qutiar then knew there was something Zuniak wanted—something for which he was afraid to ask. He did not know what it was—only that the people would be made to suffer. The people would do anything Zuniak said when he returned from his stay above the rim with the word of the gods as his command. Four days and four nights away. But what did he want?

In those same four days and four nights, Qutiar could finish his water system. All the work above the canyon rim had been done. All that needed doing was

guidework along the canyon walls and several long runs along the floor. The children would gladly mound up earthen walls on the canyon floor for him, and Qutiar could do the wall work himself.

Then would come the most difficult part, the waiting. It would be another cycle of the moon before the rains began. Perhaps Zuniak had miscounted the days. No. Zuniak wished something and had purposefully lied about the Calendar.

In the morning Zuniak, wearing nothing and carrying nothing but a small water bladder, went over the canyon. Qutiar gathered the children, drew lines in the dust, and told them how they should collect small rocks, larger rocks, and dirt to mound up along the lines. The lines would lead to the large cave under the west canyon wall. When the rains came, the water would cascade from the canyon rim as it always had. It would be gathered by the waterworks he would put on the walls and directed to the channel the children were making. It would follow the channel to the cave and pour inside, there to be trapped in the cool darkness, a perpetual reservoir for the people. Qutiar did not agree that the old ways were the best—letting almost all of the water run off as flood waters down the canyon.

"Why do you do this?" Second Wife asked him after the first day of work.

"I want Qunian to swim during the short days." It didn't explain anything, but she seemed to be satisfied.

The next night Second Wife

said, "The people laugh at you, preparing for the waters that Zuniak says will not come."

"They will come," he said. "But not until the moon is once more new."

Qutiar wondered if he had erred in saying that when Second Wife said, "But Zuniak said—"

He did not explain to Second Wife about Zuniak's mistake. She, as all the others, would believe the mistake to be Qutiar's. How, they would ask, could Qutiar know what was clearly Zuniak's lore? He did think, however, that he might spread his prediction around so that it would be common knowledge when Zuniak returned. Whatever Zuniak desired was tied up with his lying about the rains. Better, Qutiar knew, to be safe.

Only Quonton, Zuliot's father, asked why Qutiar thought the rains would return later, when Zuniak said they would return sooner. To him, Qutiar explained about the Rock Calendar. The other listened but did not comment.

"You have always possessed a sound mind," Quonton said. He did not understand the Calendar, but he must think that Qutiar could.

The work on the canyon wall was finished on the third day, and Qutiar joined with the children in making the long runs. He worried about the runs—if the water ran too high, and it came always from the rim in torrents, it would destroy the runs, wash them away; if too slowly, it would sink into the ground before reaching the cave. Had he more time, he would have

# QUTIAR MADE A MISTAKE. HE ATTEMPTED TO TAKE QUNIAN FROM THE CIRCLE, BUT HANDS IN THE CROWD STOPPED HIM.

liked to make the runs out of fired clay, the kind the potter used. It would not easily yield to the water. Next year would be soon enough for that improvement if his plan worked. *It would work*—he could see no flaw in the design. The only flaw was in the old ways.

On the fourth day, Qutiar rested. He took Qunian to the Rock Calendar, both to show her its workings and to check once more the time of the rains. He was pleased that Qunian understood so quickly about the Calendar. He was displeased that Zuniac was definitely lying about the time of the rains.

"Why is Zuniac lying about the rains?" Qunian asked. Qutiar did not know. It was dangerous that Qunian knew so quickly.

"You must not say that to anyone," he warned his daughter. "Say only he is mistaken, not lying."

"I know that," Qunian said. "I want to know why he is lying."

"I do not know."

Zuniac returned to the village on the fifth day, none the worse for his days of privation, naked, with a full water bag, with news from the gods. The gods, he said, were displeased. Qutiar could not remember a time when the gods were pleased. It was best not to consult the gods, as they were always demanding something. Leave them to themselves, and the people would be better off. Consult them and the people suffered.

At the evening fire, Zuniac explained what the gods demanded. "The rains are late," he said, "be-

cause the world is out of balance." No one mentioned what Qutiar had said about the rains not being late.

"How is the world out of balance?" Qutiar asked.

Zuniac gave him a hard look. In that instant, Qutiar knew Zuniac would say the gods had spoken of him. "There is one among us," Zuniac said, "who does not belong."

"What one?"

"The rains will come when she is gone."

She?

"No!" Qutiar would not hear the rest of Zuniac's proclamation: he had heard the same before. Since the birth of Qunian it had been ever thus. She was not born in the old way. Her head had been too big in Quzoan's womb, so the midwives and elders said she should have died with her mother. That was the old way. Qutiar remembered it as if it were yesterday—as if eight years had not passed at all. Quzoan, sweating, beaten, past exhaustion, knowing she was to die, not caring, looking at him, begging him with her eyes—*Do something, husband. Your wits have never failed me. Save my child.* The midwives stood shocked that a man would come to a woman at this time. It was not done! Quzoan had been confined for nearly two days. Too long, Qutiar knew. Too long. When he knew that Quzoan was to die, they could not keep him away. So he had relieved Quzoan's pain by taking the child, not in the manner of a normal birth, but by cutting into Quzoan's swelled and yet flaccid stomach.

He remembered as if yesterday the feel of the obsidian blade cutting Quzoan. There was almost no resistance whatsoever; the blade went in easily through the various layers. Even at the time, he was fascinated by what he saw through his tears. The gasp of pain, and the grimace. Quzoan made no further sound except to warn him, "Be careful." Be careful—the last words he heard from her. He was careful, going slowly, not knowing when he would come to the baby. Save my child. He was doing that now, by speaking out against Zuniac.

The blood. The blood. So much blood of the one he loved. But he had saved the baby. Perhaps that was why the midwives had never forgiven him. He had violated the sacred old ways and saved a child who should have died.

Zuniac stepped back from the anger in Qutiar's voice. "The gods have decreed—"

"No!" repeated Qutiar. "The rains will come during the next cycle of the moon! I have checked the Rock Calendar and the Rock Calendar does not lie."

Zuniac said nothing to that. The fire circle was deathly quiet. Qutiar had called him a liar in front of the people. He had as much as said his visit to the gods was a fraud. And Zuniac said nothing for the longest time. Finally he spoke. "We shall see."

The rains came during the next cycle of the moon as the Rock Calendar had said they would. The waters came too hard down the canyon walls and washed away the guides on the valley floor before much water had collected in



# THE BOY EXAMINED THE BOWL, TURNING IT IN HIS HANDS. HE SAID NOTHING OF ITS MATERIAL, WHICH HE COULD NEVER HAVE SEEN BEFORE.

the cave under the west wall. The water that did collect sank into the rocks beneath the cave. But Qutiari did not lose heart. He knew the cave could not drink so much, and then it would hold his water. Next year. One more year according to the old ways. He knew the waters would not easily wash away his improved pottery guides on the valley floor.

He had saved Qunian—that was the main thing. He had saved Quzoan's daughter—her flesh and his blood.

"We shall see," Zuniac had said. And when the rains came, he admitted his mistake freely. Qutiari could see in his manner that he did not relish being made a fool. Where there had been suppressed hostility before, now Zuniac made no secret of his hatred of Qutiari and his new ways. "We shall see that the old ways are best," Zuniac had said.

Quanton echoed Quzoan's words. "Be careful," he said, "when dealing with Zuniac."

We shall see. The next year, Qutiari saw. In all his calculations, he had not figured on the rains failing. But the next year he watched as the Rock Calendar predicted the beginning of the rains. And the rains did not come.

"When will the rains come?" Zuniac taunted him, halfway through the moon cycle.

Qutiari did not have an answer. The rains had come every season since the village was founded. The rains were the reason a village could be founded.

But the rains failed.

And Zuniac did not waste his

opportunity. "The world," he proclaimed loudly, "is out of balance. The world will return to balance once the stomach-born girl is gone."

"Gone?" Qutiari asked.

"Dead," Zuniac said. A gasp arose from the crowded fire ring, sounding like the voice of the jackrabbit as it is taken by the hawk.

Qutiari could not believe his ears. Zuniac had hinted as much before but had never named the deed. Dead.

"The gods require a blood sacrifice?" he asked. "A human sacrifice? What gods are these?"

Another voice from the circle, beyond the light of the flames, said, "Let her leave the village."

"The world would remain unbalanced. She must die. With the world unbalanced, the crops will not grow. The river will dry up. We all will die."

"We are not that kind of people," another from the circle said.

"In the past," Zuniac said, "in the distant past, these things were not unknown. When it came to saving the village, the ancestors—"

And Qutiari made his mistake. He attempted to take Qunian from the circle. He was going to leave the village—go over the rim with his daughter and make a new life. Perhaps if he had waited until the morning, things would have worked out differently. But when he tried to take her, hands in the crowd stopped him. He caught her by the arm for only a second before she was ripped from his grasp. Gone.

Gone.

After that, there was nothing he could do but go over the rim himself. Alone. He wandered the desert, tracked the river upstream. He found the cave that Zuniac had used on his trips over the rim. He destroyed everything useful inside it. Let Zuniac suffer the next time he speaks to the gods. In the end, he returned to the canyon above the village. He found his own cave. He waited and watched.

"When I return," the boy asked, "will Zuniac try to kill me, as he killed your daughter and Zuliot?"

"I do not know. On a pretext, yes, and he will succeed. You cannot fight a village of fools."

"But if you came and fixed the water system?" the boy pleaded.

"They would remain fools."

"What can I do?" the boy asked.

Qutiari offered the boy a bowl of water. He liked the boy and felt like showing off. The boy examined the bowl, turning it in his hands, feeling it. He said nothing of its material, which he could never have seen before. He asked about the water delivery system Qutiari had made in the cave—a simple fired clay pipe coming from a large overhead storage bowl. The end of the pipe was plugged with cactus pulp—it worked the best in stopping the leaks.

"You have water?"

"Yes." Qutiari smiled. "In fact, I was hoping you could help me to refill the storage area above. My legs . . ."

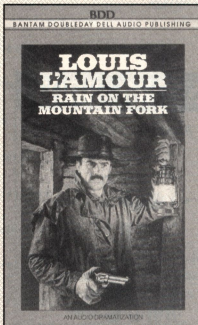
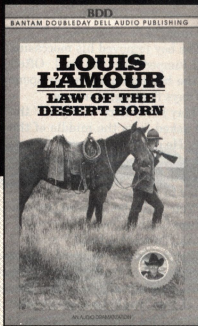
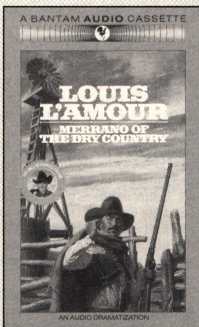
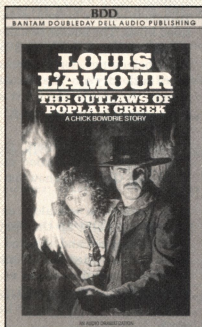
The boy took a bowl and went to the storage pool that Qutiari told him about. Qutiari followed more slowly. The boy's mouth fell

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open. He fell to his knees. "May I?"

"Jump in."

The boy removed his moccasins and jumped into the pool. Often on the hottest days, Qutiar spent his days floating, thinking.

"May I stay here with you?" the boy asked from the middle of the pool. He could swim, even though he could not have had much time when there was abundant enough water to learn.

"You will be missed in the village."

"As you were missed."

"Yes," Qutiar replied, more quickly than he had expected. "You may remain here." A new set of legs would be a great boon to him. "But you cannot return to the village."

"I know," the boy said. "I have no reason to return."

"You may never return."

"I know. Zuniac has said the village will disappear if the rains do not return. The river cannot support a village without the aid of the rains."

Yes, Qutiar had expected the village to disband years ago, in the dry years, but it had hung on.

"I am too old to go to the gods," Zuniac announced from outside the cave. "I have come to you instead, Qutiar."

Qutiar knew that he could hide no longer. That the boy who had been his comfort for the past days had left a trail that even Zuniac could follow. The boy started from his napping position, but Qutiar calmed him with a gesture.

"I am no god," Qutiar said. "I do not demand human sacrifice for appeasement." He forced himself to stand without the aid of the boy.

Zuniac stared at the cave opening in the rock wall as a blind man. "What do you demand?" the old man asked. The cares of the village and twenty years had destroyed Zuniac's power.

"That I be left alone," Qutiar answered. Zuniac looked directly at Qutiar but could not see him.

"You would let your people perish?"

"My people?" He laughed bitterly. He saw clearly in his mind's eye Qunian, fighting to free herself, being handed from one person to the next. "My people do not practice human sacrifice."

"Come out where I can see you."

Qutiar said nothing. "That was many years ago," Zuniac said.

"Many years of life my daughter did not live. Go away, old man. Go beseech your gods for rain. Leave me alone."

"The gods do not listen to me," Zuniac said, dropping his arms to his side in abject surrender.

"You have unbalanced the

world, Zuniac, and now wish the gods to rectify your mistake."

Zuniac stared at the ground. "I unbalanced the world?"

"You. Sacrificing my daughter. Killing an innocent. You unbalanced the world."

Zuniac turned from the cave and fell to his knees. He did not move for many moments. The boy came and stood next to Qutiar.

"It is so," Zuniac said. He stood. He twisted the top half of his body and said, "Your people ask," to the cave opening. He walked and then ran from the cave, through the bushes, over the rocks, and finally over the edge of the cliff. He made no sound as he fell.

A moon cycle after the death of Zuniac, the village was deserted. The fickle gods had not returned the rains with Zuniac's second sacrifice.

The boy asked only once why Qutiar did not return now that Zuniac was dead.

"His death does not return Qunian."

Qutiar spent a day alone in the village, to see the broken, desanctified kivas. The houses remained, would remain, bereft of all personal belongings, for a thousand years in the dry air. The life of the village, the people, the spirit was gone, spread to the dry wind.

Gone.

Quzoan, gone. Qunian, gone. The village, gone. Zuniac dead. What had Qutiar to show for his life?

He thought he was alone as he plodded painfully up the canyon wall. He stopped and adjusted his water system, filled in the broken areas that had allowed the water to run down the canyon wall undirected. It took surprisingly little work.

"Why are you fixing it now?" the boy asked from higher up on the rim.

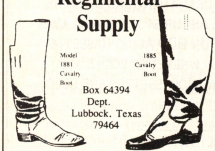
"It would have been a thing of beauty." ☐

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TERROR  
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# DRAGON PEAK

Murphey spent the day prospecting aimlessly on a steep mountainside below limestone cliffs that marched along the humped ridge of Dragon Peak. It was a satisfying day for the desert man. He found no traces of gold, or tungsten, or zinc. Therefore, he felt no personal obligation to locate a mining claim—a chore that would require a day's labor at pacing distances, building stone corner monuments, and driving his Model T Ford flivver out to Windmill Station on the highway to mail claim papers to the county recorder in far-off San Bernardino. Murphey wasn't averse to hard labor. In fact, some days he reveled in flexing his muscles while swinging a double-jack or shoveling overburden. But this day he enjoyed simply poking among granite outcrops.



RAY  
DORR



As evening shadows cooled the desert he hiked down to his camp, a small white canvas tent that nestled among Joshua trees and clumps of prickly pear cactus on a gravel flat near the base of the peak. The bed of coals beneath his bean pot had turned cold, so the beans he had set to cook that morning were only half done. Murphey had no choice but to eat them. He scrubbed out his plate and the bean pot with sand, then sat down to read the latest issue of the *California Mining Journal* by the light of a crackling fire of juniper sticks.

A man suddenly stepped out of the darkness on the opposite side of the campfire. He hadn't called out upon approaching the camp, a custom every prospector knew was both polite and prudent.

Murphey scrambled to a crouch as he whipped a Colt .45 automatic pistol from his hip pocket. He had won the gun more than a dozen years earlier in a craps game with guards at a U.S. Army stockade in France where he had been a frequent prisoner for brawling during the War to End All Wars. The handgun was accurate enough to pick off running jackrabbits when held in experienced hands. Murphey ate a lot of jackrabbits.

"Don't shoot!" the intruder called. He held up both hands. "I'm not armed."

Firelight flickered on a man who was of medium height, lean, and a few years younger than the prospector. He was a city slicker, that was plain to see. A tweed cap sat square above a face unaccustomed to sunshine. He wore a white shirt and tie, golf knickers, knee-high socks, and brown and white leather slippers. Town people called the low-cut footwear shoes, but country folks called them slippers. They were made for walking on clean sidewalks, not for tramping across deserts

"Schroder  
would've got you  
out in the middle  
of the desert,  
then skinned  
you outta your  
last dime,"  
Murphey said.



covered with cactus and sharp rocks.

"I'm lost," the man said. "My auto broke down a couple of miles back. I was following a wagon road when I smelled smoke, then I saw your fire." His voice was pitched high. Maybe he was scared.

Murphey lowered the gun, but kept it in his hand. "You alone?" he asked. The desert man was angry with himself for not having heard the stranger approach his camp.

"Unfortunately, I am. May I put my hands down?"

Murphey nodded. "Yeah. Put 'em down."

"I suppose I should have hired that guide when I turned off the highway at the little store that sells gasoline and necessities."

"Windmill Station?"

"Yes. That was the name of the place. Windmill Station. A gentleman who was filling his gasoline tank when I stopped there offered to be my guide. He was a big man, like you. He said he's familiar with this region, but something about him made me feel uncomfortable."

"Did he give his name?"

"Schroder. Bert or Bart. I don't remember which."

Murphey snorted. "Schroder would've got you out in the middle of the desert, then skinned you outta your last dime. And he would've made you think he was doing you a favor while he done it."

"Indeed?" The man stepped around the fire and held out his hand. "My name is Charles Martin."

Murphey hesitated a moment before stuffing the pistol back into his pocket. He shook the extended hand.

"Folks call me Murphey," he said.

Charles Martin looked like a rich man's son. High society probably. Meet him on a city street and he'd most likely stick his nose in the air and walk right past without a howdy-do.

"So you came out to the desert and got yourself lost," Murphey said.

"More than lost. I'm not feeling well. The heat today aggravated an ailment. I'd like to hire you to take me back to Barstow, or at least to Windmill Station. I noticed two or three tourist cottages behind the store."

Murphey leaned down to pick a short length of gnarled wood from a pile of kindling and tossed it onto the flames. A cluster of sparks whirled into the night sky. He pushed back his hat, a battered black Stetson with a brim that curled up slightly in front. Dark hair slipped down over a forehead that was surprisingly white above deeply tanned cheeks and chin.

"I hope you ain't sick with nothing serious," he said. "Because you ain't going nowhere tonight. Unless you want to walk."

He pointed toward the dim outline of a battered old pickup truck parked beside the tent. "You said your car is broke down. So is my flivver. I burned out the transmission bands yesterday. What's wrong with your car?"

"A flat tire. Two flat tires, actually. I used the spare earlier in the day when I had another flat."

"You mean you came out into the desert with only one spare?"

Murphey shook his head. This stranger irritated him. Or perhaps he was feeling cantankerous because his stomach was protesting the partially cooked beans he had eaten for supper.

"You said you're sick. What's the problem, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Lungs."

"Consumption?"

"Yes. It started with a bullet wound that wouldn't heal."

"You were in France?"

"That's where I was wounded."

Murphey studied the man. He did look a mite peaked. The desert man motioned with his head. "Hunker down and make yourself comfortable. All I can offer you is coffee and some biscuits left over from breakfast." Murphey left the fire to enter his tent.

The younger man called after him. "I'm really most anxious to get back to civilization, Mr. Murphey. Perhaps you could repair one of my flat tires and drive me out to a town. I'll pay you well."

Murphey returned carrying a small canvas bag and a tin coffee cup. He squatted on his heels beside the fire, pulled on a worn leather glove, picked up a granite-ware coffeepot from a bed of coals, and poured black liquid into the cup.

"Here you go." He held out the cup and the canvas bag. "That coffee's been boiling so long it's probably stronger than an old billy goat. This morning's biscuits are in the sack. Help yourself."

The young man scowled as he accepted the cup and bag. Murphey figured he was angry because the desert man wouldn't kowtow to him and his pocketful of money. Well, this city feller wasn't in a big city now.

"I ain't likely to patch a tire in

**It won't do no  
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mine promoters.**



the dark," Murphey said. "Ain't saying I can't. My gosh, I've patched enough tires in the dark out here. But it's a sight easier to do it in daylight. You bunk here with me tonight, Mr. Martin. We'll see about getting you back with city folks in the morning."

The man munched at a biscuit and sipped at the coffee. He tossed the last of the coffee onto the fire. Murphey flinched.

The man set the cup on the ground. "I want to thank you for your hospitality. I didn't know what to expect when I came out West."

"In the desert you don't thank a man for food and water," Murphey said. "Those are things you accept. And those are things you better be prepared to give when a feller comes into your camp."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"Just telling you how it is. No offense taken." The sharpness in Murphey's voice belied his words.

"I'm learning," the man said.

"You got a blanket roll in your car?"

"No. I had planned to return to the hotel in Barstow tonight."

"I'll give you half of my blankets. You can sleep in the tent. There's only room for one in there,

with all the tools and camp gear. I'll bunk out here."

The man studied the darkness surrounding the camp. "If you don't mind, I'll sleep next to the fire," he said.

"Suit yourself. I'll give you a tarp to keep the dew off."

The promise of dawn faded stars in the east. Murphey knelt on one knee and struck a blue-tipped match with his thumbnail. He touched the flaring match to a handful of shredded juniper bark inside the circle of blackened rocks. The dry bark burst into a ball of yellow flame. With a delicate touch the desert man built a tepee of twigs over the burning bark. The blaze created a cavity of light around the campsite.

He glanced at the mounded canvas tarp under which the young man slept. How did a city feller like this get so far off the main road? That was a fool thing to do. Look at him. Dead to the world. A desert man would've woke up as soon as someone rustled in the camp. And there's his clothes. All wet where he left them out in the night dew. He must have undressed like he figured he was sleeping in some fancy city hotel. Best patch up one of the autos and get him back to the city, pronto.

Murphey laid larger sticks on the fire—sticks large enough to make coals for cooking. He rubbed the black bristles on his jaw. Time to shave. It'd been a week since he'd used precious water to wash or shave. Did the stranger have a razor in his hip pocket? Murphey wasn't about to be his barber. And a razor was a personal item, not to be lent out.

The prospector's jaw muscles tightened as he studied the motionless mound. Then the lines in his face relaxed. *Ah, shoot, the poor kid is a wounded war vet out here trying to thumb his nose at the grim reaper a few more years. It won't do no harm to lend the*



young feller a hand. Ain't like he's one of them shyster mine promoters up here from Los Angeles, Murphey thought.

The prospector stepped to the tent, where he ladled water from a dented milk can into the coffeepot that held yesterday's coffee grounds. He returned to the campfire with the coffeepot, a skillet, a cast-iron Dutch oven, a blanket-covered canteen, a flour pail, a slab of bacon wrapped in canvas, a baking powder can and a salt can. He spread a bed of coals for the coffeepot, Dutch oven, and skillet; sliced bacon into the skillet; mixed biscuit dough that he formed into small balls, flattened, and placed in the bottom of the heated Dutch oven. He set the heavy lid on the oven, then scooped on glowing coals with a shovel. Finally, he carefully rubbed remaining dough from his hands into the fire so ants and other crawling insects wouldn't be attracted to the campsite.

"Rise and shine, young feller," he called.

The mound under the tarp stirred. A hand appeared and pushed down the canvas. The young man sat up and propped himself with his elbows. Strands of blond hair lay matted over his forehead.

Murphey said, "You sleep fit last night? No rattlesnakes come visiting?"

The man stretched his shoulders. "Yes, I did sleep well. But I'm stiff this morning. It is mornin', isn't it?"

"You bet. The sun'll be up and mornin' half gone in no time."

The man chuckled. He slipped into his damp clothes and shivered. Without taking time to lace his shoes, he hurried to hunker beside the fire.

"Do you have a coat?" Murphey asked.

"Yes, but I left it in the auto last night. The weather was so warm then."

The sun was  
two hours high  
when Murphey  
and the city man  
approached the  
tan roadster with  
the flat rear tire.



"There's a mackinaw on a box beside my bedroll in the tent. Why don't you go put it on? I should have told you to put your clothes under the tarp if you was gonna take them off to sleep. Do you have a knife in your pocket? Matches?"

"I don't have any matches. I do have a penknife." The man started to reach into a pocket.

Murphey stopped him with a gesture. "I don't want your knife. Just wanted to make sure you got one. When you're in the desert, make sure you always got a knife and matches with you. You never go nowhere without thinking you might not make it back to camp that night. You could fall over a cliff and break a leg. A fast-moving storm might catch you on the far side of a mountain. A rattlesnake might take a liking to your ankle. Most anything. The desert's not forgiving, like the city. No, sir. You get into trouble out here and most likely you gotta get yourself out."

"You mean, like having only one spare tire and leaving my coat in the auto?"

"Ah, I didn't mean to ride you, young feller. But you gotta be careful. The desert is like a woman. You watch her every minute, trying to figger what she's thinking. If you ain't careful and

make a fool mistake, she'll come down on you like your ma done when you was a little kid and broke her cookie jar. But if you treat her right and let her know she's the boss, the desert can be just as loving as any woman."

Murphey reached to remove two matches that stood upright behind his hatband. He handed them to the man. "Here's some matches," he said.

With a long stick Murphey scooped coals from the top of the Dutch oven and lifted the lid. "Them biscuits look done to me. Bacon's cooked and the coffee's boiling. Dig in."

The sun was two hours high when Murphey and the city man walked along a desert wagon road toward a new tan roadster with a black canvas top that slumped to one side over a flat rear tire. The men carried tire patching tools and a hand pump.

With a good breakfast under his belt the prospector was feeling his normal, friendly self. Although he had done most of the talking since leaving camp, he had learned that the newcomer was a civil engineer who worked for a large company in Rochester, New York. His wife had stayed in the east while "Charlie" had come west for his health. The first time Murphey had used the name *Charlie*, the younger man had studied him for a few moments, then a slight smile had bent his lips. The prospector insisted that the younger man stop calling him *Mister Murphey*. "That's my pa's name," he said.

"By golly," Murphey said, "she's a Willys-Knight. I hear tell them engines don't have no valves, or even camshafts. Just sliding sleeves for valves. I'd like to tear into that engine just to see how it works."

"The salesman in Los Angeles told me it will run longer without repairs than an engine with regu-

lar valves. So far, it has performed remarkably well. I wish I could say as much for the tires."

"Let's take a look." Murphey knelt to examine the flat tire. "You got more'n a flat here. This tire's shredded. There ain't no way to patch it."

He moved to the back of the car, where he ran his hands around a tire bolted to a rack behind the rumble seat. "I don't feel no breaks. Probably just the tube needs patching. Let me have that lug wrench."

With a few swift turns Murphey removed the lug bolts and dropped the tire onto the ground. He stomped on the side of the casing to break it loose from the wheel rim, then reached inside to pull out and examine a red inner tube.

"There it is," he said. "Looks like you ran into a Spanish bayonet. It's a good clean hole. I'll need some gasoline to clean the tube. Charlie, if you'll use your blow rag to dip some gasoline outta the tank, we'll have this patched in jig time. You'll be eating supper tonight beneath swaying palms with them Hollywood movie stars."

Murphey felt Charlie watching him while he clamped a diamond-shaped metal vulcanized patch over the hole in the tube and set a match to the fiber in the patch.

"Murphey, would you consider letting me stay in your camp for a few days?"

"What for?"

"I came out West to see if my lungs would heal. You know the desert, and you know I'm completely out of my element here. I'd be safe in your camp and traveling with you, if you travel. That is, if you don't mind having a greenhorn underfoot. I'll make it worth your trouble financially."

"I don't take money for having someone in my camp. The truth of the matter is, though, I'm just about flat busted. I wouldn't mind

**"I wouldn't take  
a grubstake from  
a war veteran  
like you," Murphey  
said. "I pay my  
own way with an  
honest man."**



having you around, Charlie. But we wouldn't have much to eat."

Charlie watched while Murphey picked up the tools and placed them on the floorboard on the passenger side of the roadster. "Perhaps I could—what's the term you people out here use?—grubstake you."

Murphey shook his head. "Nope. No grubstake."

"Why not?"

"Tell you how it is, young feller.

Grubstaking is kind of a sucker's game we play, mostly with them city slickers up from Los Angeles. When they hear about some poor galoot making a strike, them wind merchants come stampeding out here and offer us old desert rats starvation deals to become partners on anything we locate. Most of the time we have to grab the money just to keep beans in our bellies. The honest fact is, we don't prospect too hard when one of them shysters is dogging our tracks. That's grubstaking, Charlie. More'n one prospector is making it through President Hoover's national catastrophe by grubstaking. Gotta admit that I've done my share of it."

He stuck out his jaw and looked Charlie in the eye. "I wouldn't take a grubstake from a war veteran like you. If you want to go in on the grub with me, I'd be

pleased to have you. But I pay my own way with an honest man. I've got a rifle back in camp. It's a thirty-thirty Winchester. Shoots plumb center. That and a box and a half of shells. If you'll take that rifle in trade for my share of grub and some gas for my flivver, I'll call it a deal."

"A rifle is worth considerably more than some groceries and a few gallons of gasoline," Charlie said.

"That depends on how long you stay. If you figger you ain't et that much grub by the time you leave, you can give me back the cash difference."

"It's a deal. Shall we shake on it?"

"Out here a man's word is final," Murphey said. "Shaking hands and signing papers don't mean nothing if a man's word ain't no good."

Charlie grinned. "Like I said last night—I'm learning."

The men drove up the wagon track to Murphey's camp, Charlie driving slowly and hunched over the steering wheel to watch for rocks or cactus that might cause another blowout. Along the way Murphey explained that Las Vegas, across the state line in Nevada, was the closest town in which to buy new tires.

As they approached the camp Murphey saw Schroder's Dodge touring car parked beside his flivver. "Looks like your guide has come visiting," he said to Charlie.

Schroder was sitting on his heels beside the campfire, a coffee cup in one hand. He stood and waited for Murphey and Charlie to get out of the car. Schroder was a desert man. No doubt about that, though he often claimed he had attended college. And he was a big-mouthed grubstake chaser. No doubt about that, either. It riled Murphey the way Schroder seemed to fall into a pot of money whenever he wanted it. It riled him even more that Schroder



bragged how easily he could talk city folks out of their money. That sort of talk hurt when a man's belt buckle was tickling his backbone.

Murphey stepped out of the auto. "Howdy, Schroder," he said.

"Hello, Murphey, old pal. Just helping myself to your leftover coffee. The grounds must be a week old. I see you got the pilgrim in tow." He nodded to Charlie.

"This here's my new partner," Murphey said. "Talked him into joining up with me." It felt good to lay an ace on Schroder for a change.

"From the looks of that fancy automobile, it's apparent you've done yourself right, Murph."

He was talking to Murphey, but the message was aimed at Charlie. Murphey reined in his temper. He reached down for the coffeepot. It was empty. It had been nearly half full when they had left the camp earlier.

"I heard tell you staked out a claim over in the Soda Mountains," Murphey said. "Close enough to the highway so's them high-binders you deal with can get to it in their town cars."

"I did," Schroder said. "Still working it. But I've got something special to show you." He handed a small object to Murphey. "You know what this is?"

The prospector looked at the object, which was about the size of a large shoe button. Instantly he was interested. On the other hand, Schroder was belittling him by asking a question when the answer was obvious.

"Any fool can plainly see it's a gold nugget," he said. "Placer gold. Stream gold. It didn't come from around here."

Schroder arched his eyebrows and shrugged. He took back the nugget. "I'm not so sure about that. Have you seen two Mexicans poking around here? One in his twenties. The other a teenager."

"They came into camp a couple of times for beans," Murphey said.

**"There's something strange I've been wondering about them two Mexicans,"**

**Murphey said.**

**"Where have they been getting water?"**



"Of course, I gave them some. Why?"

"They came begging for water at my camp last week. I told them to keep moving. Then I found out they were packing nuggets like this one. I think they're looking for a lot more gold where this came from."

"Where'd you get this nugget?"

"Windmill Station. After the Mexicans left my camp they hiked on up there and traded it for some beans and rice and all the candles in stock. Yesterday, when I stopped there for gasoline, I happened to glance in the cash drawer and saw it. Ended up buying it."

"How'd you happen to know them Mexicans are out here in my neck of the woods?"

"The last anybody saw of them was when they left the highway and headed in this direction. They had packs on their backs made out of old tow sacks. One of them was carrying a coil of that Mexican grass rope over his shoulder."

"Maguey," Murphey said.

"Yes, that's the stuff. You said they came to your camp. Was that lately?"

Murphey did some rapid calcu-

lating before answering. He had information that Schroder wanted. He also had some questions about the Mexicans. It was time for a little horse trading. He rubbed his jaw as if trying to remember. "Let's see, that was about a week ago that they came in looking for water. They were toting those gourd canteens that Mexicans carry. Day before yesterday they came back. Had a meal, borrowed some beans, and stayed the night. What makes you think they're looking in this range? Maybe they just happened to have a nugget that come from some other place."

"One thing is certain," Schroder said, "they're out here for some reason. Who knows what? Maybe they came to dig up a Spanish treasure that was hidden in the old days. The nuggets could have come from up north. I've heard stories about Spanish travelers and prospectors being massacred along the Old Spanish Trail by Indians. If those Mexicans came to your place twice, they must be nearby. Have you seen them when you've been out scouting around?"

"Nope."

"You must have seen something—at least their tracks."

Murphey ground his teeth at the reply. Was Schroder calling him a liar? "I seen their tracks from time to time," he said, "but didn't pay no never-mind."

Schroder leaned forward slightly. "Where? Where'd you see their tracks?"

"Here and there. Didn't pay much attention." Murphey crossed his arms. "You know how it is when you're prospecting. Besides, it ain't none of my affair if they're looking for an old family treasure."

Schroder flashed his white teeth. "They may need some help packing all that gold out of here. Murphey, you and I would be doing them a favor. What do you say we work as partners?"

"I got me a partner. And I don't go nosing around other people's business unless they ask."

Schroder turned to Charlie. "What do you say, pilgrim? Do you want to go with a winner or stay with Murphey? We could end up rich."

Charlie's expression didn't reveal his thoughts while he studied Schroder. "I'll stay with Murphey," he said.

"Well, pilgrim, Murphey's a good, dependable man. You can depend on him to be short on rations and long on talk. Right, Murphey?"

"At least I don't gouge the listener's pocketbook."

Schroder laughed and slapped the desert man's shoulder. "You're a good man, Murph, old pal. You don't mind if I look around a bit while I'm out here, do you?"

"It's open country." Murphey's voice was flat. "You don't see my claim stakes ever'where."

Schroder laughed again, climbed into his touring car, and started the engine. He waved as he let out the clutch. "So long, pilgrim. Be careful that Murph doesn't feed you something you can't swallow. And be careful you don't get those city duds all dirty." The car rattled away from the campsite. At the wagon road it turned toward Dragon Peak.

"That four-flusher," Murphey said through tight lips. "With that nugget in his pocket he'll be poking around here until he finds them Mexicans."

Charlie asked, "Do you suppose they're still nearby?"

Murphey reached to scratch the back of his neck. The black Stetson slid down over his left eyebrow. "I've got a feeling they are. There's something strange I've been wondering about them two. The first time they came here, one of them was carrying a wooden bowl. I've seen placer miners down in Mexico pan for gold with

The yards in the parched railroad town were barren except for a scattering of worn out tire casings, rusted bicycles, and hulks of autos.



wooden bowls like that. I didn't give it much thought at the time. Figgered they might of been panning over on the Colorado River. And maybe that's what they had been doing. Another thing, though. Day before yesterday, when they came looking for grub, they didn't ask for water. Their gourd canteens couldn't hold more'n a couple of quarts. And the closest water is Windmill Station. That's too far to walk for two quarts. Where have they been getting water?"

Murphey spent most of the day patching transmission bands in his Model T with strips of leather cut from his belt. The leather might last long enough to get to town, where he could buy new transmission bands. Charlie sat on a running board.

"Tell me something, Murphey. What is it that you want out of life?"

"What do you mean, want out of life?"

"I mean, do you want to become a successful mine owner? Or do you dream of selling a claim for enough money so you don't have to survive on beans and bacon? Maybe you'd like to retire to

southern California, where the weather isn't so brutal, and live on a few acres with some fruit trees, and maybe a cow and some chickens."

Murphey reached back with an open hand. "Hand me that wrench, would you? Maybe them things are fine for the likes of you, Charlie. Me? I'm doing what I want right now."

"Don't you worry about the future?"

The prospector laughed. "There ain't no future. Not much further'n you can spit, no how. The sun comes up, and the sun goes down. Yesterday's gone, tomorrow ain't here. If a feller don't live for today, he ain't living for nothing. That's what the Good Book says."

"I don't recall any passage like that in the Bible."

Murphey swung around to sit on the running board beside Charlie. The wrench seemed to fit naturally in his grease-covered hands. "If the Bible don't say that," he said with a grin, "it dang sure oughta. What do you want outta life, Charlie?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that question. That's another reason I came out West—to try to straighten out my thoughts and to determine where I'm going with my life."

"If you don't mind me saying so, you seem to have a burr under your saddle about something. You look like you're thinking on a problem a lot of the time. Is it a woman other'n your wife?"

Charlie reached to pick a twig from the ground and began making marks in the dirt, just doodling. "It isn't another woman, although I imagine Marilyn believes that's the reason I'm often moody, and the reason I left home alone to come out here. When I tried to explain to her that I had to get away for a few weeks just to think, I could tell by her look that she didn't believe me. She



looked frightened when I told her I love her—her alone. And I do love her. But I don't have a way with words like you do, Murphey. I wish I had that gift."

"It ain't always a gift. Sometimes I find my trap rambling when I should cinch it up tight. There's been times in a few saloons when this big mouth got me a black eye and a sore jaw."

Next morning the partners rattled up the highway in the flivver toward Las Vegas. In town, Charlie mailed a letter to his wife. At an auto agency they bought two balloon tires for Charlie's car and a set of transmission bands for the flivver, then walked next door to a general store. Charlie picked out some rough clothes while Murphey loaded up on food items, including a box of canned tomatoes. "The acid in tomato juice counteracts poison from the sun," he told Charlie.

Murphey dropped a crate of groceries in the truck bed. Casually, he commented: "It's been a long dry spell since I been to town. What say we mosey over to a blind pig in Old Town that sells top-drawer booze?"

Charlie hesitated before answering. "I've never been to a speakeasy."

"Well, shoot fire. It's time you lived a little," Murphey said. He jumped into the driver's seat and adjusted the spark and accelerator levers. "Give that crank a turn. Let's get going."

They drove on dusty streets across the parched railroad town to an area of houses where the yards were barren except for a scattering of worn out tire casings, rusted bicycles, and a few hulks of autos that would never again run on their own power. A faded red Coca-Cola sign with white letters had been nailed to the front of one of the houses.

"The neighborhood grocery

**The man had  
the look of a  
cornered wild  
animal. He  
reeked of  
sweat and  
uncontrollable  
fear.**



store," Murphey said. He switched off the engine.

"This is a speakeasy?"

"The back room is," Murphey said. He led the way up a short walk and into what had once been a living room. A wooden counter cut the room in half. A large glass jar on the counter surrounded several dozen red and black jawbreakers. Cans of corn, green beans, peaches, and pineapple had been placed on wall shelves behind the counter. Attached to the door of an oak icebox was a crayoned message on white paper: SODA POP 5 CENTS.

The woman behind the counter looked up from the magazine she had been reading. Her hair was frizzed red. A faded housedress covered a figure that had indulged too frequently in the store's inventory. "Hello, Murphey. Long time no see. Who's your friend?"

"Howdy, Maude. This here's Charlie. Don't worry, he's not the law."

"Didn't figure he would be—traveling with you."

"Is the back room open for business?"

The woman laughed. "The back room is our business," she said. "You and your gentleman friend want the usual?"

"Do we have a choice?"

"No." She laughed again. "Go make yourselves comfortable. I'll be right in."

An hour later, Charlie cranked up the flivver and drove back to the claims while Murphey relaxed in the passenger's seat—relaxed so completely that he would have fallen out of the Model T if Charlie hadn't grabbed his shirt collar when they rounded sharp corners.

Strong coffee for supper cleared most of the cobwebs from the prospector's head, except he didn't feel much like talking that evening as they sat beside the campfire. After the fire burned down to embers, Charlie told Murphey about his long stay in an army hospital in France.

A man stumbled across the desert below Dragon Peak where heat waves danced above the cactus, rocks, and low brush. Charlie noticed him first.

"Murphey, someone is out there," he said.

Murphey sat on a square of worn canvas while he cleaned his pistol. He looked up. "It's one of the Mexicans—Emilio. Look at the way he's staggering. And he ain't wearing a hat. Something's wrong," Murphey slapped a loaded clip into the butt of the gun and climbed to his feet.

"He keeps looking back over his shoulder," Charlie said. He hurried toward the approaching man. Murphey followed.

"Emilio!" Murphey called. He waved.

The Mexican paused, looked at Murphey and Charlie, then lurched toward them. His mouth moved soundlessly. The men rushed forward to grab his arms, just as he started to fall. His clothes and hair were caked with dried mud. His feet, unprotected except for sandals, bristled with cactus needles. Flies buzzed around cuts on his arms and legs. The man's bloodshot eyes had the

look of a cornered wild animal. He reeked of sweat and more. Murphey recognized the odor—uncontrollable fear.

"Come on, man. Only a few more steps to camp," Murphey said.

They dragged the young man to the canvas tarp where he collapsed, first onto his hands and knees, then full length, his face on the canvas. His outstretched hands clutched at the fabric. His body trembled spastically.

"He's crying," Charlie said.

"The poor galoot. Looks like he's been to hell and back. I wonder where Luis is."

"That's his partner?"

"Yeah. They're cousins. That's what they told me the night they stayed here. This one said he learned English when he worked on a ranch in Arizona." Murphey squatted and put a hand on the Mexican's shoulder. The man twitched. "You're safe, Emilio. You're in my camp now. We got lots of water." He looked up at Charlie. "Get some water. I'll stay with him."

"Do you think he got lost and ran out of water?" Charlie said.

"It could be. But he don't look like other fellers I've seen who near died of thirst. His lips aren't all cracked. And usually they tear their clothes off by the time they look as wild as he does. I wonder if Bert Schroder ambushed them, maybe killed Luis."

"Mr. Schroder didn't appear to have a sterling character, but would he actually attempt to kill these men?"

"For gold? You betcha."

An hour later, Emilio sat propped up with his back against a boulder. More than a gallon of water had been used to wash the mud and filth from his body. He wore one of the gray work shirts Charlie had bought in Las Vegas and a pair of Murphey's blue denim pants. His old clothes had

**"That is where  
you will find the  
gold," Emilio  
said. "In the belly  
of the dragon."**



been thrown into a deserted prospect hole a hundred yards from camp. Murphey had cleaned the man's cuts and scratches with peroxide and poured turpentine over the wounds. The Mexican had refused to turn loose of a fiber shoulder bag that now lay on the ground beside his leg. Murphey and Charlie sat facing him.

"Can you tell us where Luis is?" Murphey asked.

"He is gone," Emilio said. He spoke English with a slow, drawn-out accent, stretching the word *gone*.

"Did you see who shot Luis? Was it that gringo who refused to give you water back by the highway?"

Emilio shook his head. "No. Luis was not shot. The monster spirit under the dragon mountain took his body. More worse, it devoured his soul."

"You mean that peak? Dragon Peak?"

"But yes."

"You lost me already," Murphey said. "You better start at the beginning."

Emilio took a deep breath and looked off toward the cliffs that formed the backbone of Dragon Peak. Murphey waited.

"I don't know if I should tell you. There is much danger," Emilio said. "You are a good man. You gave Luis and me water and food when the others turned us away."

"Your people treated me right when I was in Mexico. No reason I shouldn't do the same. If there's

something dangerous out here, I oughta know about it."

"Aiee. That is the truth. Perhaps it is more better that you should know. This man, he is your friend?"

"Charlie? He's my partner," Murphey said. "And yes, he's my friend, to boot."

Emilio studied Charlie a few moments before he reached into the shoulder bag and pulled out a piece of soft leather that he unfolded on his lap.

"This is a map that has been in my family for many generations. It is from the days of the old Spaniards in California. It shows the route from the mission San Gabriel, through a pass in the mountains, and across the desert to a peak shaped like a dragon." His finger traced along a wandering line. "Here it follows a river out of the mountain pass to a lake."

"That'd be the Mojave River and Soda Lake. That's a dry lake," Murphey said.

"Luis and I thought there would be water in that lake. We had much thirst after the river disappeared into sand."

"Do you mean to tell me that you walked all the way from the other side of Soda Lake to Windmill Station without no water, other'n what was in them gourd?" Murphey said.

"But yes. How else? We walked all the way from our village in Sonora. Often we had no water. But never for so long as from beyond the dry lake. At the store we were able to trade for water and food. Then we came here to the dragon mountain."

He pointed a brown finger to a crude drawing of a dragon. On the belly of the dragon was the word *oro*.

"What's *oro* mean?" Charlie asked.

"It's the Spanish word for gold," Murphey said. "There's a dot in the middle of the last *o*. What's that mean, Emilio?"



"That is where you will find the gold."

"In the belly of the dragon."

"Yes."

Charlie pointed to a row of dots beneath *oro*. "These dots, they have a meaning?"

"For certain," Emilio said. "One dot means much gold. This many dots means more gold than anywhere in the world."

Charlie rubbed nervously at beads of perspiration on his upper lip.

"That's a heap of gold," Murphey said. "How'd you know to find your way into the dragon's stomach?"

"As you can see on the map, there is a conquistador on horseback thrusting a lance into the side of the dragon," Emilio said.

"Yeah. That's about the location of Windy Cave on the side of the peak. There's some carvings on a boulder beside that cave. Folks around here figured the Indians made them carvings."

"Those carvings were made by my ancestors. See, here are the markings above the wound in the dragon's side."

"Let me look at that." Murphey lifted the map. "The marks are faded. I need my specs. What do you see, Charlie?"

"The marks are small. One looks like a curving snake with its head pointed toward the wound. The other mark looks like an asterisk."

"As I recollect, them's the same as the carvings up by Windy Cave. What do they mean, Emilio?"

"The snake has a double meaning. It means there is gold in the direction it is facing. It also means there is evil in that direction. The star—what did you call it?"

"Asterisk," Charlie said.

"That means death."

Charlie handed the map to Emilio. "Why did you come all the way up here from Mexico if you knew this mark means death?"

**"The water  
began to boil and  
to smell of things  
long dead,"  
Emilio said.  
"Suddenly the  
monster spirit  
surged up and  
grasped Luis."**



"Because our families are starving. The old ones left this map and a small bag of gold nuggets for their families. We were to use a nugget only to buy food to keep from dying. Last season the rains did not come. Our corn did not grow. The people in my village ate roots and killed their burros for meat. There was only one small nugget left in the bag. My father and his brother, who are very old men, decided that Luis and I should have that nugget to use on our journey to get more gold for the village."

Murphey said, "Charlie, that must be the nugget Schroder got at Windmill Station." He turned to the Mexican. "So, what happened to Luis?"

"The monster killed him. It lurks in the depths of a lake far below this desert where we sit."

Emilio looked at Murphey. "Do you believe me?" he said.

"You bet, Emilio. Go on."

"Luis and I entered the wound of the dragon. The old story said that the wound was straight down for twenty *varas*, so we knew to bring rope. At the bottom of the rope is a chamber. From that chamber we followed passages

that went deeper into the dragon's stomach until we came to a canyon."

Charlie interrupted. "You mean a larger passage, don't you?"

"But no. It is a canyon. A canyon deeper than the tallest peak in this range of mountains."

"That'd be more'n a thousand feet," Murphey said.

"Yes. Very deep. On the floor of the canyon is a bed of black sand a hundred paces wide, *más o menos*. Much gold is in the sand. There is a stream I could jump across. It was there that we stayed—how long I don't know—to pick up nuggets and pan for gold dust."

Charlie suddenly appeared shaken. "Are you all right?" Murphey asked. "You look to be ailing. Maybe you better go sit in the shade awhile."

"I'm fine. I want to hear the rest of the story. Go ahead, Emilio."

"Luis and I left the place where we had been panning for gold. We followed the canyon until we came to a lake. It is a very big lake. I don't know how large. Our voices echoed far across the water. As we stood beside that lake, the water began to boil and to smell of things long dead. Suddenly the monster spirit surged up and grasped Luis. He screamed as he was sucked down into that dead water. I could do nothing but tremble."

"You said this here monster devoured Luis's soul. What did you mean by that?"

Emilio didn't answer immediately. Finally he said, "I wanted to run away, but I could not move because I had much fear. I trembled because I thought the monster spirit would come out of the water to take me. After a while the water stopped boiling. It became deathly calm and clear. I looked down and saw my cousin floating up from the depths. His body was shriveled and shrunken—like the skin of an orange

that has been sucked dry. It was then I knew that his soul had been taken from him by the monster. The old story said that the spirit of the underworld eats the souls of mortals."

"I'm right sorry to hear about Luis," Murphey said. He hunched forward slightly, his eyes narrowed. "You say there's lots of gold down there?"

Emilio reached into the fiber shoulder bag and withdrew a hand heaped with gold nuggets. Some of the nuggets were as large as robins' eggs. He returned the gold to the bag. "I picked up these nuggets in only a small time when we first reached the stream. They are for the people of my village. Luis and I then filled a sack with gold before we walked along the canyon to the lake. I did not stop to pick up that sack of gold when I was finally able to flee from the monster."

The desert man shook his head. To hear Emilio tell the story was like eating a fistful of candy too quickly. It made his ears buzz with excitement. The story would have been unbelievable—except for the gold in Luis's shoulder bag and for a tale told by a professor in Maude's blind pig.

"There must be millions of dollars' worth of gold down there," he said. "You're gonna stake out a claim, aren't you?"

"Oh, no," Emilio said. "I will never go back down into the stomach of the dragon. You should not go there, either. I tell you about the monster spirit only as a warning should it come out of the wound some night."

Emilio struggled to his feet. He slipped the strap of the shoulder bag over his head. "I go now," he said. "Back to my people—my wife and two small daughters—so that they do not starve."

Murphey stood. "You're not leaving now, are you? At least stay the night and get an early start come morning."

**"The monster spirit does not always stay in the lake," Emilio said. "It followed me almost to your camp."**



"The monster spirit knows I am here. I feel it watching me. I must get far away from that dragon mountain."

"At least we can tote you to Barstow."

"To the highway, perhaps. No farther. Already I am unable to repay you for what you have done for me."

"Well, you ain't heading out of here without some vittles to get you down the road a piece. And a man don't survive long in this desert without a hat. Here, take mine." Murphey handed his battered black Stetson to Emilio.

"You will not have a hat."

"I got a cap with a carbide lamp bracket on the front that I use underground. It'll do me until I get to town."

At the highway Emilio shook hands with Murphey and Charlie and started walking south, toward Mexico. He stopped and turned back. "I think maybe you will go inside the stomach of the dragon, so I must warn you that the monster spirit does not always stay in the lake. It followed me almost to your camp."

As they bounced along the track toward camp Charlie said, "What did you think of Emilio's story?"

"Hard to say. Them country folks down in Mexico are the nic-

est people in the world. They'll give you their last plate of beans when they're starving. But some of them are mighty superstitious. I've heard them tell some wild stories, but never heard one to top Emilio's. That thing coming up outta the lake to grab Luis does raise the hair on the back of your neck."

The flivver rattled over rocks in the road. Charlie grabbed hold of a windshield post. "Hasn't anyone ever explored Windy Cave?"

"I've gone down in Windy Cave a few hundred feet. I didn't go as far as the canyon. Never found nothing. Limestone around here don't carry minerals. Most prospecting is done in granite formations."

"You're going into that cavern after the gold, aren't you, Murphey?" Charlie said. They were approaching Dragon Peak.

Murphey took his eyes off the wagon track just long enough to glance at the younger man sitting beside him. "Are you game for it, young feller?"

Charlie didn't answer. He gazed up at the fluted cliffs along the ridge of Dragon Peak.

"There it is, Charlie. The entrance to Windy Cave." Murphey wiggled out of the straps of a canvas backpack and let the pack fall to the ground.

"This looks like a manhole in a street," Charlie said. He peered into the hole. "About the same size. I can't see anything down there. Are you sure this is the entrance the Mexicans used?"

"Yep. Here's their rope coming outta the cave." Murphey pointed to a boulder above the dark hole where the rope was tied.

"How far down to the first chamber?"

"As I recollect, this chimney is about fifty feet deep. There's a ledge partway down where we can rest, so it ain't exactly like a straight drop."



"That rope—are you certain it's strong enough?"

"Mexican maguery? You can bust a steer with that rope if you're careful. It'll hold you, me, and half a dozen more."

For the first time since starting the climb up the peak he studied the younger man. "You're looking a little green around the gills. You feeling all right? According to Emilio, it's gonna be a long haul down to the canyon, and a tougher climb coming back up. I don't mean to cut you outta the gold, Charlie, and I won't. But if you're not feeling up to it, I can find one of my old sidekicks to go with me."

Charlie shook his head. "I want to go. It's just that the climb up the mountainside left me a little breathless."

The prospector studied the younger man. Should he call off this trip underground? Charlie was having trouble getting his wind back after the climb. What might happen inside the mountain when the going got tough? And it wasn't just that Charlie was winded—something else was bothering him.

"Look, Charlie. I think we better put this off until you're feeling better. Maybe tomorrow."

The young man turned to face the prospector. "No, Murphey." His voice was firm. "I want to go down into that cavern. I have to go."

"Have to go? There ain't nobody here making you."

"I have to go underground for me, Murphey. For me! Do you understand?"

Murphey was surprised.

Charlie avoided looking at the prospector. Instead, he looked out over the desert while he spoke, past the flats, at the foot of the peak of bleak ranges of granite on the horizon.

"You don't understand. How could you? Even I don't understand. I lied to you about my chest

"I nearly went mad when I was buried in that cave," Charlie said. "Maybe I'm still crazy. I know I was a coward."



wound. I've been telling the same lie over and over, until I began to believe it myself. When I was in the trenches, I wasn't shot. I was in a dugout when a shell hit and the roof caved in on top of me. A timber fell across my back and broke several ribs."

"Shoot, I don't see much difference in getting shot with a bullet or getting wounded from an artillery shell."

"There's more. After the roof caved in I was trapped. The timbers pinned me down. I was buried under sandbags and mud, with just a small space around my face so I could breathe." He shuddered. "It was like being trapped alive in a coffin. I could barely move."

The prospector understood men. This was not a time to interrupt.

Charlie continued. "The day I was wounded I was in a dugout with my pants down around my ankles when a runner arrived with the message that we were to charge the enemy trenches at three o'clock. I had an upset stomach. I went outside and told my men, then returned to the dugout."

"At three o'clock whistles started blowing. I heard them clearly, but I couldn't move. I huddled in the corner of the dugout while the men I was supposed to lead went over the top. I was a

coward." He clenched his teeth as the words hissed out. "A damned coward! Then the shell hit the dugout."

"Your buddies must've dug you out right away."

Charlie slowly moved his head from side to side. "No, they didn't."

"How long were you trapped?"

"Two days."

"Two days? My gosh. Why so long?"

"Our side took the Germans' trenches. The one where I was buried was now behind the lines. When I turned up missing, everyone assumed that I'd been killed in no-man's land. It wasn't until after the bodies had been collected and identified that they came looking for me. That was two days later—two days of fear that I would be trapped forever."

He faced the prospector. "I nearly went mad while I was buried in that grave. Maybe I did go mad. I've often wondered about that. Maybe I'm still crazy. I wonder about that, too. I do know that I was a coward—no doubt about that. All the years since coming back from the war I've looked for ways to test myself to see if I still have a streak of yellow down my backbone. It wasn't until Emilio was talking about going deep into a cavern that I realized I'd been avoiding tight places all this time. I can't tolerate being in an elevator, or even a small room. Perhaps that's one of the reasons I came to the desert. It's so open. I must go down into this cavern today, Murphey. Down where I'll be in tight places, where I might become trapped again. That's the only way I can find out if I'm a man or a coward."

"What'd your wife say about all this?"

"I never told her. I didn't know how."

Murphey leaned over to test the knot on the maguery rope where it was tied around the boulder. The

Mexicans had used a hitching tie—the same one he had used as a teenager to secure his saddle horse to racks in front of cowtown saloons.

"Let's get started," he said.

Murphey leaned against a wall of the small railroad station in Las Vegas, watching a California-bound Union Pacific passenger train rumble toward him. Smoke belched out of the short stack on top of the black steam engine. A bell clanged. Steam hissed. Steel brake shoes screeched. The train slowed.

The cinder-paved station yard was empty except for two other men. A telegraph operator waited near the tracks, a yellow piece of paper clutched in one hand—probably telegraphed orders for the engineer. A gaunt hobo hurried away from a freight train that had been sidetracked for the highballing passenger train. The man carried a blanket roll under one arm. Another poor galoot trying to make it through tough times. Probably didn't have a nickel in his pocket for a cup of coffee. What was the latest song playing on the radio in that downtown greasy spoon? "Happy Days Are Here Again." That might be so for the rich. Sure wasn't happy days for the working man. It'd be nice to trade places with that hobo, though. Let that feller meet the woman arriving on the train.

As soon as he got shut of the woman he'd hightail it out to Dragon Peak while there was still plenty of daylight. He wasn't about to be caught out there after dark. He'd go to his camp first, throw all his camping outfit and prospecting tools in the flivver, then go up to Windy Cave and dynamite the cavern entrance so nothing inside could get out—like popping a cork in a bottle. He remembered seeing cracks in the limestone beside the ledge a dozen feet below the cavern entrance

Whatever happened in the darkness beneath Dragon Peak, Murphey had experienced a degree of fear that he'd never before known.



where he could cram sticks of dynamite without having to use a single-jack hammer and drill. He sure didn't want to make any noise while he was inside the cavern. Then he'd vamoose outta the Mojave and forget about all that gold. He'd always boasted that he wasn't afraid of anything with hide or hair. But that thing that had come moaning up outta the lake after him and Charlie wasn't of hide or hair.

With a final jolt the train clamped to a stop. A conductor swung down to place a stool on the ground below a set of car steps, and a young woman appeared in the doorway. The conductor reached up to help her down the steps. She wore a stylishly tailored dress with short sleeves and a hem that came just below her knees. With one hand she held a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head. She looked like an easterner. She smiled at the conductor and Murphey saw her mouth move as she said something to the man. The trainman touched the brim of his flat-topped cap, picked up the stool, and climbed back inside the railroad car. The woman looked about expectantly.

The desert man eased away from the station wall. The woman was looking in the opposite direction as Murphey walked up to her. "Mrs. Martin?" he said.

The woman swung to face him. Murphey touched the front brim of his new black Stetson with two fingers. "Mrs. Martin?" he repeated.

The woman smiled. "You must be Mr. Murphey." She held out a white-gloved hand. Murphey engulfed the hand gently and briefly in a big paw.

"That's right. Can I get your baggage?"

"Thank you." She opened a small cloth bag that dangled from one wrist, pulled out two claim tickets, and handed them to Murphey. "There are two suitcases," she said.

"You might want to step into the station to get outta this sun while I get your baggage. My truck's out front."

"No. I'll go with you."

They walked forward to the baggage car, where Murphey exchanged the tickets for two expensive-looking leather suitcases, then out past the station to the flivver. With his hat Murphey batted at the dust on her side of the seat. Horsehair protruded through tears in the leather upholstery.

"I'm sorry about the dust," he said. "This ain't exactly a Cadillac."

"That's no problem. A little dust won't hurt me." She frowned, however, and looked down at her clean dress before stepping up on the running board and settling onto the seat.

Murphey reached to shift the spark and accelerator levers on the steering column, walked around to the front of the truck, and gave the crank a spin. The four-cylinder engine started chuckling. Murphey hurried back and adjusted the spark lever until the engine noise evened out, then



stepped over the side of the truck into his seat.

Away from the railroad station he turned onto a rutted dirt road that led toward the town's hospital. The woman spoke, raising her voice above the noise of the rattling flivver: "How is Charles? There was so much static on the telephone line when you called that I could barely understand what you were saying."

Murphey's knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel tighter. He stared straight ahead. "He ain't too good," he said.

"It's his lungs?"

"Yeah."

"What did you say on the telephone about Charles being in a cave? It didn't make sense that he would do that."

Murphey took a deep breath and told her about the journey down to the underground river and lake. He didn't tell her the whole story—she wouldn't believe it.

When he stopped talking the woman said, "You knew he had tuberculosis, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Charles told me he was a lunger."

"Yet you took him into a damp cave?"

"I guess I wasn't thinking straight. Gold does that to a man."

Murphey pulled off the street and parked in front of the squat hospital building. The woman waited for him to come around and open her door. Together they walked into a hallway where fans blew air across cakes of ice. The temperature was slightly cooler than outside.

The room they entered was spartan: white bed, white table, white walls and curtains. A varnished brown oak dining room chair sat beside the bed.

Murphey hung back while the woman moved to the bed where Charlie slept, his breathing labored. Bluish circles below his

**With his knife,  
Murphey sliced  
open four sticks  
of dynamite and  
crammed them  
into a crack in  
the cavern wall.  
His hands shook.**



eyes accentuated the pallor of his face.

The woman laid a hand gently on the sleeping man's shoulder. "Charles," she said softly.

Charlie opened his eyes. For a moment he appeared confused. Finally he smiled. "Marilyn." His voice wheezed from deep in his throat. "When did you get here?"

"Just now. How are you, Charles?"

"The doctor said . . ." He tried to take a breath, coughed. "He said I passed the crisis period. I'm glad you came."

"Of course I'd come." She leaned down and kissed Charlie. He reached up and grasped her arms, then pulled her closer and buried his face in her bosom. His shoulders shook.

Murphey started to tiptoe out of the room. Charlie looked up with tear-filled eyes. "Murphey."

"Yeah, Charlie?"

"Are you all right?"

"You bet. But only because you saved my life."

"Did I? I don't know what's real since I woke up here. It seems like we were living a nightmare."

"It was a nightmare, that's for dead certain. I'd still be there if you hadn't come back when that thing had hold of my legs and was trying to pull me off the cliff. Fig-

gered I was a goner, right then and there."

Charlie closed his eyes. His chin quivered. "I wasn't a coward?" he asked.

"You? There ain't no way you're a coward. I doubt I would've come back for you, things being the way they was."

Charlie opened his eyes. "You would have come back for me," he whispered.

The woman stabbed a look at Murphey. She wanted to be alone with her husband. "I'll be waiting outside," he said. He stepped into the hall.

Murphey walked to the outside door, looked out through a pane of dirty glass.

Whatever had happened in the darkness beneath Dragon Peak, Murphey knew he had experienced a degree of fear that he'd never before known—a fear he couldn't shake from his bones.

After the "thing" had exploded out of the boiling lake, something wet had grabbed his legs as he and Charlie were clawing their way desperately up the cliffs of the canyon. Murphey had been pulled backwards, toward the golden nuggets on the canyon floor and the boiling lake that smelled of burning sulfur. He had grabbed for a handhold—any handhold—but none protruded from the slick granite walls.

Then Charlie was beside him, shouting. Screaming at a monster that perhaps didn't exist, except in their minds. The monster—whatever it was—released its hold on Murphey's leg.

Several minutes passed before he heard a door close, and footsteps sound on the hallway floor. Mrs. Martin stopped beside him. He didn't dare look at her.

"He's still very sick," she said.

"I figured so. I'm sorry, Mrs. Martin." In the distance a dust devil snaked across the desert.

"He admired you, you know. He mentioned you in a letter he wrote

to me. He said you are one of the few real men he ever met. A little rough, but tough and self-reliant. Tell me, how in the world did he happen to take up with you?"

"An accident, I reckon."

"An accident? Strange." The tone of her voice softened. "I must admit that Charles has a look about him that I haven't seen since he came back from the war. More like the old Charles I knew when we were first married. Perhaps I should thank you for that."

"It wasn't none of my doings. Charlie done it all hisself."

They stood silently, side by side, gazing out onto the desert. She had grit, this woman. She'd take care of Charlie. He was safe now.

"Mrs. Martin, I gotta be moving on while there's still daylight. Real nice meeting you. I can see why Charlie married you."

"You're going to your place in the desert?"

"Not in the Mojave, no how. I'm thinking of going back to Mexico."

"You'll say good-bye to Charles before you leave?"

"I'll let you tell him. This old desert rat knows when it's time to get out from underfoot."

Murphey honked his big nose on a red bandanna as he approached the flivver. Schroder's touring car kicked up dust as it wheeled into the parking area from the street.

"Hey, Murphey, old pal. I just happened to be driving by when I saw you coming out of the hospital. How's that pilgrim doing?"

"What makes you think he's in the hospital?"

"I saw you packing him down the side of Dragon Peak from Windy Cave three days ago."

"I didn't see you."

"Do you think I'd leave my car out there anyone could see it?"

"You still nosing around out there after the Mexicans?"

"Not anymore. Not since I came across these nuggets." He dumped several gold nuggets from a buck-

skin pouch into the palm of his hand for the desert man to see.

"Where'd you get them?"

Schroder shrugged. "Funny thing. I found them beside the highway." The white teeth flashed. He poured the nuggets back into the pouch, pulled the drawstring tight. "I found this out there with the nuggets." He picked Murphey's old black Stetson from beside him on the seat, flicked at some dust on the brim, and handed the hat to the prospector. "I recognized it. I thought I'd bring it back to you."

Murphey gritted his teeth. "You done what I think you done?"

"Why Murphey, old pal, it's like I said. I just happened to find these things beside the highway. No harm in that, is there? Now I'm looking for a partner to help carry all that gold out of Windy Cave. What do you say, Murphey? Partners?"

That familiar red curtain at the back of Murphey's eyeballs began to descend. "Stay away from Windy Cave," he said through clenched teeth. "I'm warning you."

"Too late for that. I've already staked out a claim that covers Windy Cave. You're the one who has to stay out of the cave . . . unless we're partners." The grin widened.

The stern voice of Murphey's mother sounded an alarm in his brain as it always did just before he cocked his right arm. "Put your hand on the Bible, Paul, and promise me you'll never start any more fistfights."

"Ah, Ma. I promise I won't start no more fistfights."

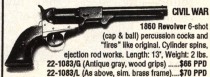
"You watch your grammar, young man. Say, I won't start any more fistfights."

In that moment Schroder slipped the clutch, backed into the street, and was gone.

Murphey climbed out of the flivver, reached for his knapsack,

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and hiked up the side of Dragon Peak to Windy Cave. He knelt beside the opening, turned his head to one side, and listened for a sound—any sound—that might come from the depths of the cavern.

Silence.

Murphey wanted to flee. He wanted to run down the side of the peak to the flivver and race away from whatever it was that lurked in the dark of the cavern, or the dark of his mind.

The maguey rope was still in place. He took hold of the rope and backed into the vertical entrance to the cavern. He dropped a few feet down the shaft . . . stopped and listened . . . another few more feet . . . stopped and listened again. The clammy, cold darkness of the cavern enveloped him like

a shroud. His foot hit the ledge. He turned loose of the rope.

With his Barlow knife Murphey quickly sliced open four brown sticks of dynamite and crammed the waxy mixture of nitroglycerin and sawdust into a crack in the cavern wall. His hands shook as he slipped a brass detonator cap over the end of two feet of fuse, crimped the cap to the fuse with his teeth, and pushed the capped fuse into the dynamite. He split the protruding end of the fuse and reached up to his hatband for a match.

Was that a sound from the blackness below? A distant wail?

It was time to get out of that cavern chimney. Hurry! Climb up to the circle of sunlight!

He flicked the match head with his thumbnail. Held the flame to

the split end of the fuse. It caught and began to hiss like a snake. Murphey started up the rope, hand over hand. Two feet of fuse meant two minutes until the dynamite exploded. Barely enough time to climb out of the cavern before a blast collapsed the entrance.

Murphey's foot slipped on the cavern wall. He swung out to the center of the chimney, then back to the wall, time lost. He heard the hiss of the fuse, and reached one hand above the other to haul himself up to daylight. He lifted a leg over the lip of the cavern entrance.

A voice came from the depths of the cavern. Words echoed up the chimney. Murphey paused in his flight to listen.

"Hey, Murphey. Is that you up there, old pal?"

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# THE TRAIN TO VICTORIA

BY C. F. ECKHARDT

In the summer of 1866 east Texas was plumb out of horses. The state and the Confederacy had just about stripped the area of anything that had four legs, would carry a saddle, and wouldn't fall over within forty rods of home. "Requisitionin'," they called it.

Out west of the Colorado, where I lived—and where I did my part in a gray jacket, fightin' Comanches, 'Paches, an' Mexican bandits from '61 to '65—we had horses comin' out our ears. They weren't "good" horses—they didn't have



bloodlines goin' back to the one Adam rode, or nothin'—but by God they had four legs, you could get a saddle on 'em if you worked at it, an' they wouldn't drop dead on you a mile down the lane from the house. 'Course, they were green-broke—that means we got a saddle on the critter, got somebody on top of him, an' rode him till he quit pitchin' at least twice—but they were *horses*, an' east Texas folks who'd been walkin' since '62 or thereabouts were mighty glad to get 'em.

Me an' my brother Al took sixty head east in strings of thirty in the spring of '66, an' we didn't get no farther than Marlin 'fore we'd sold ever' one—an' for hard money, too. Twenty dollars a head, an' no paper. Gold or silver or find a different fool.

Al, he took his six hundred dollars and headed straight home, on account of Becky Rayburn. He was sweet on her an' so was Nate Lovell. Al figured Nate was usin' the whole time we was gone to

Rebecca Rayburn wasn't to home when he called anymore.

Me, I didn't have no gal waitin' on me, and I figured to see a little something 'fore I went home. I wanted to go to a big town—San Antone was about as big as I'd ever seen—see the Gulf of Mexico, ride on a boat and a railroad train, buy me some new clothes and a repeatin' rifle. When Al headed home, I headed for Galveston.

Funny how things happen to a feller. I just wanted to ride me a railroad train on account of I hadn't never rid one afore. Come down to it, that ride plumb messed up ever'thing I ever reckoned my life'd be like. Not that it done it in a bad way, mind you.

Galveston was a mighty good place to do ever'thing I wanted to do an' a lot more, an' sometimes it was mighty difficult to stay away from the more. I'd seen pretty women afore, an' even a few painted up, but I never seen so many pretty, painted up women in such skimpy clothes in my

I did get some clothes, includin' a right fine-lookin' Sunday-go-to-meetin' suit of dark gray wool, with a fancy vest an' a couple of boilin' shirts, an' a beaver hat with a wide brim. Then I went a-huntin' some shooters, an' it wasn't long 'fore I found what I was lookin' for. I bought two brand new Navies an' all the truck that went with 'em—powder flask, mold, caps, ca'tridge paper an' a former. I got two pounds of pistol powder and five of lead, and five hundred caps. Powder an' lead an' caps were tolerable cheap in Galveston—them pistols cost me twenty-six dollars apiece, but the powder, caps, an' lead didn't come to but two dollars.

That feller had somethin' I'd heard about but never seen. 'Course, I knew that the Spencer an' the Henry an' such used copper ca'tridges with some way the cap was inside, so you could make 'em repeat, but I'd just heard about a pistol that done the same. He had two of 'em—Smith & Wesson #2s, in .32 caliber, usin' copper ca'tridges, just like a repeatin' rifle, but smaller. I looked them little fellers over—one had a long barrel but t'other'n was short—an' asked him what he'd take for the short barrel one. He looked at my plunder—them two Colts an' all that went with them, an' a Henry an' five hundred ca'tridges—an' said, "Gimme five dollars an' I'll throw in a hundred ca'tridges. You the first feller with hard money to come in here in a while."

Well, I done it. The bill come to might near a hundred of my hard dollars, but I bought it all. All I had at home was an old cap lock rifle from before the war, my daddy's old Colt five-shooter—the first one, where the trigger folds up under it—an' a pair of double-barrel horse pistols with bores you could stick your big toe down, which is what I packed on my saddle when we took them horses

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spark Becky, an' I swear he never talked about nothin' else. But him an' me an' damn near ever'body else knowed Ben Rayburn wasn't gonna let his daughter marry just anybody. I kept tellin' him that when he showed up home with six hundred dollars in hard money, Nate Lovell would find that Miss

life—an' ever' one of 'em, might near, ready to get into a bed with me for two dollars of my hard money. Shoot, I could get the same thing for two dollars paper or four bits hard money in San Antone. My daddy didn't raise no fools. I put my money back in my pocket.

east. I figured I'd pack my new Navies an' the horse pistols in my grip, maybe get a little practice with my new Henry off the back of the boat out at sea, an' jus' poke that little Smith & Wesson in my pants an' keep quiet about it, jus' in case I come up to needin' a pistol in a hurry.

I caught a boat out of Galveston for Indianola—what they call a coaster—an' I got my fill of ever wantin' to run away to sea. We sailed in the early mornin'—somethin' to do with the tide—an' the water was brown when we sailed out. By an' by it turned green, an' most of the folks on the boat turned green with it. Then it commenced to turnin' blue in stretches an' back to green, an' finally it turned a real deep blue. That's when we turned south.

The cap'n was a Yankee feller an' he said we was sailin' light on cargo, which I reckoned was good, on account of when your horse or your wagon's light you make better time. Come to find out, when a ship's light, it rolls. I didn't get sick an' lose my dinner like some folks, but I wasn't feelin' none too pert, an' when Indianola come up off the front of the ship—what they called the bow—I was plumb glad to see land.

There was a railroad train that run from Lavaca City, which was about fifteen miles from Indianola, to Victoria. It run about thirty miles. It was the only railroad train runnin' in that part of Texas, an' I wanted to ride it.

When I got to Lavaca City I asked somebody whereat a feller went to catch the train, an' he said, "Down to the dee-poe." I didn't know a dee-poe from a corn row, but after a while I found it. It was the building where the train stopped. There was a sign on it that said, "Victoria & Gulf Railroad, Lavaca City Depot." After a little I figured out that you say depot like "dee-poe."

There was a power of folks standin' at the depot, maybe

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twenty or thirty. All sorts of folks, from the looks of 'em—including some ladies—but none of 'em looked like local folks. I went up to a feller in a black suit who kept lookin' at a big gold watch an' chain on his vest.

"Whereat do I pay to ride the railroad train?" says I.

"Right here—supposedly," says he. "That is, if we can find the ticket agent to sell us tickets and tell us when the train will come get us." He was a Yankee—he had that funny talk they have.

"Ain't he here?" I says.

"This is the second morning I've been here, and I've yet to make his acquaintance," the Yankee says. "This is a very poor way to run a railroad."

"Don't reckon I'd know 'bout that," I says. "This here's the first railroad I ever seen."

"Are you game?" says he, real sudden-like.

"Fer doin' what?"

"Finding this station agent, if that's what he is, and getting something in the way of tickets and information out of him. I'm tired of waiting on his nibs to show up for work, and I'm quite sure most of the rest of the people at the station are, as well."

"I reckon," says I, an' the next thing I knew this Yankee had lit out like somebody's set fire to his

coattails. I never seen a feller move so fast just walkin' afore.

"By the way," he says sorta back over his shoulder, "I'm Captain Micah Starnes. Who are you?"

"Harry Cooper," I says.

By this time I'd caught up with him. For a little feller—I don't reckon he stood but about five eight—he could sure make them short legs move. "Were you with Hood?" he asks.

"Frontier regiment," I says. "Fightin' Comanches."

"Hood's was a fine bunch," says he. "Gave us many a sleepless night. I was an engineer—with the Army of the Potomac, under Grant. Didn't see much actual fighting, myself. I had," he kinder paused a second, "other duties."

"Whereat we figure to look for this agent feller?" I asks.

"Saloons—where else? There are only five of them in town. I'm teetotal myself, but it always pays to know where the saloons are and how many there are. Especially when you're looking for someone."

We found him in the first one, which was called the Howlin' Dog. He was passed out drunk at a back table.

"You take his feet," says Cap'n Starnes, "and I'll take his arms."

"Where we headed with him?"

"Horse trough. Best quick treatment for a drunk known."

I don't know whether it was the best one or not, but it sure worked. We dumped Mr. Ticket Man in the horse trough an' he come out on the fight. The first feller he seen was the cap'n, an' he taken a swing at him. That little feller blocked it with his arm as neat as I ever seen, an' then he popped Mr. Ticket Man right square on his nose twice, so fast it sounded like a pistol.

Mr. Ticket Man was a pretty good size feller—bigger'n me, an' I stand six one—but he didn't want no more of that. He reached under his coat an' come out with a Bowie, an' when he did I hauled out my little Smith & Wesson an' laid the business end right under his ear. "Mister," says I, "I'd take it real unkind

"'Twouldn't do you no good to buy a ticket," says Mr. Ticket Man. "Ain't been a train in four days."

"And why not?" says the cap'n.

"Either she's broke down twixt here an' there or the engineer's drunk in Victoria," he says. "No tellin' which."

"Have you tried to find out?" says the cap'n.

"Nope," says the ticket man. "Train'll get here when it gets here. Guv'ment pays me all the same."

"I take it you were in the war," the cap'n says.

"Shore was. I'uz a lieutenant in the Kansas Militia, under General Lane."

"A pack of cutthroats at least as vicious as Quantrill's, if not more so," says the cap'n, which sur-

"Whut says so?" says the ticket man.

The cap'n sorta grinned. He had a real mean grin when he wanted to—never got nowhere near his eyes. "At the moment, that pistol under your ear and Mr. Cooper's trigger finger, which is no doubt beginning to itch or cramp by now. That's all the authority I really need at the moment."

I reckon Ames, that bein' the ticket man's name, saw the point in that, on account of we all walked down to the depot—Ames wasn't real steady, but he got there—an' the cap'n told him to give up the key to the place.

"Ain't gonna do it," says Ames.

"Mr. Cooper," says the cap'n, "do you still have the device which so markedly changed Mr. Ames's behavior a short while ago?"

"Reckon," I says.

"Are you reckoned a good shot?"

"Yes, sir," I says.

"Excellent. From where you are standing, do you suppose you could shoot the lobe off Mr. Ames's left ear?"

"Well, sir," I says, "I ain't right sure. Like I said, this here's a brand new pistol. 'Sides the trigger, I don't know how she pulls 'er shot. I might have the sight on his ear an' plug him square betwixt his eyes."

"If Mr. Ames has not given me the key in five seconds, do have a try," he says. "If your shot is off to the right, we can take the key off his body."

I wouldn't figure it took Ames more 'n two seconds to come up with that key. "Somebody's gonna be in big trouble over this," he says.

The cap'n grins again—that real tight grin—an' he says, "Mr. Ames, it is entirely possible that you have never spoken truer words in your life." Then he went in an' commenced to tappin' that telegraph key, an' in a minute it went to tappin' back. He writ

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if you was to try to use that 'air sticker. I ain't had this here gun long an' I ain't never let 'er off, so I don't know whether the trigger's light or heavy. You do anything but drop that knife, I'm gonna find out."

He dropped the knife. The cap'n says, "I take it you are William Ames, the Lavaca City ticket agent and stationmaster for the Victoria & Gulf Railroad?"

"Who wants to know?" says Mr. Ticket Man, an' I nudged him a mite with the business end of the pistol. "I'm him," he says.

"There are twenty-eight people at the terminal here, all wanting to buy a ticket to ride to Victoria. Some of them have been waiting three days. We'd like to buy tickets, and we'd like to know when the train is coming in."

prised me. I'd never heard a Yankee badmouth another Yankee afore. "No doubt you got this position through Lane's influence. It would not surprise me if you did not keep it long."

"I'll keep it," says the ticket man. "Who they gonna put in—some Reb?"

"That is not entirely impossible," says the cap'n. "You do have a telegraph key at the station, do you not?"

"Yep," says the ticket man.

"Then we shall go there and use that key for the purpose for which Mr. Morse designed it."

"That key's Yew Ess gov'ment property. Can't let nobody use it less'n they're official."

"I am sufficiently official for that purpose," says the cap'n.



something on a paper while it tapped, an' then he commenced to tappin' again, an' after a while it tapped back some more. Then the cap'n come back out.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he says, "God willing and weather permitting, a locomotive and four coaches will arrive in Lavaca City no later than nine o'clock this night. It is scheduled to depart for Victoria at nine tomorrow morning. Until then, there is nothing more to be done here except purchase our tickets. Mr. Ames being here to take our money at last, we may do that."

Well, we did. Ames wasn't none too happy about it, but we all bought tickets for the train to Victoria from him. Then we headed back to wherever it was we was stayin', an' I didn't have no place to stay. "Lavaca Hotel," says the cap'n. "It has vacant rooms—twenty-five cents a night and clean sheets; thirty cents with a bath, as well. It also has a dining room and the food, while not Delmonico's, is neither poisonous nor rubbery. In fact, there is a loin steak that is a better than fair piece of meat, and it is neither raw nor burned to a crisp. I'm staying there myself, as are most of our fellow passengers."

I paid my thirty cents an' had a hot bath—first one in a while—an' changed out of my drawers an' stockin's, an' got out a fresh shirt for to wear on the railroad train. There was a right pretty girl travelin' with a feller might near old enough to be her daddy, but not quite, an' I was wonderin' if I might meet up with her. She was blonde-headed and pale as an egg-shell—she looked like she might crack if you handled her rough.

The train come in just after dark, an' we heard it a-whistlin' an' a-puffin' around down to the depot, which wasn't but a block away. Me an' Cap'n Starnes was eatin' supper when it come in, an' he looked at his watch.

"Early," he says. "All of seven minutes. They'll be turning on the wye and coupling, and then watering and wooding up for the trip tomorrow. That will take an hour, and then we might wander down to the station and have a look at the equipment."

"Pears to me you know a power 'bout railroads," I said.

"I was born in 1837 in Paterson, New Jersey," he said. "That was the year the Thomas Rogers firm built the *Sandusky*, the first

he seen me lookin' sorta questionin'." "It's the wheels. She has four big drivers, and four little ones on the pilot truck under the front. The big ones have power to them; the little ones are on a king post so they pivot and guide the locomotive around curves.

"Oh, but you've been badly used, old girl," he said, and it dawned on me that the man was talkin' to the machine. "Still, it can be put right. At least, I hope it can." He turned to me. "She's a

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locomotive to go west of the Alleghenies, and the first locomotive Rogers ever built. My father helped build the *Sandusky*—and a great many more locomotives. I grew up in the Rogers shops. When I entered college it was to study civil and mechanical engineering. I can build anything from a handcar to a trestle."

"Lordy," I says. "What you doin' here?"

"The South and the West are where the rails must go. Who knows? Perhaps I'll charter a joint-stock company and build a railroad of my own someday soon."

We finished our supper an' then we moseyed down to the depot. There was a railroad engine standin' on the tracks there, an' I don't reckon I'd ever seen a machine that big afore.

"By God," says the cap'n, "the old *Narcissa*. Outshopped by Rogers in 'forty-eight, one of the first eight-wheelers built there." Then

very special locomotive to me, but I never thought I'd see her again. You see, when she was outshopped and fired up for the first time, it was the day I turned eleven. As a special birthday treat for me, I was allowed to whistle down her steam and blow her cylinders after her first test run."

"You talk like that thing's alive," I said.

"In a way, she is. She runs on water and fire, and without them she's only dead metal. If you think about it, that's also what we humans run on, and without them we are dead flesh. She rusts, we rot. Mankind has never come closer to creating life out of metal and wood than a locomotive, and I doubt we ever will."

Well, we got down to the depot at dawn the next mornin'—the cap'n was an early riser, an' he didn't like nobody to sleep once he was up. He taken to lookin' that machine over in the daylight.

"My God," he says. "They

should have pulled this locomotive off the line a year ago and rebuilt her. Her valve gear's gone to hell—if it holds together to get us to Victoria, it will be a miracle. And if the track's no better between here and Victoria than what's in the yard, we may not get there at all. Look at those ties—at least eight feet apart. Ties should never be more than a yard, center

About the time we come in, the ticket man looks up an' sees the cap'n. "That 'air's that li'l son of a bitch what started the trouble," he hollers, an' he comes up with a bottle in his hand. I outs with my Smith & Wesson, an' 'bout the same time the cap'n, he outs with a little short-barreled two-shooter pistol with a bore you could stick your thumb down. "It's loaded

taled to right at sixty shots. That's pretty close to twelve holes for each if we was loaded with ball, an' if the cap'n had buckshot in them two-shoots, that raised the number some. That was more than them fellers wanted to argue with, an' they filed out. But if looks could kill a man, me, the cap'n, an' that Georgia feller'd been a-kickin' mesquites from underneath right there.

The Georgia feller was the one with that real pretty gal. He introduced himself to us as Col. Randolph Caldwell of the 9th Georgia Cavalry—"late of," as he put it—an' the uncle of that gal. "My niece Abigail," he says, "is a consumptive. I must get her to a high, dry climate as quickly as possible or she will die."

"Whereat you headed?" says I. "The town of Franklin," he says, "right out at the western tip of Texas. We've been told it's a fair town, large enough to fend off Indian attacks. It's nearly a mile high, and very dry."

"Your information is correct," says the cap'n. "The town is about four thousand feet above sea level and extremely dry, but you'll find it's now called El Paso."

"Don't reckon you need to go that far," I says. "Country north of San Antonio is pretty high and plumb dry, most of the time. You could stop there."

Well, we went down to the depot an' told the folks that we wouldn't be goin' 'til tomorrow—cap'n told 'em 'bout the drunk crew—an' then he said, "This train will leave promptly at nine o'clock whether the crew is here or not, so it would be well to be here."

An ol' lady up an' says, "Who's a-gonna drive it if the crew ain't here?"

"I will," says the cap'n, an' I didn't doubt it a bit.

When me an' the cap'n got down

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to center. And if there's ever been an ounce of ballast under this track, somebody carried it away years ago. This, sir," he says to me, "is a *hell* of a way to run a railroad."

Well, sir, come half past seven, when the cap'n says the crew should be down oilin' up the engine, packin' the bearin's on the journal boxes—whatever they are—an' firin' up, ain't no sign of nobody. An' I can see that little man's mad.

"Mr. Cooper," he says, "do you still have that excellent little persuasive device?"

"Reckon," I says.

"Follow me. We may have use for it," he says, an' then he lights out at that high-lope walk of his.

They was all in the Howlin' Dog. Ames the ticket man, the engineer, the fellow that fed the fire, the brakeman, and the conductor. From the looks of the bottles, they'd been there since the train come in an' got turned around.

with buckshot," he says, "and it can make quite a mess of a man's belly. You men will go to wherever you stay in this town right now, you will sleep this off, and you will not touch another drop until this train reaches Victoria. You will be at the station tomorrow morning at precisely half-past five. Do I make myself clear?"

"Tain't clear," says the engineer. "Whut's your 'thority?"

"At the moment, this pistol. I have another, and a Colt's revolver, as well. If you are not there, cold sober, and I ever see any of you again, I will use one or the other on you. Is that clear?"

"I got a pair a Navies an' a Henry stands with him," I said. 'Bout that time I heard a voice from behind me, an' if it didn't have a Georgia drawl I never heard one.

"I have a brace of LeMats, and they will be with these gentlemen, as well," it said.

I figured it up later, an' that to-

to the depot next mornin'—at half past five—there wasn't hide nor hair of them railroad folks. "It looks like I will have to handle it after all," says he. "Mr. Cooper, will you fire for me?"

"Never done it," I says.

"Ever stoke a stove?"

"Yes, sir," I says.

"Then you can fire a locomotive. All I need is a good hot fire and plenty of water, and I'll get old *Narcissa* to Victoria." Then he clumb up in the engine an' the next thing I heard was, "Those bastards! Those goddamned bastards!" An' then he started cussin' for fair. That man could cuss plumb artistic.

I clumb up behind him an' asked him what was the matter.

"The wood! Look at that wood!"

"Looks like a bunch of it to me," I says.

"Yes—a bunch of goddamned green oak! Satan himself couldn't raise a head of steam with green oak! I need pine, or something like it—something to make a hot fire. If I can get a fire going and get up steam, I can nurse us along with this garbage, but unless I can get a head of steam, we go nowhere."

"Cap'n," says I, "I'd reckon you got something to do with this here railroad that you ain't tol' me about."

"You're right, Harry," he says—an' that was the first time he ever called me by my Christian name. "I'm the newly appointed general manager of the Victoria & Gulf, and it's my job to make a working railroad of it. It's considered of strategic importance, since it connects with the Gulf. Or almost does, anyway. But unless I can get a head of steam, I'm the general manager of nothing."

"All you need is something that burns real hot so you can get up steam?" I asks.

"Probably," he says. "Once we get the grate hot, even that oak will burn."

"You got two dollars an' two bit in hard money?"

"Of course," says he. "Why?"

"If you've got two dollars an' two bits in two-bit pieces, in an hour I'll have what we need to get the steam up."

"What do you intend to do—buy a building and tear it down?"

"You had fun with your secret, I'll have some fun with mine," I says, an' he grinned. This time, his eyes got into it. He fished in his pocket, come up with a handful of change, an' give it to me.

"If you need more, come back," he says.

First off, I went out an' bought forty tow sacks. Then I found me a kid. There's always four or five of 'em hangin' around. I told him what I wanted an' what I'd pay him an' his pals to get it, an' he looked at me like I was crazy. "You'll pay *how much*?" he says.

"Five cents a full tow sack," I says, "an' that means plumb full, where you can barely squeeze 'er shut at the top. Dry, too—driest you can find. Don't pay nothin' if it's wet. An' I need lots of it. I got two dollars to spend on it, an' that means forty sacks, but I gotta have 'em in an hour."

I give him a dime an' he like to bust his britches gettin' back to tell the others I wasn't a-funnin' 'em. From then 'til about seven o'clock we had a steady stream of kids packing tow sacks. The cap'n—he'd been up to town, I reckon, lookin' for them crew fellers—opened one a them sacks an' like to dropped his watch. "Cooper," he hollers, "what the hell are you doing buying dried cow dung?"

"You said you wanted a hot fire," I says. "Cow chips makes as hot a fire as you'll see—burns like pine, only it don't smoke as much."

"If this works, you will have written a new chapter in the annals of railroading. If it doesn't, I'll have my two dollars out of your hide."

"It'll work," says I, an' commenced to lay a fire inside that firebox. Once I had a good stack of chips—stacked up with some air space between 'em so they'd catch good—I taken the red lantern hangin' in the depot, sprinkled some coal oil over the stack, an' tossed a lucifer in. They caught quick, an' it wasn't but just a

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"Mister," says the kid, "I'll get you a hundred sacks full, you want 'em."

"Jus' forty," I says. "Remember—dry as a bone."

"Wasn't ten minutes later that the first kid showed up with two tow sacks slung over his shoulder.

minute that you could feel the heat comin' out of that firebox.

"By God," says the cap'n, "that is a hot fire."

"Yes, sir," I says, an' I slings another sack in.

In a minute he says, "I've got steam. Not much yet, but the



pressure's coming up. Harry Cooper, you are a genius!"

"I ain't sure what no genius is, Cap'n," I says. "Should I grin or shoot ye?"

He checked the water an' the tender was full, so we pumped some into the boiler with the hand pump. The steam went down but in a minute it come back up, an' at nine o'clock the cap'n said we was ready. The passengers boarded. The cap'n, he asked Colonel Caldwell if he'd take charge of the coaches, an' the colonel said he would. The cap'n reached up an' pulled the whistle rope, an' we started off.

I'd be lyin' if I said it was an easy trip. I stoked that boiler with that green oak an' we had a hell of a time keepin' up steam, but we made it. We never run faster 'n a walk—the cap'n said the rails was bad in town, but worse on the line. I seen that little feller grit his teeth an' squint his eyes more 'n once, when we come to a little bridge or something. He said something about the ties bein' too far apart at least a hundred times, an' cussed the fellers that was runnin' the railroad 'fore he got there three times for ever' time he cussed the line. I said, "I reckon if we do run off the line, 'twouldn't hurt us none. I seen oxcarts run faster'n this."

"If this locomotive upsets and a steam line cracks, you won't live to regret that statement," he says. "You and I will both be scalded to death in an instant by that superheated steam." I didn't make no more jokes about not bein' hurt if we run off the line after that.

It took us nigh on eight hours to make the run from Lavaca City to Victoria—that's a mile less'n four miles ever' hour, which is about what an oxcart makes. When we got to Victoria there wasn't but one feller there—the

depot man. The cap'n told this depot feller who he was, an' the depot feller like to fell all over himself bein' nice, but it didn't hoe no corn. Next day he was out of a job, an' so was might near ever'body else who worked for the Victoria & Gulf. Then he turns to me an' says, "Mr. Cooper, would you like a job?"

"Firin' engines with cow pat-ties?" I says.

"Special assistant to the general manager—at one thousand, four hundred forty dollars a year."

"Hard money?" I says.

"That or government scrip—United States, not Confederate."

"What does a special assistant to the general manager do?" I asks.

"Among many other things, he backs up the general manager with a pistol when needed."

"Cap'n," says I, "I reckon you done hired yourself a special assistant."

Well, the cap'n, he never got to build his own railroad. When we left the Victoria & Gulf an' formed Starnes, Cooper, an' Caldwell, the li' V & G was the best run railroad in Texas. We had twenty-four miles of proper roadbedded an' ballasted tracks, an' the other six miles had good ties—an' enough of 'em—an' ballast, but no good roadbed yet. We had four locomotives—includin' the ol' *Narcissa*, which the cap'n plumb near rebuilt. We had nine coaches, twenty house cars for goods or produce, forty-three cars for haulin' livestock, eleven platforms for haulin' wood—an' contracts for mesquite an' cedar from as far away as north of San Antonio. My brother Al made enough to buy him an' Becky a fair place on wood contracts for the V & G. We run two dozen trains a week—two passengers a day Sunday, Wednesday, an' Friday, an' the rest freight—an' they run on

time. Runnin' time for a passenger train from Victoria to Lavaca City an' back was two hours an' fifty-three minutes, an' that included start, stop, turnaround, wood an' water, an' passenger an' baggage loadin' an' unloadin'.

When we left the V & G an' formed our own comp'ny—me, the cap'n, an' the colonel—we went to California for a spell to take over an' run a short line there. That's when Abigail made her choice—me. She said the cap'n was already married—to a locomotive. From there we went plumb up to the Great Lakes country to run one, an' from there down to Mississippi. By then Starnes, Cooper, an' Caldwell was known as the comp'ny you called when you had a short line in trouble. After that we went all over the Americas, from might near to the Yukon River to Bolivia, an' from the Pacific to the Tennessee mountains. Me an' Abigail, our first boy was born in Peru.

Yessir, in this here year of the Good Lord of 1921, I'll be eighty-one come fall, an' I've got a lot to look back on. There's a lot bad you can say about the railroads an' the fellers what built 'em an' run 'em, but by God there's a lot good you can say, too. There ain't a town in these here United States that's got any size to it that ain't got at least three times a week passenger service, an' you can go into might near any tank town an' buy a ticket to anywhere from way up in Canada to the Panama Canal—an' get there inside of eight days. You can mail a letter in New York an' have it in San Francisco four days later, carried on a railroad train. But, lookin' back on it, ever' now an' then I get a funny feelin'. Wouldn't it be fun to tear it plumb to pieces an' start all over? ☐

# Dragon Wells



"Steady, Lady. Steady on."

Kel McKyer leaned forward in the saddle to help the horse climb the shale slope, its hooves clattering on the Arizona stone like a woman's shoes on a hardwood floor. McKyer had won the mare, a raw-boned buckskin, three nights before, playing poker. The game had been in the better of the two saloons supported by a town called Lancelot. The man he'd

beaten, a blacksmith named Suggins, had been a poor loser, refusing even to tell McKyer the horse's name. *Lady* would do, at least until a better one came to mind.

McKyer crested a rise and dismounted to take a swallow of water from his canteen. In the army, his sergeant had always

made the troopers fill their canteens after the evening meal, and two nights ago it had

by  
**Jeremiah Healy**

**It was nearly a three-day ride without water to Dragon Wells, and two days beyond that to the next settlement.**

proven to be what the sergeant had called it, a "prudent practice." Proven itself because Suggins, losing a second straight night to McKyer under a kerosene lamp and over cheap whiskey, had called McKyer a cheat and drawn down on him. McKyer had shot the man with the 1874 Colt Peace-maker he'd won a month before during a good run of cards. He'd shot Suggins only once, and the man probably lived, so long as the doctor wasn't too drunk by the time the other men in the game, townspeople, had carried Suggins to his office. But McKyer didn't want to take that chance, so he left Lancelot on the horse he'd won, with his canteen full and the hope that the direction he'd taken, into the desert, would give even townspeople loyal to their blacksmith some pause. It was nearly a three-day ride without water from Lancelot till you reached Dragon Wells, and two days beyond that to the next settlement, just a lively station.

McKyer took off his bandanna and wet it carefully from the canteen. Then he let Lady take the bandanna between her teeth and chomp on it some. The amount of water the horse got wouldn't help her much, but McKyer wanted to be sure she remembered how good water tasted, to keep her going.

Taking back the bandanna, McKyer pressed the cloth against his own neck before tying it again under the collar of his old cavalry tunic. The heat danced off the sand and rock formations in front of him. The tunic was too hot for the day and too light for the night,

so he was comfortable in it just two hours a day. It would be some advantage to travel only by night, but then he'd lose the lead he'd gotten over whatever posse might be coming after him. Besides, two hours a day of comfort was more than most got.

McKyer swung back onto Lady, adjusting the Winchester in the scabbard under his right leg. He gave the mare her head—just a two-heeled dig in the ribs to start her going again, this time down the slope.

McKyer saw a glint, maybe a hundred yards to his left and above in a tumble of rocks that looked as if a giant's hand had just dropped them from above. He slid off Lady on the right flank, being thankful the horse didn't shy as he kept her between him and where he had seen the glint. McKyer eased the Winchester from the scabbard and walked very slowly, nudging Lady onward with his left hand on both the reins and the saddle cinch. A glint likely meant a rifle, and in this country, somebody might ambush you only for your horse or your guns. Or both.

Keeping the mare on the upside of him, McKyer reached the shelter of another clump of rocks. He tethered her to a stunted juniper and thought about it. He could circle around whoever was up there, but they were between him and the wells, so he'd have to circle wide, losing time and burning his mount in the bargain. Then, too, they'd be watching his reaction, and might move to where they

could take him, even if he did circle.

McKyer took a deep breath, let it out with the feeling inside him of coming to a decision. He checked the loads in his weapons, slackened the tether on Lady, and started moving low and slow up the slope.

The first thing McKyer heard was the whumping of wings as a stone he'd dislodged spooked one of the buzzards. Then the other four took off, irregularly and noisily, like they didn't appreciate being disturbed.

The birds hadn't been at him long.

He was wedged in a space between two rocks, like he'd fallen from a horse and had just enough left to seek some cover. The horse was nowhere in sight; it had probably taken off as soon as the death smell had gotten too high. McKyer watched for a minute before deciding to move close and study on things.

The man was on his left side, legs drawn halfway up, like a baby sleeping in a crib. A pair of spectacles lay not far from his face, one of their lenses maybe causing the glint McKyer had seen. The man was dressed half for the desert and half for town, a canvas bag on a sling around his neck, like a drummer boy carrying his instrument. Between the shoulder blades was an ugly hole—the kind a large caliber weapon would make. There was no exit wound on the front of his shirt, so there was a good chance he'd been shot from some distance.

The man had no kind of skin for the Arizona Territory. Fair under his hat and below his yellow hair, it was burned a harsh red from the sun on his hands and neck and nose. The hat had a label from a store McKyer knew he couldn't pronounce, the word *Berlin* under it. There was a bulge in the man's



breast pocket. McKyer reached in and found a letter. It was written in a woman's hand and a foreign language, he thought maybe Dutch or German, since he was pretty sure Berlin was in one of those countries. The only words he recognized were the name *Hans* at the beginning of the letter and the name *Gretel* at the end. It reminded him of a story his mother had told him when he was a child, something about two other children named Hans and Gretel—no, Hansel and Gretel—leaving a trail of bread crumbs to mark their way. McKyer couldn't remember why they did that in the story.

Putting the letter back where it had been, McKyer noticed the man's right hand was in the canvas bag. It took some effort to pull it out. There was a hole in the bag, maybe a bullet hole, that helped the rest of the canvas around it to tear some. The hand was balled into a fist. McKyer pried the fingers open, and two nuggets fell to the ground.

McKyer had seen gold only a few times, couldn't even be sure that's what he reached down for and picked up now. He hefted the nuggets in his palm. Very heavy.

Then he noticed something about fifteen feet away. It jumped out at you, once you knew what to look for.

Another nugget.

About ten feet past that, another.

McKyer forced himself to stop before he'd be exposed to fire from beyond the rocks, then backtracked to the man's body.

Now he hefted all four nuggets in his hand. "These were yours, Hans, and somebody shot you for them, but then didn't follow on. Now, why would that be?"

McKyer thought about it, but had no answers. He didn't even think about trying to bury the dead man, since that would only change which creatures got to eat

him first. One thing did become pretty clear, though.

Given the distances involved and the need for water, old Hans couldn't have come from anywhere but Dragon Wells.

Lady perked up and began to move faster, maybe reacting to the smell of water in a wind that to Kel McKyer felt only hot and dry. As they moved through a washout and uphill, though, he could see the entrance to the canyon that gave the wells their name. Two cliffs with outcroppings like spikes on their backs that seemed to square off against each other, like dragons about to fight. About two hundred yards outside the mouth of the canyon was a hummock of rock that God in His infinite wisdom had given two pools of water—pools that bubbled up fresh and pure from somewhere beneath the surface.

McKyer had crossed the dead man's trail a couple of times, finding another five nuggets. These he put with the first four in his saddlebag, although he fig-

bled quickly over to Lady as the thump of another slug kicked up a small cloud of dust just in front of the mare's forelock. McKyer climbed over his saddle and pressed himself lengthwise against Lady's back as the animal shuddered once and was still. Another round struck Lady's chest, the bullet making a sound like an ax biting into rotten wood. The horse didn't even quiver this time.

McKyer stayed pressed but watched over Lady's mane, picking up the flash from the muzzle and ducking as another round thumped the ground. He lay there as another and then another struck her body.

After ten minutes, there were no more shots, and McKyer relaxed a little. The Winchester was pinned in its scabbard under Lady's right flank. It'd take a man three hours with a pick and shovel to dig under the horse enough to free it. Not that the rifle could punch far enough to do any good against whatever the hell it was somebody was using up at the wells.

**M**cKyer pried the fingers open,  
and two nuggets fell to the  
ground.

ured there must have been more that he missed.

This time McKyer also missed the glint.

Lady screamed and arched and started to go down on her right side, the dull report of a big gun just reaching McKyer's ears as he managed to clear his boots from the stirrups and roll free. McKyer ended up on his hands and knees, the horse quivering a man's height away from him. Shaking his head to clear it, McKyer scrab-

At least, not from where McKyer was now.

He took the last of his water from the canteen, a mouthful at a time, savoring the feeling of it over his tongue and down his throat. There was no need to ration it anymore. In a few hours it would be dark, and McKyer either would have all the water he wanted or not have need of water anymore.

McKyer checked his Peacemaker and tried not to think how

much worse Lady would be smelling shortly.

They weren't very professional about it.

McKyer had waited until dark, slipping down to the washout, then using that as cover and tunnel to move around and approach the wells from ninety degrees off where they'd shot his horse. He'd come across a gila monster and a sidewinder and considered himself lucky to have seen them both in time not to have to make noise killing them. The smell of dead horse grew heavier as he moved up toward the wells, which didn't make sense, since he'd been moving away from Lady for the past hour. Three hundred feet from the rim of the wells he cocked the Peacemaker, not wanting the click to sound any closer than that. The last fifty feet was the hardest, crawling and not knowing if somebody was going to open up without warning, the way they had on him once already.

him. The man's back was to McKyer, the face looking mostly toward where McKyer had been when they'd busted Lady out from under him. The Mexican had a rolling block carbine in his hands, not anything that could have done the damage that afternoon.

Between the two pools another man sat. It was harder to see him, because he wore a blanket around his shoulders like an old woman with a shawl. His face was craggy, though, and he had one leg stretched out. There were stains on the pant leg that could have been dried blood. The man was wringing his hands, big hands, and seemed to be talking softly to something wrapped in another blanket about three feet away from him. If McKyer had to bet, he'd have said there was a body in the second blanket, about the size of a short man or a tall woman.

Maybe five feet away from the sitting man was a big rifle leaning against a rock, bore looking to be fifty caliber or better. Might be a

remembered how much warning they'd given him on Lady.

McKyer took three more deep breaths to steady himself. He shot the Mexican twice in the back, the second slug causing the man to release the carbine and spin toward McKyer before sliding down the wall into a sitting position.

As the sound from the Peacemaker rattled around the wells, the sitting man threw off the blanket and jumped up, stumbling a little on what now pretty clearly was a bad leg. The man lunged for the big rifle, even though he also wore a sidearm.

McKyer shot him once in the side and once more high on the chest as the man turned with the gun, but never got to level it. The big barrel drooped, then dug into the ground as the man sagged down behind it, finally letting loose of it.

Waiting, McKyer let his eyes go back and forth between the two men until he was pretty sure only the Mexican was still alive. His chin rested on the serape, and the man's breathing came ragged. He was staring down toward his belt, like he was counting the exit wounds blossoming and burbling on his chest.

McKyer said, "Just two of them."

The Mexican lolled his head back against the stone wall. "Is enough, I think."

There was something wet in the man's voice, like somebody wanting to cough and holding off on it.

McKyer stayed where he was.

"Why'd you shoot at me?"

"You not gonna believe it."

"Try anyway."

The Mexican sent his eyes over to the other man. "His name is Buff. Short for 'Buffalo'—what he hunt with that big gun of his. Probably why they no more of them."

"So?"

"So we come here for water, two day ago. Buff and his little

**McKyer thought about asking them to drop their weapons, but then he remembered how much warning they'd given him on Lady.**

At the rim, he took three deep breaths to take the stress out of his hands and arms. Taking off his hat, he looked over the edge of stone.

He saw a bowl-like depression, maybe a hundred feet across, two pools of water separated from each other by twenty or so feet, like a pair of sunnyside eggs. At one edge of the bowl stood a man with narrow shoulders and wide hips, Mexican from the serape and off-white, homespun clothes on

Sharps, the kind McKyer had heard the buffalo hunters used up north. He had no idea what the sitting man might have under the blanket.

For about ten seconds, McKyer thought about asking them to drop whatever weapons they had and raise their hands. He even considered briefly saying something like, "Hey," just so the Mexican would turn around and the sitting man would stand. Then he



brother Billy and me. We ride together, year almost. We get to the wells, and there this man, got a stick across his shoulders, carrying two buckets, like he coming here for water, too? Only he walking up to here from the canyon."

This time the Mexican did cough. It hurt to hear it.

"Anyways, this man on foot, he see us, drop his stick and buckets and run back to the canyon. We yell to him, but he don't stop. We can hear him yelling something, too, but to the canyon, and we cannot understand what he say. We hear his horses down there, so we figure we go down, have a visit with him."

"Then what?"

"Then the man, he gone into the canyon now, he start shooting. He don't say nothing to us, he just start."

McKyer looked to Buff's face and thought, *I can understand that.*

The Mexican coughed again. Some blood started running down a corner of his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his left hand and used his right to sit a little straighter against the stone wall. "Anyways, one of the bullets, it get Billy's horse. The horse roll, squash him like a bug, you know it?"

"Something like that happened to me recently."

The Mexican laughed, then made like it hurt. "Yeah, we do same thing to you. Anyways, Buff make me stop going down to the canyon, help him get Billy back up here. I tell him is no use, anybods can see he dead—whole top of him is broke. But we bring him up here and Buff put him in that blanket, and then Buff, he start acting crazy."

"Crazy?"

"You don't think shooting horses out here crazy?"

"He shot your horses?"

"Verdad. You can smell them."

McKyer nodded. "Why?"

**M**cKyer noticed that the man's right hand had made its way under the serape while the Mexican was talking.

"Buff, he don't want me running out on him. He want me to help him take the *vinganza* for his brother."

"So what did you do?"

"We sit here. What else you gonna do with no horses? Buff, he shoot his big gun down at the canyon. I don't know if he hit nothing. Then he say, 'Quinto, we got the water, we gonna thirst them out.' Hey, that a word in English?"

"What?"

"Thirst them out?"

"Kind of."

"I don't think it is. Anyways, last night, the man we see try to ride away. We got a moon, he crazy, too, but maybe he low on water. But then why he ride from only water for days? I don't know. Buff, he take that big gun, and he try to shoot him going away. Buff say he hit him twice. I think only one time."

McKyer thought about the bullet wound in the back of the man he found, then the hole in the canvas bag. "Buff was right."

Quinto tried to shrug and winced. "Anyways, the big gun don't bring him down, and we don't got no horses to go after him. So we start walking down to the canyon, see about his other ones."

"And the man really was calling to somebody, right?"

The Mexican smiled, a little more blood drooling down his chin. This time he didn't bother to wipe it. "Hey, you pretty smart. We figure, the man ride off by himself, the other one must be dead."

"That how Buff got shot?"

A nod. "We down maybe half-

way, all in the open, and somebody start shooting at us again. Buff get shot in the leg like that, we crawl back up here. Then Buff start praying over his brother. I don't know what I gonna do, but the water here look better than the desert, you know it?"

"I still don't get why you shot at me."

"Was not me. Was Buff. He figure, you maybe another of the ones from the canyon, you kind of heading that way more than for here. If you not, he figure you don't got a horse, maybe you come with us, three guns against one down there."

"Not great thinking."

"Like I say, Buff crazy over his brother. You think they married or something." Quinto leered. "Sometime I think maybe they are."

McKyer thought about the other things he'd been told. Part of it might be lies, but he didn't think much. It explained what had happened.

The Mexican made a gesture with his left hand. "Hey, I could like a smoke."

"Don't use it myself."

Quinto pointed with the same hand. "That's all right, I got some, bag around my neck."

McKyer noticed that he couldn't see the man's right hand, which seemed to have made its way under the serape while the Mexican was talking.

McKyer said, "Go ahead. The smoke won't bother me."

"I cannot do it. You bullet hurt my right arm. I need you for to help me."



"I don't think so."

"Come on. What can this cost you?"

"Depends on what's under the serape."

Quinto smiled, two streams of blood now running out of his mouth, like live red fangs. "I thought you was pretty smart."

The man brought his right hand down from under the serape with a derringer in it. McKyer ducked below the rim of the wells.

"Come on, I not gonna hurt you."

McKyer didn't want to waste another bullet on a dying man, but the thought of the water at the wells had been with him for two long days and a difficult night. He quartered around from where he'd been, came up over the rim, and shot the Mexican a third time.

**W**aving the flag in his right hand and carrying the bucket in his left, McKyer came over the rim again.

The water was worth the extra bullet. Cool in the night air of the desert, it almost chilled him as he drank, pushing away his thoughts of bathing in it. He washed his face and his chest some, and his feet from the boots and his hands from the powder marks on them. Then he thought about his options. He didn't see many.

A horse whinnied down in the canyon.

That settled it. He took out a pocketknife and went to work on Quinto's shirt. Then he reloaded the Peacemaker and took off the belt and holster.

"Peace!" Kel McKyer waved the white flag he'd cut from the Mexican's shirt. "No fight!"

It was two hours after first light. McKyer wanted whoever was left in the canyon to see him clearly. He also wanted to trigger the memory of how good water could taste once the sun crept higher in the sky.

McKyer took a couple of tentative steps sideways down the outside of the wells' rim toward the mouth of the canyon. "No shoot. No shoot." He pointed to his empty waist. "No gun. No shoot!"

Nothing happened, so he waved the flag some more. "Water! I bring you water!"

McKyer got to the point where the stick and buckets were. He picked up one bucket and turned his back to the canyon mouth. The next ten steps seemed to take a while, especially when he saw the bodies of the horses Buff had killed, but still nothing happened.

waving than the bucket arm was from carrying.

Then another fifty yards. Still nothing. "Water! No shoot! I bring you water!"

He was now almost at the mouth of the canyon. It was in shadows, cool deep shadows, so you couldn't make out anything in the mouth itself. "I can't see you."

McKyer took ten more steps toward the shadows before he heard, "Here, Soldier."

A woman's voice, husky with something through a thick accent.

He reached the shadows, his eyes adjusting. There was an overhang of rock with a couple of ricochet gouges on it. Some canvas was the color of Hans's bag was stretched out from the rock to a couple of tent pegs, almost like the rock was a roof and the canvas a low porch. Under the rock a rifle was pointed at him, and behind it was a woman, lying on her stomach and propped up on her elbows, watching him.

"Ma'am," said McKyer.

"Who are you?"

"Just somebody who walked into something."

She laughed, then moaned, but only a little, like she'd learned to control it. "That is very good joke."

He said, "I have water here in your bucket."

"Please, ja."

McKyer moved toward her, slowly and steadily, setting the bucket down within the length of her rifle, but making no attempt to take the weapon away from her. She cupped her trigger hand and dipped into the bucket. McKyer was now sure she didn't intend to shoot him.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"Can I sit down?"

"Yes, of course."

He squatted, then sat stretching his legs in front of him so the Peacemaker wouldn't make too much trouble for his rump. He

# BRULES

He was the last of a dying breed.

**"A GREAT  
ACHIEVEMENT."**

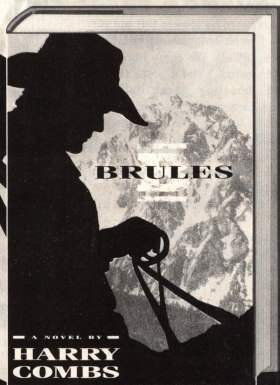
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studied the woman a little. She wore what looked like a man's shirt and a floppy hat, short blonde hair and blue eyes under the brim.

He said, "What are you doing out here?"

"My husband and me, we come to United States from Germany. He is geology study. You know what is geology, Soldier?"

"No."

"It is the study of the rocks. Their . . . formations, *ja*?"

McKyer nodded, not really understanding.

"My Hans and me, we come out here because he see in Tucson a map tell him this place is. He see this place have what he need."

"What was that?"

"The water and the gold."

McKyer kept himself from looking around for more nuggets.

The woman cupped out another handful of water, then shook her head. "My Hans, he is good man, smart man; he love to tell me stories. But he is not strong man. Not strong at all. We come here, and he is scared. I see a place that is hard but so . . . beautiful, *ja*? Hans, he see only the danger, the snakes, the . . . fear in things."

"Like those men up at the wells."

The woman looked at him. "You kill them?"

"Only because they tried to kill me."

"Hans, he see them when he go for the water. He run back scared. They come down, he shoot at them."

"My opinion, he was right to do it."

"He not try to hit them, but he hit one of the horses, I think. The man on it hurt; the other two shoot at us."

McKyer said, "Why'd your husband take off on you?"

The woman's face darkened. "How do you know this?"

"I'm sorry?"

"How do you know my husband is gone, not just in the back of the canyon here?"

McKyer thought about it. Not a woman to be lied to. "Because I found his body. The man with the big gun hit him when your husband was riding away."

The woman shut her eyes, squeezed them, but only for a moment before opening them again. "I was afraid this, *ja*."

"I don't mean to pry on things, but why'd he leave you?"

She sighed. "He was not strong. He tell me he get the help, but he tell this more for him than for me. The man with the big gun, he . . ." She reached the hand that wasn't dipping water down her body to about the stomach, came back up with a bloodied palm. "He hit me. We stop some of the blood, but not all. Hans say he go to the town Lancelot, get the help and the doctor for me, but we both know that is not possible. He make the canvas here for when the sun come to this place."

McKyer looked at the canvas. Hans had done a nice job of fixing her up, as nice as could be, under the circumstances. But he'd still left her.

The woman took some more water.

"Ma'am?"

"*Ja*?"

A horse whinnied in the canyon, maybe smelling the water in the bucket. "When I came over the rim and down the hill, why didn't you shoot me?"

"You did not walk like one of them."

"But I could have been just as bad."

"*Ja*, but you try to tell me you

are not, with the water and no gun."

McKyer felt the Peacemaker digging into his back. The next question was chancy, but he wanted to ask it. He shifted his hands behind him like he was getting more comfortable, resting his weight on the left one while moving his right one closer to the revolver. "Why don't you shoot me now?"

She stopped taking water, looking at him now with cold blue eyes, a strong woman's eyes. "I never shot a man before the one with the big gun. I never kill one, ever."

"And if you shoot me now . . ."

"I must kill you or you kill me, and I will die soon anyway from the bullet already."

McKyer just watched her.

"And there is other reason, too, Soldier."

"What's that?"

"I do not want to die alone."

"Ma'am—"

"In the canyon there are two horses, *ja*? And a tent. In the corner of the tent a bag of the gold. My Hans, he take some with him. For the help and the doctor he say, but . . . but he not take all. They are for you, Soldier—the horses and the gold. Please, just . . . stay with me."

McKyer worked on it, took in some air. "I will."

There was a silence then, a silence between them so that he could hear her breathing and he figured she could hear his.

The woman broke it by saying, "Tell me a story, Soldier."

"A story?"

"*Ja*. Something . . . anything."

Kel McKyer tried hard, but the only one he could think of was "Hansel and Gretel." ■



# THE CLOUD CRACKER

**T**he old watchman's shack was at the south end of the Delford railroad yards, a short walk from the station. Quincannon spied it as soon as he stepped down from the Stockton train. It was a ramshackle affair, listing a few degrees farther south on one side, its dusty windows blinded by squares of monk's cloth. Half a dozen citizens lounged in the shade of a row of locust trees nearby—far fewer, no doubt, than had been in attendance when the man calling himself Leonide Zacks had begun his rain-conjuring experiments five days ago.

The length of brand-new stovepipe that poked up more than a dozen feet through the shack's roof, and the streams of yellowish gas pouring from the pipe, gave the structure the look of a weirdly distorted steam boiler. An actual steam boiler was hidden from curious eyes inside—one of the items that composed Zacks's "miracle cloud-cracking machine." Among the others were a variety of chemicals, coils of copper tubing, a galvanic battery, and two large earthenware crocks. The crocks, Quincannon thought wryly, ought to have been given names: lightning mug for one, thunder mug for the other.

**by Bill Pronzini**

Alongside the shack stood a newly constructed platform, on top of which sat another odd contraption—a cross between a small-caliber cannon and a gigantic slingshot. It was in fact a kind of mortar whose alleged purpose was to assault the heavens with rockets containing a “secret chemical gas.” Stretched between the platform and the building was a silken banner festooned with ribbons that hung limp in the hot, dry air. Even from a distance Quincannon could read the crimson words emblazoned on the banner:

LEONIDE ZACKS

“THE CLOUD CRACKER”

Peerless Drought Breaking  
by the King of Pluviculturists  
Results Guaranteed

Not a trace of a cloud, cracked or otherwise, marred the smoky blue of the sky overhead. Quincannon would have been amazed if there had been. He would have been even more amazed to have smelled rain among the sharp odors of summer dust, river water, and the noxious perfume of the chemical gas. The heat here in the Central Valley was intense. Sweat slicked his forehead and trickled through the hairs in his gray-flecked freebooter's beard as he turned to peer in the opposite direction.

The town of Delford stretched out there, some five square blocks of it, its main street defined by orderly rows of gaslight standards—electricity hadn't yet come into general use here—and zinc-sheathed telegraph poles. There was not much activity, owing to the heat and the fact that this was a farm community still caught in the vise of a lengthy drought. Wheat fields surrounded it, broken only by the Southern Pacific tracks on one side and the San Joaquin River on the other.

“Mr. Quincannon.”

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had been.

He swung toward the open doors to the station. One of his clients, Aram Kasabian, had appeared there and was hurrying toward him. Fiftyish, portly, wearing muttonchop whiskers and a black chevot suit, Kasabian looked exactly like the prosperous small-town banker he was. He had been on edge in San Francisco last week; today he appeared worried to the point of twitchiness.

“Well, Mr. Kasabian. Good of you to meet me.”

“I wanted to see you right away. I must say I'm relieved that you're here.”

“Difficulties with Zacks and the Coalition?”

“Zacks and O. H. Goodland.”

O. H. Goodland was Quincannon's other Delford client. He was one of the larger wheat farmers in the area and, based on their meeting in San Francisco, something of a narrow-minded hothead. Upon learning that the other half of Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services, was a former female operative of the Pinkerton Agency's Denver office, Goodland had made dispar-

aging remarks that had earned him Quincannon's dislike. Men who saw no purpose to a woman other than cook and bed partner were horses' hindquarters.

“What's happened?” he asked the banker.

“O. H. threatened to kill Zacks last evening.”

“Did he now. For what reason?”  
“Evidently Zacks made improper advances to his daughter. Perhaps even seduced her. Molly denied the seduction, but O. H. isn't convinced.”

Quincannon felt no surprise at this turn of events. The rain-maker had a reputation as a womanizer. “When were the advances made?”

“While O. H. and I were in San Francisco. He found out yesterday afternoon, when he came upon Molly crying in her room.”

“The girl is smitten with Zacks?”

“It seems she was, before the advances.”

“Does Mrs. Zacks know about this?”

“She wasn't present when O. H. accosted her husband, but I don't see how she could fail to have heard. Zacks's assistant, Collard, was there and it was in public, outside the Valley House.”

“Accosted? Were blows struck?”

“Worse than that.” Kasabian mopped his forehead with a silk handkerchief. “O. H. was carrying his revolver and he drew the weapon when Zacks gave him no satisfaction. Tom McCool disarmed him—he's our town marshal, if you remember—and warned against any further violence. But O. H. is stubborn and a grudge-holder; there's no telling what he might do.”

“Is he back in town today?”

“He never left town.” Kasabian said. “Took a room last night at the hotel, down the hall from Zacks's room. He's in the hotel saloon this very minute.”

"Building his courage with whiskey?"

"Yes. O. H. is temperamental enough when he's sober, but under the influence he is twice as unpredictable."

This information made Quincannon scowl. He had no use for men who sought to solve their troubles with the aid of strong drink, having been such a man himself not so long ago. Toward the end of his fourteen-year stint as a U.S. Treasury operative he had accidentally shot and killed an innocent bystander during a gunfight, and this had led him into a prolonged period of drunkenness. Now, thanks in no small part to Sabina Carpenter, he was an ex-drunkard and a better flycop than he'd been a government agent.

He said, "Leave Mr. Goodland to me. Has there been any other trouble?"

"No, thank heaven."

"How is the Coalition taking Zacks's failure to bring rain?"

"There has been some grumbling, but he's a slick-tongued devil. Most of the people still have faith in him. He and Collard fired those chemical bombshells of theirs the last two nights and plan to do the same twice more. That's all it will take, he says. He promises at least one-half inch of rain by Monday morning or he'll return the advance payment."

"Which means," Quincannon said, "that unless a natural storm appears, he intends to vanish with the money by Sunday night. He won't, however. He'll be behind bars long before then."

Kasabian brightened. "He will? Miss Carpenter's wire said you were bringing good news..."

"I'll share it after we've collected Mr. Goodland."

Quincannon allowed the banker to pick up his carpetbag, lead the way through the station and north along Main. The heat lay heavy on his neck; that and

O. H. Goodland's activities had tempered his good humor somewhat. He preferred San Francisco, with its cool fogs, and clients who acted in a reasonable fashion, thus permitting him to finish the task he had been hired to do and to take proper credit for it.

He and Sabina had accomplished this job swiftly. And he intended to be back in the city no later than Friday, two days from now, with the balance of their fee and a full complement of satisfac-

**"Y**our threats are  
worthless," Ben Collard  
said. "We'll stay until  
we've fulfilled our  
contract to bring rain."

tion and goodwill. Leonide Zacks was a ruthless confidence man; bringing him to justice would be a feather in the caps of Carpenter and Quincannon. It would also save the Delford Coalition, a group of wheat farmers and merchants who had suffered hardest under the long drought, the three thousand dollars they had already paid to have rain clouds collected and cracked. But the feathers wouldn't be half as tall if Zacks was shot dead by an irate farmer.

The collecting and cracking of Leonide Zacks would be done tomorrow, legally and according to Quincannon's arrangements—a fact he meant to impress on O. H. Goodland. With the barrel of his Navy Colt, if necessary.

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The Valley House was a plain, two-story building opposite the bank. It had two entrances, one marked *Hotel* and the other *Gentlemen's Saloon*. When he followed Kasabian through the latter, Quincannon found himself in a dim, stuffy room ripe with the smell of beer and spirits. He wrinkled his nose, scanning the handful of patrons. O. H. Goodland was not among them.

Kasabian was asking the barman where Goodland had gone when loud, angry voices rose from the adjacent hotel lobby. One, a tolerable bellow, Quincannon recognized as the farmer's. He hurried through the archway separating the saloon from the lobby.

At the foot of the staircase to the upper floor, Goodland stood nose to nose with a slender young man in a cutaway coat and brocade vest. A fair-haired woman dressed in shirtwaist and Balmoral skirt was making an effort to push Goodland away. He took no notice; she might have been pushing at a rooted tree.

"... all of you out of town before noon tomorrow," the burly farmer was shouting, "or you'll suffer the consequences." The words carried a faint whiskey slur. Veins stood out on his thick neck; his face was the color of eggplant. "Hear me, Collard? By noon tomorrow!"

Ben Collard, Leonide Zacks's alleged assistant, was four inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter, but he, too, stood his ground. Flashing eyes and the hard set of his mouth belied the dandified appearance given him by a curled mustache and sleekly pomaded hair. He was neither afraid of Goodland nor intimidated by him.

"Your threats are worthless," he said. "We'll stay until we've fulfilled our contract to bring rain—"

"Rain! Not a cloud, much less a cloudburst, in five days."

"We are scientists, not wizards."



Goodland uttered a rude word that brought a gasp from the woman. Quincannon thought the gasp was theatrical; Nora Zacks had likely heard—and spoken—far worse in her twenty-eight years. She was small and soft-looking, but there was sand and steel at the core of her.

She said with spirit, "You are vulgar, sir, as well as a drunkard and a fool."

"Better a vulgar fool than a charlatan and a debaucher."

"My husband did not seduce your daughter."

"You can't deny he made advances to her."

"I can and I do. Now will you kindly allow us to proceed to our rooms?"

"Proceed to the devil, the lot of you. You'll be welcomed with open arms."

At this insult Collard's control deserted him. He launched a blow without warning—one that had a good deal of force when it landed on the farmer's chin. Goodland reeled backward and went down, but only for the time it took him to shake his head and roar out an oath; then he scrambled to his feet with fists cocked. He would have charged the smaller man if Quincannon hadn't caught both his arms from behind and pinned them at his sides.

Goodland struggled, and when he couldn't break loose he swiveled his head to see who had him in such an iron grip. "Who in the name of . . . oh, it's you, Quincannon. Let me go."

"Not until you agree to behave."

"That damned fop hit me—"

"You gave him good reason."

Goodland repeated the rude word, tried again to pull free.

"You've had too much to drink and it's an infernally hot day. A bad combination, Mr. Goodland." Quincannon applied pressure on the man's right arm until Goodland grunted with pain and subsided. "Will you behave now?"

"All right, blast you. You needn't break my arm."

Quincannon shoved him to a nearby wing chair and bent him into it, none too gently. The farmer stayed put, massaging his arm and muttering to himself.

Nora Zacks said, "You have our gratitude, Mr.—Quincannon, is it?"

He bowed. "John Quincannon, at your service."

**Q**uincannon hoisted  
O. H. Goodland out of the  
wing chair, then  
marched him past a  
wide-eyed desk clerk  
and out through the  
hotel's rear door.

She introduced herself and Collard. "I don't believe I've seen you in Delford before today."

"Mr. Quincannon is from San Francisco," Kasabian said.

"A reporter with the *Call-Bulletin*," Quincannon lied glibly, "come to witness the marvels of pluviculture firsthand. I had hoped to arrive earlier in the week, but another matter kept me in the city. I seem not to have missed either a deluge or a sprinkle, so far."

"You may well see the latter by morning," Collard said.

"Indeed? And the former?"

"By the first of next week. Given enough time, the Cloud

Cracker's miracle formula always produces the desired results."

"I look forward to meeting the great man."

"He'll want to meet you, too," Nora Zacks said. "Come to the rail yards before seven this evening and Mr. Collard or I will introduce you."

"He'll be bruising the sky again with his rockets?"

"Yes. Promptly at seven."

When she and Collard had gone upstairs, Quincannon wasted no time in hoisting O. H. Goodland out of the wing chair, then marching him past a wide-eyed desk clerk and out through the hotel's rear door. The farmer's protests were mild; heat, exertion, and alcohol had combined to make him sluggish. Kasabian tagged along behind.

In the shade of the hotel livery barn Quincannon sat him down again on a bale of hay. A water pump and trough beckoned nearby. He pumped half a dipperful and then unceremoniously doused the farmer's head with it. This roused Goodland, brought him sputtering to his feet.

"How dare you! You . . . you . . ."

"Are you sober enough now to listen to reason?"

"Mr. Quincannon has news for us, O. H.," Kasabian told him hastily. "Good news about Zacks."

"That rascal's death is the only news that would cheer me," Goodland dried his face with the sleeve of his shirt. His spurt of anger seemed to dry with it. He regarded Quincannon through eyes that were bleary but focused. "Well? What's this news of yours?"

"Andrew Beadle."

"Beadle? You mean the county sheriff?"

"I do. He'll be arriving on the noon train from Fresno tomorrow. With two deputies and a warrant for the arrest of Cora and Leo Saxe and Harry Pollard."

"Saxe? Pollard?"

"The real names of the Cloud Cracker and his cohorts."

"They're wanted criminals, then?" Kasabian asked.

"In four midwestern states."

"For what crimes?"

"The two men for confidence swindles dating back ten years, to their days as theatrical performers in Chicago."

"Theatrical performers?"

"Low comedy and specialty acts in variety beer halls. More confidence men than you might think have such backgrounds. Since becoming professional swindlers they've left a trail of victims in Illinois, Ohio, Kansas, and Nebraska. Rainmaking is their most recent dodge, begun when Zacks married Cora Johnson in Omaha two years ago. Before that they posed as mining stock speculators, purveyors of a fountain-of-youth elixir, and inventors of an electric cancer cure."

"Frauds and highbinders," Goodland said. "By God, I knew it all along."

Kasabian asked, "How on earth did you find out so much so quickly, Mr. Quincannon?"

The truthful answer was that he and Sabina had sent wires to other detective agencies across the country, providing specific information on the three rainmakers and their methods. The Pinkerton Agency's Chicago branch had been the most helpful. One of their operatives had developed a fascination with fraudulent pluvi-culturists after the debunking of the "Australian Rain Wizard," Frank Melbourne, who had achieved widespread publicity by allegedly "squeezing rain from cloudless skies as one would squeeze water from a sponge" in Ohio and Wyoming in 1891.

Melbourne had so thrived at first that other opportunists began claiming to have fantastic chemical or electrical machines and formulas of their own. Some,

such as Clayton B. Jewell and the Kansas-based Inter State Artificial Rain Company, were quasi-legitimate exploiters who utilized Melbourne's trick of consulting long-range almanac forecasts and then gambling on natural storms to follow their cloud-milking fold-derol. These men operated on a "no rain, no pay" basis. The out-and-out fleecers such as the Cloud Cracker worked only in communities where they were able to inveigle drought-weary citizens to pay half their exorbitant fees up front. If no natural storms arrived, allowing them to collect the balance, they were content to disappear with the half already paid.

Miffed as he was at O. H. Goodland, Quincannon was not inclined to tell the simple truth. He

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answered Kasabian's question by saying, "Detective work of the most advanced and perspicacious sort. Did you think you'd hired a commonplace agency when you came to us?"

"No, no, not at all..."

Quincannon turned to the farmer. "Do you still consider me a fool for having a woman as my partner?"

"I never said you were a fool. I merely said it seemed a misguided choice."

"Misguided. Bah." Quincannon fixed him with a steely eye. "I trust you won't make a misguided choice, Mr. Goodland."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Taking the law into your own hands."

"Put your mind at rest, Quincannon. Now that I know Zacks or Saxe or whatever the scoundrel's name is is headed for prison, I'll not try to avenge my daughter's honor."

"You'll return to your farm, then?"

"No, that I won't do. Not until I see him arrested with my own eyes." Goodland paused, frowning, as a thought struck him belatedly. "Why aren't Beadle and his deputies already here to do their duty? Why are they waiting until tomorrow?"

"They have more urgent business in Fresno."

Goodland said, "More urgent business," in disgusted tones. He added his favorite rude word and stalked away to the hotel.

Town marshal Tom McCool was a middle-aged, lantern-jawed man whose peacekeeping duties were mostly limited to the arrest of drunks and rowdies on Saturday night. Stolid and unimaginative, he had staunchly supported the Delford Coalition—the reason Kasabian and Goodland had bypassed him in their determination to expose the Cloud Cracker and gone to Carpenter and Quincannon instead.

Now, however, with matters coming to a head, it was necessary to enlist McCool's aid. Quincannon took Kasabian with him to the marshal's office, where he showed McCool wires from the Chicago Pinkertons and Sheriff Beadle as proof of the rainmakers' criminal backgrounds and imminent arrest. McCool offered no ar-



gument. He'd "grown some leery" of Zacks, he said, and also been worried over O. H. Goodland's lack of good sense. He promised to keep a sharp eye on the farmer and the three swindlers.

When Quincannon returned alone to the Valley House, to claim the room Kasabian had arranged for him, the desk clerk handed him a Western Union telegram that had just been delivered. It was from Fresno and it read:

ARRIVAL DELAYED UNTIL SIX PM  
TOMORROW EARLIEST STOP REGRET  
ADDITIONAL DELAY POSSIBLE STOP  
WILL NOTIFY ASAP IN THAT EVENT  
STOP

A BEADLE

"Hell and damn!" Quincannon said explosively, startling the clerk.

He read the wire again. "Regret additional delay possible" might mean Friday or even Saturday before Beadle and his deputies finally showed up in Delford. The prospect scratched at his temper like a thorn. The longer the delay, the shorter the odds that Goodland would lose his head or that Zacks would attempt to abscond with the Coalition's three thousand dollars. The only sure way to avoid either of those occurrences was for him and McCool to make a citizen's arrest of the four individuals, and he was hesitant to do that, except as a last resort. The legalities were tricky without the proper warrants.

There was another reason the delay rankled him. If he wasn't back in San Francisco by early Saturday morning, his and Sabina's plans for the weekend would have to be canceled. And important plans they were, confirmed it.

He went from the hotel to the telegraph office and sent a wire to Sabina.

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BEADLE DELAYED STOP RETURN SF  
BY SATURDAY MORNING IN JEOPARDY  
STOP IF WE MUST CANCEL EXCURSION  
WILL SUFFER GRAVE PAIN AND  
HEARTBREAK STOP

JQ

Grave pain and heartbreak, indeed, he thought as he handed the message and coins to the telegraph agent. Sabina's adamant

vince her to join him on an overnight pleasure trip, and her reluctant agreement to spend the coming weekend at Muir Woods seemed a sure sign that her defenses were crumbling at last. They would have separate rooms at their lodging house, to be sure; but if all went well, such sleeping arrangements *could* be modified. At the very least they would be together in intimate surroundings. If the excursion had to be canceled, Sabina might balk at rescheduling—and in that event, his frustrations would become intolerable.

"Hell and damn!" he exclaimed again, startling the telegrapher this time. Scowling and grumbling, he stomped out into the heat-drugged afternoon.

Quincannon was sitting in a wing chair in a corner of the hotel lobby, pretending to read a two-day-old copy of the *Stockton Record*, when Nora Zacks came downstairs. She was alone; her husband was still at the watchman's shack, and Collard had left twenty minutes earlier. He watched her walk across the lobby and outside. On her way to supper, he judged, before joining the men for the rocket assault. He consulted his Hampden pocket watch; the time was a quarter of six.

He laid the paper aside, climbed the stairs to the second floor. He had learned from the desk clerk which rooms were occupied by the Zackses and by Ben Collard; he went to the Zackses' suite first. The door was locked, of course, but this presented little difficulty for a man of Quincannon's talents. The handy little tool he carried in his pocket gave him access in less than a minute.

A thorough search of luggage and furnishings turned up no hint of the Coalition's three thousand dollars. Finding and confiscating the cash was one way of ensuring

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approached the shack he  
could hear a rumbling,  
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of hornets.

refusal to permit their relationship to go beyond the professional had been a source of misery and frustration to him for nearly two years now. She was a handsome, desirable woman, and while simple seduction had been his motive at first, this had rapidly changed to deeper and more poignant feelings. Now . . . well, he was smitten and no denying it. John Quincannon, confirmed bachelor, man of the world, hard-headed survivor of numerous misadventures, mooning and pining like a lovesick boy. Sad but true. This and the fact that his affections were unrequited made him desperate to break down Sabina's defenses.

It had taken him months to con-



that the three humbuggers remained in Delford until Sheriff Beadle's arrival. But it was a small hope, at best. Chances were the greenbacks rested in a money belt worn around the Cloud Cracker's waist.

Quincannon relocked the door and then picked the latch on the one adjacent. The money was not in Collard's room, either. But he did find one item of interest, in plain sight on the stand next to the bed: a timetable for Southern Pacific's Central Valley passenger trains, with notations written in ink at the top. The notations read: *Stockton Limited, Thursday, 6:00 P.M.*

The day and time puzzled him. *This Thursday, tomorrow?* It would seem so; it was highly unlikely that the trio intended to remain here another eight days. And yet, it also seemed unlikely that they would be planning to leave so soon, by train and in broad daylight. Their usual pattern was to dismantle the mortar under cover of darkness, load it and the rest of their rainmaking apparatus into their converted dougherty wagon—abandoning only the steam boiler, which had been obtained locally—and then vanish in the middle of the night.

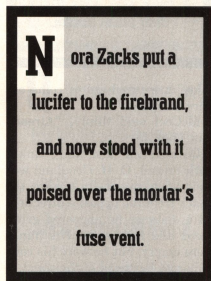
Did they propose to abandon everything this time? If so, why? And how did they expect to be able to slip away by coach with the Coalition's money?

On the other hand, if the Cloud Cracker *wasn't* fixing to leave by train tomorrow evening, why had Collard marked the timetable?

Quincannon took his supper at a sidewalk establishment called the Elite Café, which advertised "the best meal in Delford" (if this was true, the worst was probably lethal), and then walked down to the rail yards. At a quarter of seven some of the day's heat had eased, but the sky was still summer-hazed and cloudless. A small

crowd had begun to gather under the locust trees near the watchman's shack. The mood was not festive; facial expressions ranged from wary optimism to half-weary, half-sullen pessimism. It would not be long—three more days at the outside—before the more militant among the disillusioned took to cooking tar and gathering feathers.

As he approached the shack he could hear a rumbling, fluttering noise coming from within, not unlike the activity in a hive of hornets. It had an impressive sound, as befitted a miracle cloud-cracking machine, but it was in fact nothing more than the workings



of the steam boiler and galvanic battery. Noxious yellow gas still issued from the stovepipe jutting above the roof—a combination of hydrogen and oxygen produced by mingling muriatic acid, zinc, and a little hydrogen, which was then pumped skyward through the boiler. The mortar rockets contained a similar and equally worthless chemical mixture.

Quincannon was about to take up a position near the mortar platform when the shack door opened and two men emerged. One was Ben Collard; the other—heavysset, bearded, with flowing silver-black mane—would

be the infamous Leonide Zacks. Both were in shirtsleeves, sweating profusely from the heat inside, and each carried a pair of long, slender mortar shells. Nora Zacks, dressed in a fancy green and blue outfit, a squash-blossom necklace at her throat, followed after them, smiling and waving at the crowd. Even though she, too, had been in the shack, she looked cool and dry and unruffled.

Zacks and Collard brought their burdens to the platform, laid them at the foot of the slingshot mortar. Quincannon joined them at that point. He said, "Good evening, gentlemen, Mrs. Zacks," and doffed his derby to the woman. "Preparations for tonight's entertainment are nearly complete, I see."

Zacks bristled at this. He was an imposing gent up close, as most successful confidence men were; his black eyes were piercing and his manner imperious. "Entertainment? Hardly that, sir. Hardly that. Drought-breaking is serious business. And who might you be, may I ask?"

"This is Mr. Quincannon, Leonide," Nora Zacks said, "the San Francisco newspaperman I told you about."

"Ah, yes." Zacks's irritation vanished behind a mask of good fellowship. He pumped Quincannon's hand vigorously. "A pleasure, sir. I am in your debt for saving my wife and assistant from harm this afternoon."

"Not at all. Mr. Goodland was too far under the influence to have inflicted much harm on anyone."

"A ticklish situation, nevertheless," Zacks said. Then he frowned and said to Collard, "Here, Ben, what're you doing?"

The smaller man had climbed onto the platform, was picking up one of the rockets. Before he answered he began inserting the missile into the cannon's muzzle. "Loading the mortar, as you can plainly see."

"There's time enough for that."  
"I'd rather have done with it now."

Zacks said to Quincannon, sounding irritated again, "Insolent fellow. I may have to hire a new assistant. Now, if you'll excuse me, sir, there is more work to be done inside. We'll talk again, I'm sure."

"Oh, yes. We'll have much to say to each other later on."

Zacks turned away. Collard, who had finished loading the mortar, leaned over to take Nora Zacks's hand and help her onto the platform. Then he dropped down beside Quincannon, nodded curtly, and followed the larger man into the shack. The door shut firmly behind him.

Quincannon retraced his steps past the platform, where Nora Zacks was now soaking the tip of a long firebrand in kerosene. Under a locust tree, while he fed shag-cut tobacco into his pipe, he saw Aram Kasabian and Tom McCool approaching. O. H. Goodland was not with them, nor anywhere else among the gathered.

"We saw you talking to Zacks and Collard," the banker said when he and McCool reached him, "and wondered why."

"A testing of the waters, you might say."

"I'm not sure I—"

"There isn't a speck of worry in Zacks, though I detect some in Collard. He is the dominant partner and he doesn't seem ready to skip yet."

"That's good." Kasabian looked more closely at Quincannon's face and added, "Isn't it?"

"Perhaps."

"You're still concerned about O. H.?"

"Should I be?"

"Well, he was in his room a few minutes ago. I stopped by to have a word with him."

"Sober?"

"Yes, but he was pacing like a cat. It won't surprise me if he

**Q**uincannon hurled  
his weight against  
Collard, with sufficient  
force to send the door  
crashing inward. Both  
men were off balance as  
they burst inside.

takes it in his head to come out here tonight—"

McCool said thinly, "Already has. Look."

Quincannon and the banker both turned. O. H. Goodland was striding purposefully toward the shack from the opposite direction. At a distance he appeared grim-faced and hard-eyed. His hands were empty, but he wore his cowhide coat buttoned at the waist; it was impossible to tell if he was armed or not.

Quincannon said, "Hell and damn!" and called out Goodland's name. The wheat farmer took no notice. He was at the shack's door now, and he beat on it once with a closed fist. It opened immediately. And immediately he pushed his way inside.

"Oh, Lord," Kasabian moaned, "if he's come to do harm to Zacks—"

"Good citizens of Delford. Cover your ears and cast your eyes to the heavens. Your parched land will soon be drenched in a life-giving downpour—the time is close at hand!"

These words came from Nora

Zacks, atop the platform. They brought all eyes her way, momentarily froze Quincannon and the two men in place. She had put a lucifer to the firebrand, he saw, and now stood with it poised over the mortar's fuse vent.

McCool said in a tone of awe, "By Godfrey, the woman's fixin' to fire that thing all by herself—"

He broke off as Nora Zacks lit the fuse, then dropped the firebrand, raised her skirts, and scurried down off the platform in unladylike haste.

In the next instant there was a tremendous concussive *whump!* The slingshot cannon bucked, the platform shuddered, and the chemical rocket Collard had inserted hurtled skyward with an earsplitting whistle. After several hundred feet the missile arced, then burst with a flash that unleashed streams of colored smoke.

Quincannon saw this at the edge of his vision; he was moving by then, his eyes on the shack's closed door. It remained closed until he had gained the far end of the platform and then it popped open to reveal Ben Collard. Collard stepped out, yanked the door shut behind him; when he spied Quincannon he began gesticulating wildly. His handsome face was a sweat-sheened mask of distress.

"Mr. Quincannon," he shouted. "Marshall McCool. Come quickly!" On the last word he spun on his heel and lunged back to the door. By the time Quincannon rushed up behind him he had the knob in both hands and was rattling it frantically. "Locked—Goodland's locked it!"

"What the devil's happened?"

"He made threats, drew his pistol, and ordered me to leave..." Collard punished the door again. "Leonide! Are you all right?"

From inside a voice cried in muffled terror, "No, Goodland, no, don't shoot. Don't kill me!"

Quincannon tried to force Collard out of the way so he could get



his own hands on the knob, but the small man couldn't be budged. McCool and Kasabian were there now, too, pushing in behind Quincannon, with several other men at their heels.

Another cry came from within: "Please, spare my life!"

Seconds later there was the report of a gunshot.

Quincannon's reaction was immediate. He hurled his weight against Collard, with sufficient force to send the door crashing inward. Both men were off balance as they burst inside. Quincannon staggered, but righted himself just in time to avoid tripping over O. H. Goodland, who was huddled on one knee on the rough plank floor. Between Goodland and the rainmaking apparatus at the far wall, Leonide Zacks lay supine in a twisted, motionless sprawl. The front of his shirt was splotted with blood.

Goodland appeared to be hurt; his face was twisted with pain and his left hand cradled the back of his head. In his right hand, held limply, was a Colt's New Pocket Revolver. Quincannon yanked the weapon free of his grasp, without resistance from the farmer.

Kneeling beside Zacks, Collard said heavily, "He's dead. Shot through the heart."

The door under the boiler stood open to reveal the pulsing flames within. With all the windows closed and sealed, the heat in the room was stifling. Quincannon breathed shallowly through his mouth as he scanned the dim confines. The only light came from the fire and from a single coal-oil lamp, but his sharp eyes picked out the glint of something on the floor near one of the earthenware crocks. He sidestepped Goodland and the dead man, bent to scoop up the small object—and almost dropped it because it was hot to the touch.

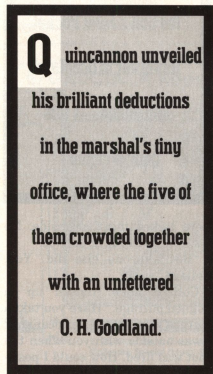
A wailing voice rose from outside: "Let me through—oh, please,

let me through!" The knot of men clogging the doorway parted to permit the entrance of Nora Zacks. When she saw her husband she flung herself down beside him, caught up one of his hands, and hugged it to her bosom, sobbing.

Quincannon glanced at the object he'd found. It was a spent cartridge shell. He drew out his handkerchief, wrapped the casing in it.

O. H. Goodland still clutched his scalp, grimacing, blinking now as if his eyes refused to focus properly. Dizziness overcame him when he tried to stand; he sank down again to one knee. "My head . . . feels cracked, like an eggshell . . ."

Collard said, "He must have fallen when he shot poor Leonide."



"Shot? I didn't shoot anyone."

McCool stepped forward, relieved Quincannon of the Colt's revolver, and peered at it. "This here's your gun, Mr. Goodland."

"Tell you, I didn't shoot anyone."

"He's guilty as sin," Collard said. "There was no one else here—no one else could have done

it. You see that, don't you, Marshal?"

"I see it," McCool agreed grimly. "Mr. Goodland, I got no choice but to arrest you for the crime of murder."

Quincannon did not accompany the marshal and his prisoner to the jailhouse. Nor did he follow Collard and a still-sobbing Nora Zacks to the hotel. Instead he remained at the shack, waiting outside until everyone else had gone, then shutting himself inside.

The first thing he did was to examine the door and its sliding bolt. Then he searched among the jars of chemicals, spare rockets, and other items that littered the floor around the boiler and crocks; searched every nook and cranny until he satisfied himself that there was nothing else to be found, including the Coalition's three thousand dollars. The money hadn't been on Zacks's person, either; he had given the body a quick frisk before the town's undertaker had arrived to claim it.

From the rail yards he went to the Western Union office, where he sent a night wire to the Pinkerton agency in Chicago. The wire asked specific questions and ended with the words URGENT REPLY NEEDED. If the Pinks heeded this, as he was certain they would, he would have an answering wire early in the morning.

Warm, dusty darkness was setting when he left the telegraph office. Word of the shooting had spread quickly; gaslit Main Street was packed with citizens discussing the Cloud Cracker's violent demise. They would have a great deal more to discuss within the next twenty-four hours. Quincannon thought as he made his way to the jailhouse to question O. H. Goodland. And they weren't the only ones with surprises in store for them.

By sundown tomorrow the name most often spoken in Del-



ford would not be Leonide Zacks or O. H. Goodland. It would be John Quincannon.

The reply to his Chicago wire was waiting when he stopped at the telegraph office at ten o'clock Thursday morning, on his way back from a brief visit with the railroad station agent. The answers to his questions were all just as he had expected. They brought a smile to his mouth and led him to send another wire, this one to Sabina in San Francisco:

CLOUD CRACKER MURDERED LAST NIGHT IN BIZARRE CIRCUMSTANCES STOP YOUR TRUSTED PARTNER HAS ALREADY SOLVED CRIME STOP BEADLE ARRIVAL UNIMPORTANT NOW STOP EXPECT TO REACH SF TOMORROW AS PLANNED STOP GLORIOUS WEEKEND CELEBRATION INDICATED STOP WILL PROVIDE DETAILS OF BRILLIANT DETECTIVE WORK EN ROUTE MUIR WOODS STOP

Whistling, his step jaunty, he crossed the street to the bank to collect Aram Kasabian. The two men then went to the jailhouse to collect Tom McCool. And the three men then proceeded to the Valley House to collect Ben Collard and Nora Zacks.

The time for unveiling his brilliant deductions had arrived.

The place of the unveiling was the marshal's tiny office, where the five of them crowded together with an unfettered and head-banded O. H. Goodland. Mrs. Zacks wore mourning black and a stoic expression, which remained unchanged even after Quincannon revealed his true profession, his purpose in Delford, and the upcoming arrival of Sheriff Beadle and the arrest warrants. Collard, too, seemed determined to play the innocent. He said indignantly, "This is all an intolerable misunderstanding. We are legitimate pluviculturists—obviously the victims of mistaken identity.

We've committed no crime in the Midwest or in Delford."

"None here except willful homicide," Quincannon said.

"Faugh! You can't mean the murder of poor Leonide. The man who shot him has already been arrested—and why isn't Goodland locked in a cell, where he belongs?"

"Mr. Goodland did no shooting last night."

"How can you make such a statement? You were at the shack—you know what happened as well as I do. He and Leonide

vances to Mr. Goodland's daughter, successful or not, were the final straw: they drove you to conspire in his murder."

"Preposterous!" Collard shouted. "Nefarious!"

"Fact," Quincannon said. "As for your motives, you'd grown to hate Zacks for a different reason. He'd taken over the handling of your swindles, reduced you to a subservient role by the force of his will. With him dead, you could have his wife and his money, and be your own master again."

"Utter rot, I say."

"Mr. Goodland's rash behavior two days ago gave you the impetus and the perfect foil for your plan. And the plan itself worked smoothly enough. If I hadn't come to Delford, you might well have gotten away with it—and with the Coalition's three thousand dollars. Before anyone thought to ask you for the money, you and Mrs. Zacks would have gone on the six o'clock train for Stockton tonight. The station agent confirmed that you purchased the tickets this morning."

"What of it? I am escorting Mrs. Zacks to Stockton, yes—but I intended to return the money before departing. Leonide's murderer is in custody, or so we thought. There is no good reason for us to stay here—"

"You may have purchased the tickets today," Quincannon interrupted him, "but the date and time were settled much earlier."

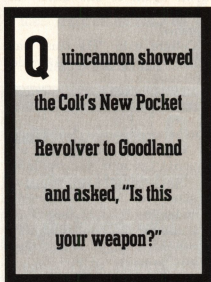
"How could you possibly know that?"

"The railroad timetable in your room, the written notations in your hand. I saw them yesterday afternoon, in the course of my investigation, two hours before the murder."

The woman said, "That proves nothing and you know it."

"By itself, no. Tell me, Mrs. Zacks, why did you fire the mortar last night?"

The question caught her off



were locked together inside. No one else *could* have done it."

"But someone else did. You, Collard."

Collard drew himself up in feigned outrage. "Have you taken leave of your senses, Quincannon? I was outside with you when the shot was fired. How could I possibly be guilty?"

"By means of clever planning, careful timing, and the help of your accomplice. Or rather, your paramour."

Nora Zacks said flatly, "That's a ridiculous accusation."

"Not at all. Your husband was a womanizer. Before the three of you left Omaha for California, his illicit affairs drove you to take his partner as your lover. His ad-

guard. "Why . . . I was the only person on the platform. My husband and Ben were inside the shack with Goodland."

"Why didn't you wait for them to come out?"

"The launching was scheduled for seven. Rather than delay, I went ahead on my own."

"But you'd never fired the mortar before."

"Not in Delford, but elsewhere—"

"No. Your frightened actions after lighting the fuse prove otherwise. Last night was the first time and it was done by prearranged plan. That's the reason Collard loaded the mortar while I was talking to your husband—so it would be ready for you. Properly loading such a launcher is more difficult and dangerous than firing it."

Quincannon shifted his attention to O. H. Goodland. "Mr. Goodland, why did you go to the shack after I warned you to stay away?"

"A message was slipped under the door of my room. Signed with Zacks's name and asking me to come promptly at seven to settle our differences. The word *promptly* was underlined."

"My husband did write such a note," Nora Zacks lied. "He told me he had, which is the reason I was unconcerned when I saw Goodland arrive."

"No, Mrs. Zacks. The note was written by you, I suspect—a careful forgery."

She started to deny it, changed her mind, and said nothing.

Quincannon produced the Colt's New Pocket Revolver, which McCool had let him have earlier. He showed it to Goodland and asked him, "Is this your weapon?"

"It is."

"Did you take it with you last night?"

"I did not. I had no weapon when I went to the shack and Zacks had no damned idea what I was doing there. He was telling

me that when Collard clubbed me from behind."

"When did you last have the gun in your possession?"

"Tuesday afternoon, after I made the mistake of threatening Zacks with it. McCool took it away from me."

The marshal said, "I emptied it and put it in his saddlebag at the hotel livery. Collard was there; he saw me do it. He couldn't come back later and swiped it."

"I won't stand for any more of this." Collard's voice had risen. He was sweating now. "How dare you accuse me when you know damned well it's impossible for me to be guilty. I was *outside* when Leonide was killed. You saw me, Marshal. And you, Quincannon. You heard him beg for his life and you heard the fatal shot. You can't deny the truth of that."

"I can't and won't deny what I seemed to hear."

"Seemed? What do you mean, seemed?"

Quincannon displayed another object from his pocket. "I found this on the floor, shortly after we broke into the shack. When I picked it up it was hot to the touch."

"Couldn't have come from Mr. Goodland's gun," McCool said. "Revolvers don't eject spent shells. Only one bullet was fired from that Colt's, and the empty was in the cylinder."

Kasabian asked, "Then where did that one come from?"

"The fire inside the boiler," Quincannon said, "where Collard placed it after he clubbed Mr. Goodland, shot Zacks, and put the revolver in Mr. Goodland's hand. A blank cartridge. The heat ex-

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ploded the powder, simulating a gunshot, and the explosion kicked the casing out through the open fire door. Collard had used the trick before—I'll explain where and how shortly—and so he was able to gauge within a minute or so when it would go off."

"Amazing. And the shot that actually killed Zacks—?"

"Fired when Mrs. Zacks launched the rocket, promptly at seven. The boom of the mortar drowned the report. Timing, you see?"

"What about the locked door?"

"It *wasn't* locked. Collard pretended it was by holding on to the knob and rattling it, while he blocked the doorway with his body. The bolt wasn't damaged, a fact that was overlooked in the excitement—by everyone except me."

Collard knew he was caught, but in desperation he played out his last card. "Leonide was still alive when we were all outside. You know he was, you heard him beg for his life—you heard him!"

"No," Quincannon said, "I didn't."

He paused dramatically and then asked the banker, "Mr. Kasabian, do you recall my telling you Zacks and Collard were once variety performers in Chicago?"

"Yes. Low comedy and specialty acts, you said."

"I didn't know for certain what the specialty acts were until this morning, when I received a wire from the Chicago Pinkerton office. One act was a magic show in which a supposedly invisible pistol was fired on command. Zacks was the magician, Collard the one who invented and staged the

trick. Collard was also a performer with his own specialty. One he performed well, by all accounts."

"What specialty, for heaven's sake?"

Quincannon said, "Ventriloquism."

Sheriff Beadle and his deputies arrived without further delay, anticlimactically, on the noon train from Fresno. By this time, even though Collard was still maintaining his innocence, Nora Zacks had admitted her part in her husband's murder. She claimed the entire plan had been Collard's and that he had coerced her into it—a falsehood, to be sure, but one she had already begun to play well with tears and lamentations. She was a comely woman; Quincannon had little doubt that she would be able to convince a jury to be lenient.

That evening he left Delford on the same train the two conspirators had intended to take—the six o'clock Limited for Stockton. He was in a fine humor. In his wallet was the balance of his fee, plus a bonus from a somewhat chastened O. H. Goodland; and in his coat pocket was a telegram from Sabina, which he had picked up at the Western Union office shortly before Beadle's arrival.

As the train rattled its way north through sun-browned wheat fields, he took out the wire and read it again.

EAGERLY AWAIT YOUR RETURN AND DETAILS OF BRILLIANT DETECTIVE WORK STOP HEART AFLUTTER WITH ANTICIPATION OF GLORIOUS WEEKEND CELEBRATION STOP DID MY HERO COLLECT BALANCE OF FEE STOP

A roguish smile split his free-booter's beard. Sabina's sarcasm didn't fool him—not for a minute. Her defenses were definitely crumbling. . . .

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BY  
**Thomas Thompson**

# Gun Job

**H**e was married in June and he gave up his job as town marshal the following September, giving himself time to get settled on the little ranch he bought before the snows set in. That first winter was mild, and now, with summer in the air, he walked down the main street of the town and thought of his own calf crop and of his own problems, a fine feeling after fifteen years of thinking of the problems of others. He wasn't Marshal Jeff Anderson anymore. He was Jeff Anderson, private citizen, beholden to no man, and that was the way he wanted it.

He gave the town his quick appraisal, a tall, well-built man who was nearing forty and beginning to think about it, and every building and every alley held a memory for him, some amusing, some tragic. The town had a Sunday morning peacefulness on it, a peacefulness Jeff Anderson had worked for. It hadn't always been this way. He inhaled

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deeply, a contented man, and he caught the scent of freshly sprinkled dust that came from the dampened square of street in front of the ice cream parlor. There was a promise of heat in the air and already the thick, warm scent of the tar weed was drifting down from the yellow slopes in back of the town. He kept to the middle of the street, enjoying his freedom, not yet free of old habits, and he headed for the marshal's office, where the door was closed, the shade drawn.

This was his Sunday morning pleasure, this brief tour of the town that had claimed him so long. It was the same tour he had made every Sunday morning for fifteen years; but now he could enjoy the luxury of knowing he was making it because he wanted to, not because it was his job. A man who had built a bridge or a building could sit back and look at his finished work, remembering the fun and the heartache that had gone into it, but he didn't need to chip away personally at its rust or take a pot of paint to its scars.

own boot heels had helped wear it; the desk was scarred and some of those spur marks were as much his own as his own initials would have been. He grinned at the new marshal and said, "Caught any criminals lately?"

The man behind the desk glanced up, his face drawn, expressionless, his eyes worried. He tried to joke. "How could I?" he said. "You ain't been in town since last Sunday." He took one foot off the desk and kicked a straight chair toward Jeff. "How's the cow business?"

"Good," Jeff said. "Mighty good." He sat down heavily and stretched his long legs, pushed his battered felt hat back on his thinning, weather-bleached hair, and made himself a cigarette. He saw the papers piled on the desk and glancing at the clock he knew it was nearly time to let the two or three prisoners exercise in the jail corridor. A feeling of well-being engulfed him. These things were another man's responsibility now, not Jeff Anderson's. "How's it with you, Billy?" he asked.

The answer came too quickly, the answer of a man who was nervous or angry, or possibly both.

they didn't like the job Billy was doing they should have gone to Billy, not to Jeff. But that was typical of the city council. Jeff had known three mayors and three different councils during his long term in office and they usually ran to a pattern. A few complaints and they got panicky and started going off in seven directions at once. They seemed to think that because Jeff had recommended Billy for this job the job was still Jeff's responsibility. "They made the trip for nothing, Billy," Jeff said. "If you're worried about me wanting your job you can forget it. I told them that plain."

"They'll keep asking you, Jeff." "They'll keep getting no for an answer," Jeff said.

Billy Lang sat at his desk and stared at the drawn shade of the front window, the thumb of his left hand toying nervously with the badge on his calfskin vest. He was a small man with eternally pink cheeks and pale blue eyes. He wore a full, white mustache and there was a cleft in his chin. He was married and had five children, and most of his life he had clerked in a store. When Jeff Anderson recommended him for this job Billy took it because it paid more and because the town was quiet. But now there was trouble and Billy was sorry he had ever heard of the job. He said, "You can't blame them for wanting you back, Jeff. You did a good job."

There was no false modesty in Jeff Anderson. He had done a good job here and he knew it. He had handled his job exactly the way he felt it should be handled and he had backed down to no one. But it hadn't been all roses, either. He grinned. "Regardless of what a man does, there's some who won't like it."

"Like Hank Fetterman?"

Jeff shrugged. Hank Fetterman was a cattleman. Sometimes Hank got the idea that he ought to take this town over and run it

**B**illy had taken the job because the town was quiet. But now that there was trouble, he was sorry he had ever heard of it.

In front of the marshal's office Anderson paused, remembering it all, not missing it, just remembering; then he turned and pushed open the door, the familiarity of the action momentarily strong on him. The floor was worn and his

"You ought to know, Jeff. The mayor and the council came to see you, didn't they?"

Annoyance clouded Jeff Anderson's gray eyes. He hadn't liked the idea of the city fathers going behind the new marshal's back. If

the way he once had. Hank hadn't gotten away with it when Jeff was marshal. Thinking about it now, it didn't seem to matter much to Jeff one way or the other, and it was hard to remember that his fight with Hank Fetterman had once been important. It had been a long time ago and things had changed. "Hank's not a bad sort," Jeff said.

"He's in town," Billy Lang said. "Did you know that?"

Jeff felt that old, familiar tightening of his stomach muscles, the signal of trouble ahead. He inhaled deeply, let the smoke trickle from his nostrils, and the feeling went away. Hank Fetterman was Jeff Anderson's neighbor now and Jeff was a rancher, not a marshal. "I'm in town, too," he said. "So are fifty other people. There's no law against it."

"You know what I mean, Jeff," Billy Lang said. "You talked to Rudy Svitač's boy."

Jeff moved uneasily in his chair. Billy Lang was accusing him of meddling, and Jeff didn't like it. Jeff had never had anything to do with the marshal's job since his retirement, and he had promised himself he never would. It was Billy's job, and Billy was free to run it his own way. But when a twelve-year-old kid who thought you were something special asked you a straight question, you gave him a straight answer. It had nothing to do with the fact that you had once been a marshal.

"Sure, Billy," Jeff said. "I talked to Rudy's boy. He came to see me about it, just the way he's been coming to see me about things ever since he was big enough to walk. The kid needs somebody to talk to, I guess, so he comes to me. He's not old-country, like his folks. He was born here; he thinks American. I guess it's hard for the boy to understand them. I told him to have his dad see you, Billy."

"He took your advice," Billy

Lang said. "Three days ago." He turned over a paper. "Rudy Svitač came in and swore out a warrant against Hank Fetterman for trespassing. He said his boy told him it was the thing to do."

Jeff had a strange feeling that he was suddenly two people. One was Jeff Anderson, ex-marshal, the man who had recommended Billy Lang for this job. As such, he should offer Billy some advice

old days when Hank Fetterman was running things and the town was wide open. Maybe they wanted it that way again. Every man was entitled to his own opinion and Billy Lang was entitled to handle his job in his own way. This freedom of thought and action that Jeff prized so highly had to work for everyone. He stood up and clapped a hand affectionately on Billy Lang's shoulder, anxious

**J**eff glanced quickly at the new marshal, surprised, only half believing what he had heard.

right here and now. The other person was Jeff Anderson, private citizen, a man with a small ranch and a fine wife and a right to live his own life. And that was the Jeff Anderson that was important. Jeff Anderson, the rancher, grinned. "Hank pawin' and bellerin' about it, is he?"

"I don't know, Jeff," Billy Lang said. "I haven't talked to Hank about it. I'm not sure I'm going to."

Jeff glanced quickly at the new marshal, surprised, only half believing what he had heard. He had recommended Billy for this job because he figured he and Billy thought along the same lines. Surely Billy knew that if you gave Hank Fetterman an inch he would take a mile.

He caught himself quickly, realizing suddenly that it was none of his business how Billy Lang thought. There were plenty of businessmen in town who had argued loudly and openly that Jeff Anderson's methods of law enforcement had been bad for their cash registers. They had liked the

to change the conversation. "That's up to you, Billy," he said. "It's sure none of my affair." His grin widened. "Come on over to the saloon and I'll buy you a drink."

Billy Lang stared at the drawn shade, and he thought of Hank Fetterman, a man who was big in this country, waiting over at the saloon. Hank Fetterman knew there was a warrant out for his arrest; the whole town knew it by now. You didn't need to tell a thing like that. It just got around. And before long people would know who the law was in this town, Hank Fetterman or Billy Lang. Billy colored slightly, and there was perspiration on his forehead. "You go ahead and have your drink, Jeff," he said. "I've got some paperwork to do." He didn't look up.

Jeff went outside and the gathering heat of the day struck the west side of the street and brought a resinous smell from the old boards of the false-fronted buildings. He glanced at the little church, seeing Rudy Svitač's





spring wagon there, remembering that the church hadn't always been here; then he crossed over toward the saloon, the first business building this town had erected. He had been in a dozen such towns, and it was always the same. The saloons and the dead-falls came first, the churches and the schools later. Maybe that

"Good enough," Jeff said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"You twisted my arm," Hank Fetterman said.

Hank Fetterman was a well-built man with a weathered face. His brows were heavy and they pinched together toward the top, forming a perfect diamond of clean, hairless skin between his deep-set eyes. His voice was quiet, his manner calm. Jeff thought of the times he had crossed this man,

leaned his elbows on the bar and turned his shot glass slowly in its own wet circle. Behind him Hank Fetterman's two cowboys broke into a boisterous, ribald song. The bartender wiped his face with his apron and glanced out the front window across toward the marshal's office. Jeff Anderson downed his drink, tossed the shot glass in the air, and caught it with a down sweep of his hand. "You're used to that kind of talk, Hank." He set the shot glass on the bar.

"You're pretty friendly with the Svitacs, aren't you, Jeff?" Hank Fetterman asked. He was leaning with his back to the bar, his elbows behind him. His position made the holstered gun he wore obvious.

Again, just for a moment, Jeff Anderson was two people. He remembered the man he wanted to be. "I don't reckon anybody's very friendly with the Svitacs," he said. "They're hard to know. I think a lot of their boy. He's a nice kid."

Slowly the smile came back into Hank Fetterman's amber eyes. He turned around and took the bottle and poured a drink for himself and one for Jeff. "That forty acres of bottom land you were asking me about for a calf pasture," he said. "I've been thinking about it. I guess I could lease it to you all right."

"That's fine, Hank," Jeff Anderson said. "I can use it." He doffed his glass to Hank and downed his drink. It didn't taste right but he downed it anyway. The two cowboys started to scuffle and one of them collided with a table. It overturned with a crash.

"Please, Hank," the bartender said. "They're gonna get me in trouble—" His voice trailed off and his eyes widened. A man had come through the door. He stood there, blinking the bright sun out of his eyes. Jeff Anderson felt his heart start to pump heavily, slowly, high in his chest. "Morn-

**J**eff had no regrets over the way he had handled Hank in the past. It had nothing to do with his feelings toward him now.

proved something. He didn't know. He had just stepped onto the board sidewalk when he saw the druggist coming toward him. The druggist was also the mayor, a sanctimonious little man, dried up by his own smallness. "Jeff, I talked to Billy Lang," the mayor said. His voice was thin and reedy. "I wondered if you might reconsider—"

"No," Jeff Anderson said. He didn't break his stride. He walked by the mayor and went into the saloon. Two of Hank Fetterman's riders were standing by the piano, leaning on it, and one of them was fumbling out a one-finger tune, cursing when he missed a note. Hank Fetterman was at the far end of the bar, and Jeff went and joined him. A little cow talk was good of a Sunday morning and Hank Fetterman knew cows. The two men at the piano started to sing.

Hank Fetterman's glance drifted lazily to Jeff Anderson and then away. His smile was fleeting. "How are you, Jeff?"

enforcing the no-gun ordinance, keeping Hank's riders in jail overnight to cool them off. He had no regrets over the way he had handled Hank in the past. It had nothing to do with his feeling toward Hank now or in the future. He saw that Hank was wearing a gun and he smiled inwardly. That was like Hank. Tell him he couldn't do something and that was exactly what he wanted to do. "Didn't figure on seeing you in town," Jeff said. "Thought you and the boys were on roundup."

"I had a little personal business come up," Hank Fetterman said. "You know about it?"

Jeff shrugged. "Depends on what it is."

The pale smile left Hank Fetterman's eyes but not his lips. "Rudy Svitac is telling it around that I ran a bunch of my cows through his corn. He claims I'm trying to run him out of the country."

Jeff had no trouble concealing his feelings. It was a trick he had learned a long time ago. He

ing, Mr. Svitac," the bartender mumbled.

Rudy Svitac stood in the doorway, a thick, dull man with black hair and brows that met across the bridge of his nose and a forehead that sloped. Jeff saw the rusty suit the man wore on Sundays, the suit that had faint soil stains on the knees because this man could not leave the soil alone, even on Sundays. He had to kneel down and feel the soil with his fingers, feeling the warmth and the life of it; for the soil was his book and his life and it was the only thing he understood completely and perhaps the only thing that understood him. He looked at Jeff, not at Hank Fetterman. "Is no good," Rudy Svitac said. "My son says I must talk to Billy Lang. I talk to Billy Lang but he does nothing. Is no good."

A thick silence settled in the room and the two cowboys who had been scuffling quit it now and stood there looking at the farmer. Hank Fetterman said, "Say what's on your mind, Svitac."

"You broke my fence," Rudy Svitac said. "You drive your cows in my corn and spoil my crop. All winter I wait to plant my crop and now is grow fine and you drive your cows in."

"Maybe you're mistaken, Svitac," Hank Fetterman said.

"My boy says is for judge to decide," Rudy Svitac said. "My boy tell me to go to Billy Lang and he will make a paper and judge will decide. My boy says is fair. Is America." Rudy Svitac stared unblinkingly. He shook his head slowly. "Is not so. I want my money. You broke my fence."

"You're a liar, Svitac," Hank Fetterman said. He moved away from the bar, slowly. He looked steadily at Jeff Anderson, then he glanced across the street toward the marshal's office. The door was still closed, the shade still drawn. Hank Fetterman smiled. He walked forward and gripped Rudy

**R**udy Svitac stumbled backward, out through the door, and his heel caught on a loose board in the sidewalk.

Svitac by the shirt front. For a moment he held the man that way, pulling him close, then he shoved and Rudy Svitac stumbled backward, out through the door, and his heel caught on a loose board in the sidewalk. He fell hard and for a long time he lay there, his dull, steady eyes staring at Jeff Anderson; then he turned and pushed himself up and stood there looking at the dust on his old suit. He dropped his head and looked at the dust and he reached with his fingers and touched it. One of Hank Fetterman's cowboys started to laugh.

Across the street Jeff Anderson saw the blind on the window of the marshal's office move aside and then drop back into place, and immediately the door opened and Billy Lang was hurrying across the street. He came directly to Rudy Svitac and put his hand on Svitac's arm and jerked him around. "What's going on here?" Billy Lang demanded.

"Svitac came in looking for trouble," Hank Fetterman said. "I threw him out." Hank was standing in the doorway, directly alongside Jeff. For a brief moment Hank Fetterman's amber eyes met Jeff's gaze and Jeff saw the challenge. If you don't like it, do something about it, Hank Fetterman was saying. I want to know how you stand in this thing and I want to know now.

There was a dryness in Jeff Anderson's mouth. He had backed Hank Fetterman down before; he

could do it again. But for what? One hundred and fifty dollars a month and a chance to get killed? Jeff had had fifteen years of that. A man had a right to live his own life. He looked up toward the church and the doors were just opening and people were coming out to stand on the porch, a small block of humanity suddenly aware of trouble. Jeff saw his wife Elaine, and he knew her hand was at her throat, twisting the fabric of her dress the way she did. He thought of the little ranch and of the things he and Elaine had planned for the future, and then he looked at Billy Lang and he knew Billy wasn't going to buck Hank Fetterman. So Jeff could make a stand, and it would be his own stand and he would be right back into it again, just the way he had been for fifteen years. There was a thick line of perspiration on Jeff's upper lip. "That's the way it was, Billy," Jeff said.

He saw the quick smile cross Hank Fetterman's face, the dull acceptance and relief in Billy Lang's eyes. "Get out of town, Svitac," Billy Lang said. "I'm tired of your troublemaking. If Hank's cows got in your corn, it was an accident."

"Is no accident," Rudy Svitac said stubbornly. "Is for judge to decide. My son says—"

"It was an accident," Billy Lang said. "Make your fences stronger." He didn't look at Jeff. He glanced at Hank Fetterman and made his





final capitulation. "Sorry it happened, Hank."

For a long moment Rudy Svítac stared at Billy Lang, at the star on Billy's vest, remembering that this star somehow had a connection with the stars in the flag. His son Anton had explained it, saying that Jeff Anderson said it was so, so it must be so. But it wasn't

watching them, Jeff saw Anton, their son, a boy of twelve with an old man's face, a boy who had always believed every word Jeff Anderson said. Jeff saw young Anton looking down the street toward him and he remembered the boy's serious brown eyes and the thick black hair that always stood out above his ears and lay rebelliously far down his neck. He remembered the hundred times he had talked to young Anton, pa-

Jeff saw Rudy hesitate, take two more steps; and now Billy was saying something and Rudy dropped his head and let his chin lie on his chest. The boy came running up, and he took the rifle out of his father's hand and the crowd in front of the saloon expelled its breath. Jeff felt the triumph come into Hank Fetterman. He didn't need to look at the man. He could feel it.

The slow, wicked anger was inside Hank Fetterman, goaded by his ambition, his sense of power, and the catlike eagerness was in his eyes. "No Bohunk tells lies about me and gets away with it," he murmured. "No Bohunk comes after me with a gun and gets a second chance." His hand dropped and rested on the butt of his holstered six-shooter, and then the thumb of his left hand touched Jeff Anderson's arm. "Have a drink with me, Jeff?"

Jeff saw Elaine standing in front of the church and he could feel her anxiety reaching through the hot, troubled air. And he saw the boy there in the street, the gun in his hand, his eyes bewildered, searching Jeff Anderson's face. "I reckon I won't have time, Hank," Jeff said. He walked up the street and now the feeling of being two people was strong in him, and there was a responsibility to Billy Lang that he couldn't deny. He had talked Billy into taking this job. It was a lonely job, and there was never a lonelier time than when a man was by himself in the middle of the street. He came close to Billy and said, "Look, Billy, if you can take a gun away from one man, you can take a gun away from another."

Billy looked at him. Billy's hands were shaking, and there was sweat on his face. "A two-year-old kid could have taken that gun away from Rudy, and you know it," he said. He reached up swiftly and unpinned the badge

**A**nton was a bright boy with an unlimited belief in the future, in a household where there was no future.

so. Hank Fetterman wasn't in jail. They weren't going to do anything about the ruined corn. The skin wrinkled between Rudy Svítac's eyes and there was perspiration on his face and his lips moved thickly but no sound came out. He could not understand. Thirteen years he had lived in this America, but still he could not understand. His son had tried to tell him the things they taught in the schools and the things Jeff Anderson said were so; but Rudy had his soil to work and his crops to plant, and when a man's back was tired his head did not work so good. Rudy Svítac knew only that if the jimson weed grew in the potato patch, you cut it out. And the wild morning glory must be pulled out by the roots. No one came to do these things for a man. A man did these chores himself. He turned and walked solidly up the street toward where he had left his spring wagon by the church.

His wife Mary was there, a thick, tired woman who never smiled nor ever complained, and

tiently explaining things so Anton would understand, learning his own beliefs from the process of explaining them in simple words. And Anton would listen and then repeat to his parents in Bohemian, telling them this was so because Jeff Anderson said it was so. A bright boy with an unlimited belief in the future, in a household where there was no future. At times it seemed to Jeff almost as if God had looked upon Rudy and Mary Svítac and wanted to compensate in some way, so he had given them Anton.

Jeff saw Rudy reaching into the bed of the wagon. He saw Mary protest once; then Mary stood there, resigned, and now the boy had his father's arm and there was a brief struggle. The father shook the boy off, and now Rudy had a rifle and he was coming back down the street, walking slowly, down the middle of the street, the rifle in the crook of his arm.

Billy Lang moved. He met Rudy halfway, and he held out his hand.



from his vest. He handed it across. "You want it?"

Jeff looked at that familiar piece of metal and he could feel the boy's eyes on him; and then he looked up and he saw Elaine there on the church porch, and he thought of his own dreams and of the plans he and Elaine had made for the future. "No, Billy," he said. "I don't want it."

"Then let it lie there," Billy Lang said. He dropped the badge into the dust of the street and hurried off, a man who had met defeat and accepted it, a man who could now go back to the clothing store and sell shirts and suits and overalls because that was the job he could do best. There was no indignity in Billy Lang's defeat. He had taken a role that he wasn't equipped to handle, and he was admitting it.

The boy said, "Mr. Jeff, I don't understand. You told me once—"

"We'll talk about it later, Anton," Jeff said. "Tell your dad to go home." He walked swiftly toward Elaine, swallowing against the sourness in his throat.

They drove out of town, Jeff and Elaine Anderson, toward their home and their own life; and now the full heat of the day lay on the yellow slopes and the dry air crackled with the smell of dust and the cured grass, and the leather seat of the buggy was hot to the touch. A mile out of town Jeff stopped in the shade of a sycamore and put up the top. He moved with dull efficiency, pausing momentarily to glance up at Hank Fetterman and his two riders passed on their way to the ranch. He got back into the buggy and unwrapped the lines from the whipstock, and Elaine said, "If there's anything you want to say, Jeff—"

How could he say it? He couldn't, for the thing that was most in his mind had nothing to do with the matter at hand, and yet it had everything to do with it

and it couldn't be explained. For he was thinking not of Hank Fetterman nor of Rudy Svitac, but of a colored lithograph, a town promotion picture that had once hung on every wall in this town. It showed wide, tree-lined streets, a tremendous town house with a flag half as large as the building flying from a mast, and lesser pen-nants, all mammoth, rippling from every building. Tiny men in cutaway coats and top hats lei-

of him. He had come to Jeff Anderson because Jeff Anderson was authority, and already young Anton had learned that in America authority was for everyone. "My father and mother do not understand," he said. "They do not speak English." He unrolled the lithograph and put his finger on it, and then indicated the town of Alkali with a spread hand. "Is not the same," he said. "Is not so."

There were dreams in that boy's

**"A**

**merica isn't something  
you cut off like a piece of  
cake and say there it is,"**

**Jeff said.**

surely strolled the avenues, and high-wheeled bicycles rolled elegantly past gleaming black victorias on the street of exclusive shops, while three sleek trains chuffed impatiently at the station. The railroad had put on a large land promotion around here when the road was first built. They had offered excursion trips free so that people could see the charms of New Canaan. They had handed out these lithos of the proposed town by the bushel. For a while New Canaan bustled with activity, and men bought town lots staked out in buffalo grass. And then the bubble burst and New Canaan settled back to what it was before—a place called Alkali at the edge of open cattle range. And young Anton Svitac had come to see Marshall Jeff Anderson for the first time and he had come about that picture.

Jeff remembered how the boy had looked that day, no more than six years old, his eyes too large for his old-man's face, his voice a mirror of the seriousness of thought that was so much a part

eyes, and they were about to be snuffed out; and Jeff Anderson didn't want it to happen. "Sure it's so, Anton," he heard himself saying. "It's not what it is today, it's what's going to be tomorrow, see?" He remembered the trouble he had had with the words, and then it was all there and he was telling it to Anton, telling it so this boy could go home and tell it to a work-bent man and a tired woman. "It's like America, see? Some of the things aren't right where you can touch them. Maybe some of the things you see are ugly. But the picture is always there to look at, and you keep thinking about the picture, and you keep working and making things better all the time, see? America isn't something you cut off like a piece of cake and say there it is. You keep on looking ahead to what it's going to be, and you keep working hard for it all the time, and you keep right on knowing it's going to be good because you've got the picture there to look at. You never stop working and say 'Now the job is done,' be-



cause it never is. You see that, Anton?"

The boy hadn't smiled. This was a big thing and a boy didn't smile about big things. He rolled the lithograph carefully. "I see," he said. "Is good. I will tell my father. We will keep the picture."

Those were Jeff Anderson's thoughts, and how could he tell them, even to Elaine; for they had so little to do with the matter at hand and yet they had everything to do with it.

And Elaine, looking at her husband now, respected his silence. She remembered the three long years she was engaged to this man before they were married, years in which she had come to know him so well because she

words, he didn't like the sound of it and he wanted to argue back. His voice was rough. "I reckon they look on it as home," he said. "The boy was born there. I reckon it sort of ties you to a place if your first born is born there."

She closed her eyes tightly, knowing that she was no longer one person but three, knowing the past was gone and the future would always be ahead, and it was her job to help secure that future as much as it was Jeff's job. She opened her eyes and looked at her husband, still afraid, for that was her way; but somehow prouder and older now. She folded her hands in her lap and the nervousness was gone. "I suppose we'll feel that way, too, Jeff," she said. "It will always be our town after our baby is born here. I talked to the doctor yesterday—"

against him until he felt that the seat of the buggy was no longer large enough to contain him. He helped her out of the buggy, his motions exaggerated in their kindness; and he took her arm and helped her up the front steps.

The coolness of the night still lingered in the little ranch house, for she had left the shades drawn; and now she went to the west windows and lifted the shades slightly, and she could see down the lane and across the small calf pasture where a thin drift of dust from their buggy wheels still lingered. There was a loneliness to Sunday after church, a stillness on the ranch. She glanced toward the barn and Jeff was unharnessing the mare and turning her into the corral, his back broad, his movements deliberate; and she saw him stand for a moment and look down the creek toward where Rudy Svitač's place cornered on Hank Fetterman's huge, unfenced range.

He came into the house later, into the cool living room, and he sat down in his big chair with a gusty sigh, and pulled off his boots and stretched his legs. "Good to be home," he said. "Good to have nothing to do." He raised his eyes to meet hers and they both knew he was lying. There was always something to do.

The moment he was sure she knew it was easier for him, but he still had to be positive that she understood that now it was different. Once he made this move there would be no turning back. She had to see that. An hour ago the town had been a town, nothing more; and if certain merchants felt business would be better with Hank Fetterman running things that was their business; and if Billy Lang wanted to go along with that thinking or go back to the clothing store, that was his business. Jeff Anderson hadn't needed the town. It was a place to shop and nothing more,

**"I was wrong about Billy Lang," Jeff Anderson said. "He's not going to stand up to Hank Fetterman."**

loved him so well. She knew him even better now. He was a man who was born to handle trouble, and a piece of tin on his vest or a wife at his side couldn't change the man he was born to be. She knew that and she didn't want to change him, but a woman couldn't help being what she was either and a woman could be afraid, especially at a time like this when there was so much ahead. She wanted to help him. "Maybe the Svitačs would be better off someplace else," she said. "They never have made the place pay."

And that was exactly the same argument he had used on himself; but now, hearing it put into

He felt the hard knot in the pit of his stomach. Then the coldness ran up his spine, and it was surprise and fear and a great swelling pride; and the feeling crawled back up his neck, and every hair on his head was an individual hair, and the hard lump was in his throat. He moved on the seat, suddenly concerned for her comfort. "You feel all right, honey? Is there anything I can do?"

She didn't laugh at him any more than Anton had laughed at him that day in the office. She reached over and put her hand on his hand, and she smiled. As they drove down the lane the great pride was inside him, swelling

and a man could shop as well with Hank Fetterman running things as he could with Jeff Anderson running things. But now, suddenly, that had changed, and there was tomorrow to think about, and it was exactly as he had explained it to Anton. Now, one day soon, Jeff Anderson might be explaining the same things to his own son; and a man had to show his son that he believed what he said, for if he didn't there was nothing left. "I was wrong about Billy Lang," Jeff Anderson said. "He's not going to stand up to Hank Fetterman."

She looked into his eyes and saw the deep seriousness and knew his every thought, and in this moment they were closer than they had ever been before; and she remembered thinking so many times of men and women who had been married for fifty years or more and of how they always looked alike. She said, "I have some curtains I promised Mary Svítac. Will you take them to her when you go?"

She didn't trust herself to say more and she didn't give him a lingering embrace as a woman might who was watching her man go off to danger; but she pretended to be busy and turned her head so that his lips just brushed her temple, and it was as casual as if he were only going to his regular day's work. "And thank her for the pickles," she said.

He stalked out of the house as if he didn't like having his Sunday disturbed by such woman nonsense, but when he was halfway to the barn his stride lengthened and she saw the stiffness of his back and the set of his shoulders. She sat down then and cried.

Anton, the boy, was pouring sour milk into a trough for the pigs when Jeff rode into the Svítac yard. The world could collapse but pigs had to be fed, and the boy was busy with his thoughts and did

**J**eff went to the corner and took Rudy Svítac's rifle from its place. He levered in a shell, leaving the rifle at full cock.

not see Jeff ride up. The door of the little house that was half soddy, half dugout, opened, and Mary Svítac called something in Bohemian. The boy looked up, startled, and Jeff smiled. "Will you ride my horse over and tie him in the shade, Anton?"

The flood of hope that filled the boy's eyes was embarrassing to a man, and Jeff dismounted quickly, keeping his head turned. He took the bundle of curtains from behind the saddle and handed the reins to the boy; then walked on to the sod house where Mary Svítac stood, the shawl tied under her chin framing her round, expressionless face. He handed her the curtains. "Those pickles you gave us were fine, Mrs. Svítac. Elaine wanted me to bring these curtains over."

Mary Svítac let her rough fingers caress the curtain material. "I will give you all the pickles," she said. "We don't need the curtains. We don't stay here no more."

Rudy's thick voice came from the dark interior of the sod house; and now Jeff could see him there, sitting in a chair, a man dulled with work and disappointments, a man with a limited knowledge of English who had come to a new country with a dream, and found grasshoppers and drought and blizzards and neighbors who tried to drive him out. He looked up. "We don't stay," he said.

"Can I come in for a minute, Mrs. Svítac?" Jeff asked.

"I make coffee," she said.

He stooped to pass through the low door, and he took off his hat and sat down. Now that his eyes were accustomed to the darkness of the room, he saw the big lithograph there on the wall, the only decoration. Rudy Svítac stared unblinkingly down the side of his nose. "We don't stay," he said.

"Sure, Rudy," Jeff Anderson said softly. "You stay."

Mary Svítac started to cry. There were no tears, for the land had taken even that away from her. There were just sobs—dry, choking sounds as she made the coffee—but they were woman sounds, made for her man; and she was willing to give up fifteen years of work if her man would be safe. "They will fight with us," she said. "They put cows in my Rudolph's corn. They tear down our fence. Soon they come to break my house. Is too much. Rudolph does not know fight. Rudolph is for plant the ground and play violin—"

"You stay, Rudy," Jeff Anderson said. "The law will take care of you. I promise you that."

Rudy Svítac shook his ponderous head. "Law is for Hank Fetterman," he said. "Is not for me." "It's not so, Rudy," Jeff said. "You ask Anton. He knows."

"I ask Anton," Rudy Svítac said. "He says I am right. Law is for Hank Fetterman."

The boy came to the door and stood there, peering inside the room. His face was white, drawn



## 900 MHz breakthrough!

## New technology launches wireless speaker revolution...

Recoton develops breakthrough technology which transmits stereo sound through walls, ceilings and floors up to 150 feet.



Breakthrough wireless speaker design blankets your home with music.

By Charles Anton

If you had to name just one new product "the most innovative of the year," what would you choose? Well, at the recent *International Consumer Electronics Show*, critics gave Recoton's new wireless stereo speaker system the *Design and Engineering Award* for being the "most innovative and outstanding new product."

Recoton was able to introduce this whole new generation of powerful wireless speakers due to the advent of 900 MHz technology. This newly approved breakthrough enables Recoton's wireless speakers to rival the sound of expensive wired speakers.

**Recently approved technology.** In June of 1989, the *Federal Communications Commission* allocated a band of radio frequencies stretching from 902 to 928 MHz for wireless, in-home product applications. Recoton, one

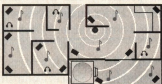
of the world's leading wireless speaker manufacturers, took advantage of the FCC ruling by creating and introducing a new speaker system that utilizes the recently approved frequency band to transmit clearer, stronger stereo signals throughout your home.

**Crisp sound throughout your home.** Just imagine being able to listen to your stereo, TV, VCR or CD player in any room of your home without having to run miles of speaker wire. Plus, you'll never have to worry about range because the new 900 MHz technology allows stereo signals to travel over distances of 150 feet or more through walls, ceilings and floors without losing sound quality.

## 150 foot range through walls!

Recoton gives you the freedom to listen to music wherever you want. Your music is no longer limited to the room your stereo is in. With the wireless headphones you can listen to your TV, stereo or CD player while you move freely between rooms, exercise or do other activities. And unlike infrared headphones, you don't have to be in a line-of-sight with the transmitter, giving you a full 150 foot range.

The headphones and speakers have their own built-in receiver, so no wires are needed between you and your stereo. One transmitter operates an unlimited number of speakers and headphones.



Recoton's transmitter sends music through walls to wireless speakers over a 75,000 square foot area.

**One transmitter, unlimited receivers.** The powerful transmitter plugs into a headphone, audio-out or tape-out jack on your stereo or TV component, transmitting music wirelessly to your speakers or headphones. The speakers plug into an outlet. The one transmitter can broadcast to an unlimited number of stereo speakers and headphones. And since each speaker contains its own built-in receiver/amplifier, there are no wires running from the stereo to the speakers.

## Full dynamic range.

The speaker, mounted in a bookshelf-sized acoustically constructed cabinet, provides a two-way bass reflex design for individual bass boost control. Full dynamic range is achieved by the use of a 2" tweeter and 4" woofer. Plus, automatic digital lock-in

tuning guarantees optimum reception and eliminates drift. The new technology provides static-free, interference-free sound in virtually any environment. These speakers are also self-amplified; they can't be blown out no matter what your stereo's wattage.

**Stereo or hi-fi, you decide.** These speakers have the option of either stereo or hi-fi sound. You can use two speakers, one set on right channel and the other on left, for full stereo separation. Or, if you just want an extra speaker in another room, set it on mono and listen to both channels

on one speaker. Mono combines both left and right channels for hi-fi sound. This option lets you put a pair of speakers in the den and get full stereo separation or put one speaker in the kitchen and get complete hi-fi sound.



These wireless stereo headphones have a built-in receiver.

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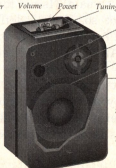
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with worry; but the hope was still in his eyes and a confidence was there. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Jeff could hear the sound of horses approaching. Jeff stood up and the feeling that was in him was an old and familiar feeling—a tightening of his muscles. He went to the corner of the room and took Rudy Svitac's rifle from its place, and he levered in a shell, leaving the rifle at full cock. He stepped through the door then, and he put his hand on the boy's head. "You explain again to your father about the law," he said. "You know, Anton, like we talked before."

"I know," Anton Svitac said.

Jeff stepped swiftly through the door into the sunlight, and he saw Hank Fetterman and the same two riders who had been with him at the saloon coming toward the soddy. Only Hank was armed, and this could be handy later, when Hank talked to the judge. If we had expected trouble all three of us would have been armed, Judge, Hank Fetterman could say. They rode stiffly, holding their horses in. Jeff Anderson stood the cocked rifle by the fence post, placing it carefully. He pushed his hat back on his head and felt the sun on his back as he leaned there, one foot on a fence rail, watching the pigs eat the sour milk.

He knew when the riders were directly beside him, and he turned, his elbows leaning on the top rail of the fence behind him. His hat was pushed back but his face was in the shade, for he had moved to where he was between the sun and the riders. Hank Fetterman said, "We're seeing a lot of each other, neighbor."

"Looks that way," Jeff said.

Hank Fetterman quieted his horse with a steady hand. His eyes never left Jeff Anderson's face. "I asked you once today if you was a friend of the Bohunks," he said. "Maybe I better ask it again."

"Maybe it depends on what you've got on your mind, Hank."

"The Bohunk's been eating my beef," Fetterman said. "I'm sick of it."

"You sure that's it, Hank?" Jeff asked quietly. "Or is it just that there's something that eats on you and makes you want to tear down things other folks have taken years to build up?"

There were small, white patches on either side of Hank Fetterman's mouth. "I said the Bohunk was eating my beef," Hank Fetterman said. His lips didn't move. "You doubting my word?"

"No," Jeff said. "I'm calling you a liar."

He saw the smoldering anger in Hank Fetterman, the sore, whiskey-nursed anger, and then the cattleman felt the full shock as the flat insult in Jeff's voice reached through to him. He cursed and half twisted in the saddle, blinking directly into the sun. "You forgetting you ain't a law-

You'll have to be big enough to make me. No actual words, and yet they knew; and they faced each other with muscles tense and faces drawn, and appeared at ease. Jeff Anderson had dealt himself into the game, and he had checked the best.

Hank Fetterman saw the rifle by the post. He knew it was cocked and loaded. He wondered if Jeff Anderson was actually as quick and as accurate as men said he was; and because he was Hank Fetterman he had to know, because if he backed down now it was over for him and he knew it. He jerked his horse around, trying to avoid the direct glare of the sun, and he made his decision. His hand went for the gun.

Jeff Anderson saw the move coming. It seemed to him that he had plenty of time. He had placed the rifle carefully and now he held it, hip high, gripping it with one hand, tilting it up and pulling the trigger all at the same time. He didn't hear the sound of the rifle's

**H** e didn't hear the sound of the rifle's explosion, but he saw the thin film of gun smoke and saw Hank Fetterman's mouth drop open.

man any more?" he demanded.

"You decide, Hank," Jeff said.

They looked at each other, two men who had killed before and knew the meaning of it, two men who respected a gun and understood a gun. They said nothing and yet they spoke a silent language, and the man who had been a lawman said, I'm telling you to back down, Fetterman, and the man who wanted to be king said,

explosion. You never did, he remembered; but he saw the thin film of gun smoke and he saw Hank Fetterman's mouth drop open, saw the man clawing at his chest. He didn't feel the sickness. Not yet.

Time passed as if through a film of haze, and nothing was real. Then they were gone and a canvas was stretched over the still form of Hank Fetterman and Rudy Svi-



tac was whipping his team toward town to get the coroner. Now the sickness came to Jeff Anderson. He stood by the barn, trembling, and he heard the boy come up behind him. The boy said, "This was in the street in town, Mr. Anderson." The boy held out the tin star. "I told my father how the law was for everybody in America. Now he knows."

Jeff Anderson took the tin star and dropped it into his pocket.

Elaine saw him through the front window. She had been watching a long time and she had been praying silently; and now she said, "Thank God," and she went and sat down, and she was like that when he came into the room. She wanted to ask him

about it, but her throat kept choking; and then he was kneeling there, his head in her lap, and he was crying deep inside, not making a sound. "It's all right, Jeff," she said. "It's all right."

For that was the thing he had to know—that it was all right with her. He had to know that she loved him for the man he was and not for the man he had tried to become. He couldn't change any more than Billy Lang could change. She had never told him to take off his gun—not in words—but she had wanted him to, and he had understood, and he had tried. No woman could ask for greater love than that a man try to change himself. And no woman need be afraid when she had such

love. She thought of young Anton Svitač and of her own son who was to be, and she was calm and sure.

A long time later she picked up Jeff's coat and laid it across her arm. The tin star fell to the floor. For a long time she looked at it, then she bent her knees and reached down and picked it up and put it back into the coat pocket. She went into the bedroom then and hung the coat carefully. From the bureau drawer she took a clean, white, pleated-front shirt and laid it out where he could see it. Marshal Jeff Anderson had worn a clean, white, pleated-front shirt to the office on Monday morning for as long back as she could remember. She didn't expect him to change his habits now. ☐

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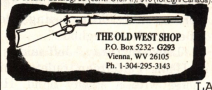
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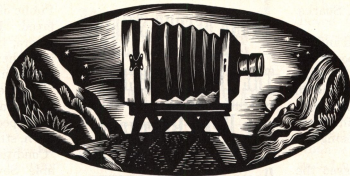
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# THE RENO BROTHERS

## THE WORLD'S FIRST TRAIN ROBBERS

GORDON KINNEY WATCHED curiously as two men ran from the shadows and leaped through the open door of the express car. Until then he had paid scant attention as the evening train for Cincinnati struggled to gain speed after its brief station stop. Kinney recognized the men, John and Simeon Reno. Everyone in Seymour, Indiana, knew the Reno brothers—Frank, John, Sim, Bill, and the oddball of the family, Honest Clint.

Kinney turned away, unaware that he had witnessed the start of a historic event—the world's first for-profit train robbery. Earlier an express car had been burglarized in Connecticut and during the Civil War trains had been stopped in the South for military purposes, but the October 6, 1866, robbery

on the Ohio & Mississippi line was the first in which masked gunmen confronted an express agent for personal gain.

Elem Miller didn't resist. Even so he received a blow on the head after handing over the key to the "local" safe that could be opened at every stop. From it John and Sim Reno pocketed about \$15,000. The "through" safe was another matter. It had been locked at St. Louis and a key wasn't carried on the train.

Undaunted, one of the brothers pulled the emergency cord and as the train slowed, the pair tumbled the safe out the open door. After pulling the cord again, the signal to resume speed, John and Sim jumped to the ground scarcely a mile from the Seymour

B Y   D I C K   S T O D G H I L L

station. A cohort, Frank Sparks, was waiting with horses.

This, too, was witnessed and the word quickly spread. A posse was formed and arrived at the scene before the robbers had time to force open the safe, which contained \$30,000. Back in town, Gordon Kinney told of seeing the Renos board the train.

In the days that followed the brothers flaunted their wealth. Railroad detectives obtained their boot prints, then claimed they matched those at the site of the robbery. Masks and loot from other jobs were found in the Reno house. Warrants were issued, but it was considered a joke when the two brothers and Sparks were arrested. They were soon free on bail and never came to trial.

A month later Gordon Kinney answered a late-night knock at his door and was gunned down.

Long before staging the train robbery the Reno Brothers Gang had terrorized the countryside, ranging at times as far west as Missouri and the Iowa-Nebraska border. Some said Frank, the eldest at twenty-nine, was the leader. Others claimed John, twenty-seven, was the mastermind. Simeon wasn't as bright, but the twenty-three-year-old was a ready and willing follower. At eighteen Bill was learning the trade from his brothers.

The family, of French descent, had anglicized their name from *Renault*. Reno, Nevada, was named for a prominent relative. Wilkinson Reno, a farmer and father of the boys, had arrived in Indiana as a youth. He acquired land and by 1866 was the biggest taxpayer in Jackson County. The fifth son, Clinton, and a lone sister, Laura, were upstanding citizens. It was said that his brothers despised Clint.

The role of Wilk Reno is murky. He had built a school for his sons and church attendance was mandatory.

# LONG BEFORE STAGING THE TRAIN ROBBERY THE RENO BROTHERS GANG HAD TERRORIZED THE COUNTRYSIDE.

Still, he was looked upon with suspicion when the thriving town of Rockford, near the Reno farm, experienced a series of incendiary fires that left it gutted. Rockford was rebuilt, only to have the arsonist strike again. Most of the residents moved two miles south to Seymour—a raw, new town platted in 1852 on a wide plain amid low hills and rolling terrain. Two rail lines crossed in the center of town.

The numerous trains arriving from the four points of the compass drew a motley crowd of gamblers, counterfeiters, thieves and gunmen. Some believed John Reno traveled about the country recruiting them. The outlaws took over the charred remains of Rockford as their own. Many young men from the surrounding countryside turned to crime and, like the new arrivals, became part of the gang led by the Renos.

Residents of the area lived in constant fear. Few ventured outside after dark, and they were in grave danger even when home. Surrounding houses and demanding valuables was a favorite tactic. Keeping or carrying money was tantamount to signing one's own death warrant. Stores were hit again and again. Travelers checking into the Rader House and other Seymour hotels were robbed and sometimes murdered.

Public officials were bribed or coerced. Informers were everywhere; criticizing the Reno boys and their followers could be a deadly mistake.

The editor of the *Seymour Times*, a local booster hoping to draw people and industry to the town, still felt compelled to write: "Conditions today are unspeakable. Seymour has a carnival of crime." And in another issue: "Jackson County contains more cutthroats than Botany Bay." In July 1865 he warned visitors "...not to drink, nor to go to sleep, nor to move about unless in sufficient numbers to overawe the gangs of thieves and assassins that infest this place."

Seymour was truly as wild and dangerous as any Kansas cowtown or outlaw haven in Arizona. More so, perhaps. On April 11, 1867, the *Times* listed fourteen recent murders. A week later it mentioned thirty-five major crimes.

Many believed the Reno brothers did not take part in most of the ordinary crimes, being content to raid county treasuries in several states and rob an occasional train. Some even saw Frank Reno as a Robin Hood who would come to the aid of a family in distress. The story was told of Frank giving \$1,000 to a neighbor about to lose his home to a usurer, instructing him to pay the mortgagee at nine o'clock that night and to obtain a paid-in-full receipt. Shortly after nine the gang retrieved Frank's money, along with everything else of value in the usurer's possession.

After being hired by Adams Express, Allan Pinkerton and his detective agency monitored the activities of the Reno Gang. An undercover operative, Dick Win-scott, opened a bar in Seymour and became acquainted with the outlaws.

In a portent of things to come, three men were lynched in Jack-

son County during 1867. Two were hanged in the courthouse square at Brownstown after being taken forcibly from the jail by a mob wearing scarlet masks.

About the same time John Reno and Volney "Val" Elliott, tipped off by former Seymour friends, raided the Daviess County treasury in Gallatin, Missouri—the heart of Jesse James and Younger brothers' territory. John was identified, but making an arrest in Seymour would be risky. Pinkerton hatched a plot in which Winscott lured him to the railroad station on the pretext of meeting a friend. As the train was about to pull away, Pinkerton men jumped down to the platform, grabbed John, and carried the struggling outlaw aboard. No one realized it, but in doing so, they probably saved his life.

In his autobiography, John Reno presented a different version of his capture. The best evidence that the snatch took place came later when William Pinkerton admitted, "It was kidnapping, but the ends justified the means." The damaging admission came at a time when the agency already was having an image problem.

Frank Reno led gang members west to free his brother as he was en route to prison, but they missed train connections in Illinois. In January 1868, John Reno entered the Missouri State Prison for a stay of ten years.

A few months later the Renos staged their biggest caper, unaware they were setting off a chain of events that would draw the world's attention. Mass lynchings would occur, diplomatic relations between England and the United States would be strained to the breaking point, law and order would finally come to Seymour, and as its legacy the gang would leave behind a mystery that to this day remains unsolved.

At 11:45 P.M. on May 22, 1868,

# PINKERTON RECORDS

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## SHOW THE GANG ESCAPED

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## WITH \$96,000—THE

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## LARGEST THEFT IN THE

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## NATION'S HISTORY UP TO

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## THAT POINT.

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the Jeffersonville & Indianapolis Railroad's northbound express stopped at Marshfield, a desolate, uninhabited water and fuel stop in swampland less than twenty miles south of Seymour. Men quietly slipped from hiding places, overcame the train crew, uncoupled the locomotive and express car from the coaches, and sped off northward. The number of outlaws involved varies from one account to another but it included Frank, Simeon, and Bill Reno, along with half a dozen others.

The luckless Adams expressman was beaten, then thrown from the speeding train before it stopped near Farmington, a crossroads village a few miles south of Seymour, where horses were waiting. Pinkerton records show the gang escaped with \$96,000, making it the largest theft in the nation's history up to that point.

Cries of outrage arose; for the first time, the Renos felt threatened. Sim and Bill went to Indianapolis to hide out with friends. Frank Reno and Charlie Anderson traveled farther afield, eventually arriving in Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

Those remaining behind believed that even without Reno leadership they could continue as before. A train robbery was planned west of Seymour. The engineer was brought into the plot, but immediately tipped off the Pinkertons.

The robbery was set for July 10, when a large shipment of cash would supposedly be on the train. Instead, Pinkerton men awaited in the darkened express car. A gunfight broke out and the robbers, two of them wounded, had to flee. Val Elliott collapsed from loss of blood and was captured.

A few days later Fril Clifton and Charlie Roseberry, reportedly a captain in the Union army during the Civil War, were seized in a thicket near Rockford. Three others—Frank Sparks, John Moore, and Henry Jerrell—again escaped and headed west to a hideout at a farm in Illinois.

On the night of July 20, the three in custody were being taken to the county jail in Brownstown when a waving lantern halted the train in which they were riding. Men in scarlet masks went through the coaches calling the names of Elliott, Roseberry, and Clifton. Once found, the outlaws were hustled to a nearby beech tree and lynched. Elliott and Roseberry remained defiant to the last. When ordered to admit his misdeeds the former, a handsome Ohioan, cried, "Confess, hell! I'll tell you nothing. You are a thousand to one against us—go ahead and do your damndest." Clifton asked in vain to see his mother, an act interpreted by the mob as a sign of cowardice. In view of later events, there may have been another reason.

From Illinois, Jerrell wrote to his sweetheart in Louisville. Pinkerton agents were awaiting the letter. Moore, Sparks, and Jerrell were soon captured. The train taking them to Seymour experienced strange delays and missed



connections with another bound for Brownstown. The Pinkerton men, stranded at the depot with their prisoners, located a wagon and set out for the county seat.

En route they passed the tree west of town used in the lynchings five days earlier. Sighs of relief were heard once it was behind them, but they were premature. Suddenly, scarlet-masked men rose up from the fields and seized the prisoners. They were taken to the same tree, forced to stand at the back of the wagon, and hanged from the same limb. John Moore, twenty-one-year-old veteran of the Civil War, had grown up only a short distance away. When told to remove his black hat he refused, defiantly shouting, "You're just a pack of moss-backed Hoosiers." The hat was still on his head when the bodies were discovered in the morning.

Later, Sim and Bill Reno were apprehended in Indianapolis, Frank and Charlie Anderson in Windsor, Canada. Extradition proceedings for the latter pair were involved, but eventually they joined the younger Reno boys in jail. Not, however, before a tug hired by Allan Pinkerton to take the prisoners across the river to Detroit was struck by a large launch and immediately sank. It was an incongruous scene—Pinkerton and his men fighting to keep their shackled prisoners afloat until the launch returned to the rescue.

The three Renos and Anderson were confined in the jail at New Albany, supposedly the strongest in Indiana. But it was not, as events proved, strong enough to keep out the masked men of the Vigilance Committee. In the pre-dawn hours of December 12, 1868, they traveled south by train, stormed the jail, and after chasing the nightshirted sheriff across the lawn and shooting him in the arm, lynched Anderson and

# NO ONE, INCLUDING PINKERTON'S NATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY, REALLY KNOWS WHAT BECAME OF THE RENO LOOT FROM VARIOUS CRIMES.

Frank, Simeon, and William Reno.

The civilized world was shocked. Government officials in England were particularly incensed, having been assured that the men they had agreed to extradite from Canada would be safe. They were appeased only when legislation was rushed through Congress guaranteeing that such a thing would never happen again.

A few days later a vigilante notice scorning world opinion was distributed in Seymour. It warned that any further transgressions would result in more lynchings. While meant for everyone, seventeen names of those under surveillance were mentioned. Wilk Reno was one and, oddly enough, another was "Honest Clint."

The brutal methods of the vigilantes proved effective. The remaining outlaws fled; an uneasy calm settled over Seymour.

In 1878 John Reno was paroled, then arrested outside the prison gates and returned to Seymour on a charge stemming from the 1866

train robbery. Bond was set at \$20,000. The penniless John was soon freed when three prominent Seymour businessmen posted bail. A year later the charge was dropped.

John went back to prison for three years in 1885, after pleading guilty to passing counterfeit money. In the meantime, he had married brother Frank's widow. She divorced him after two years. John died in 1895 at his Seymour home, three blocks from where he and Simeon had pulled the first train robbery, which set a crime pattern followed for decades by outlaw bands farther west.

No one, including Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, really knows what became of the Reno loot from various crimes, including the \$96,000 Marshfield robbery. Many feel it was buried. In later years, men dug without success at the Reno farm, in Rockford, and near the spot where the outlaws abandoned the train.

Fril Clifton's mother left the area soon after her son's lynching. A story circulated that the man who worked the land after her departure plowed up glass jars containing what at the time was a small fortune. If true, the reason Fril had wanted to talk to her was so she would know where at least part of the treasure was buried.

Other people believe the Renos "banked" their money with cooperative Seymour businessmen for safekeeping. The posting of John's bail adds credence to the theory. It is said today that certain men of prominence became unexplainably affluent as the Reno era drew to a close.

Many conflicting and erroneous accounts of the Reno Brothers Gang are in print. The dates of major robberies are certain because of official records. The lynchings are well-documented. The total amount of money stolen in all their robberies differs from publication to publication, as does

the number of men involved in various events. The monetary figure in the Pinkerton records for the Marshfield job can be taken as accurate. The worst of the errors is found in *The People's Almanac*. It tells treasure hunters where to find Marshfield, but points to a village of that name more than a hundred miles from the scene of the robbery.

Little remains from the Reno era in Seymour today. The town of 15,500 has prospered and contains many beautiful buildings, yet few would describe it as a lovely place. The most prominent feature is a cluster of concrete silos, long abandoned. A downtown store bears the name Reno Western Apparel and the railroad tracks still meet in the center of town. Finding Hangman's Crossing and other locations isn't difficult if a visitor has the time.

Frank, Simeon, and William Reno are buried side by side in the old City Cemetery, which closed in the 1920s. The plot, which is on a slight rise of ground, is the only one enclosed by a wrought-iron fence. The grave markers are relatively new, the site well maintained. But don't be fooled, warn Seymour residents. They say the three brothers, and probably John as well, really lie in the shade of a large tree about a hundred yards away.

The grave of John Moore, who refused to remove his hat before the rope was put around his neck, is in a small cemetery beside Highway 11 a few miles south of Seymour. A government headstone for Civil War veterans marks his place.

The names of the vigilantes have never been published. An outsider has little or no chance of learning them even though certain people in Seymour, some of them descendants of the masked men, could provide the information. For reasons known only to

themselves, maintaining secrecy is still important. Not long ago a historian received warnings that vigilante names should be omitted from a proposed history of the town.

Aside from the Renos, even the names of outlaws are missing from a series of articles on the troubled times published in the *Seymour Tribune* in 1987 and reprinted in book form a year later. The outlaw surnames, said the writer, are still found in Seymour, so including them could cause embarrassment. Yet anyone can find them in numerous publications at the town's excellent library.

Secrecy always leads to speculation, and the secret of the vigilantes is 125 years old. One can't help wonder if the leaders of the organization didn't have more to hide than merely having taken the law into their own hands. And if maintaining silence remains important in Seymour today because the motives of vigilante leaders were less noble than appeared. Is it possible that the Renos did indeed place their loot with friends they thought could be trusted, but who instead wanted to keep it for themselves, and found a way of doing so by donning scarlet masks and leading others to do the same on those long-ago nights of terror? **EN**

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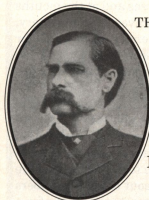
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Turkey Creek in  
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Mountains.





# WYATT EARP COUNTRY



THE SOUTHEAST CORNER OF ARIZONA is the land that Cochise and Geronimo loved and fought for—long, fertile valleys running north to south, divided by mountains whose names reverberate like hoofbeats: the Chiricahuas, the Dragoons, the Whetstones, and Huachucas, the Pedregosas, and the Peloncillos.

**Left: Wyatt Earp.**  
**Below: Cave Creek, one of the most haunted places in the country.**

This is high desert—cattle country, with grass tall in the valleys and oak, pine, and juniper abundant in the higher elevations. Much of it is unchanged from a century ago when Geronimo surrendered, and when a group of outlaws known as the Cowboy Gang terrorized the entire population.

Their names became a part of history: Old Man Clanton and his sons, Ike, Phin, and Billy; Frank and Tom McLaury; the mad dog, Johnny Ringo; Curly Bill Brocius, leader of the entire crew.

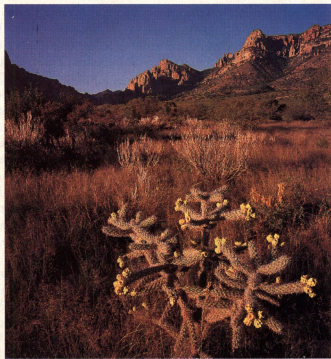


PHOTO BY EDWARD McCAN. WYATT EARP PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BOYER COLLECTION

But these names would mean little today without the vital link, the man who was hired to clean up the cowboys and the mining town named Tombstone, and who did so with courage and cool deliberation.

His name? Wyatt Earp. His associates, brothers Virgil and Morgan and the dentist-turned-gambler, Doc Holliday. His place, Wyatt Earp country, Cochise County, Arizona—6,256 square miles of rugged terrain; over four million acres of violent history.

Where would the western buffs and moviegoers of the last sixty years be without Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight to end all gunfights, the shootout at the O.K. Corral? Scores of films have been made, some simply using the Earp name and drifting off into fantasy, others closer to the truth but always missing the vital issues.

I have been lucky. I live in the shadow of the Chiricahua Mountains. I've hiked them and all the others, ridden the hills and valleys, been to places few have seen, and gradually, the puzzle that was Cochise County in the 1880s has become clear.

Simply put, the place was a robbers' roost, bristling with rustlers, con men, petty thieves, murderers, and highwaymen. At one point, according to a Mrs. J. C. Colyer, there were over three hundred "cowboys" living as they pleased and terrorizing what few good people there were.

Mrs. Colyer and her husband found it impossible to live in the newly formed county of Cochise. While on their way back home, she gave an interview to a *Kansas City Star* reporter, saying, "It is impossible to exaggerate the extent to which their lawlessness is carried. The people are all in constant dread of their visits. Most of them (the cowboys) are wealthy, owning the ranches in the surrounding country."

## Cochise County in the 1880s was a Rob- bers' Roost, Bristling with Rustlers, Con Men, Petty Thieves, Murderers, and Highwaymen.

This latter is also true. The cowboy ranches, all in strategic areas, were convenient hiding places for members of the gang who were on the lam, as well as for those who made a fine living stealing cattle in Mexico and driving them to market in the United States.

There was the first McLauray ranch on the Babocamari in the San Pedro Valley. There was the Chandler Milk Ranch and Ike Clanton's place, also in the San Pedro. The Sulphur Springs Valley boasted the Widow Patterson's public house at Soldier Hole, and later a second ranch belonging to the McLaurys, and Joe Hill's ranch, known as the Cienega, was in the San Simon Valley. Today these are ruins, difficult to find, and usually nothing more than a pile of adobes crumbling back into the red earth. And sometimes all that remains is a name on a map that gives rise to questions.

Old Man Clanton's ranch lay in the Animas Valley, a stone's throw from the Mexican border. From here he drove stolen cattle through Clanton Draw into Skeleton Canyon and thence across the

San Simon Valley to market at Tombstone and Fort Huachuca. Rustler Park, high in the Chiricahuas, is named for the obvious reason. Cattle brands were changed here, and while they healed, the stock grazed in the lush pasture. That pasture today is a popular campground reached via Portal, Arizona, and Cave Creek—one of the most scenic and haunted places in the country.

Deer drink from the creek water. Lions and bears den in the caves that tower above the road. The elusive trogons hiding in the trees lure birders from all over the world—Cave Creek is one of the great birding areas of America. And now and then someone speaks cautiously of the lights seen at night—lights with no hand holding them, dancing in the tops of trees and at the mouths of the great caves. It is a mystery, a thing to wonder at, to watch for when the moon is down and the only other light is that from a billion stars.

Farther north in these same mountains is the site of the old gold-mining town of Galeyville. Now in private hands, there is little left of the town, which was the favorite hideout of gang members evading warrants or looking for a spree.

Galeyville was named for its founder, John Galey, a Pennsylvania wildcat oil man and friend of the Mellon family. It was Galey who years later drilled the Spindletop Well in Beaumont, Texas, that was one of the cornerstones of the Mellon fortune. But in Cochise County he was simply trying to make his gold strike pay off—a difficult task, and one that put him in debt. In fact, he made the mistake of borrowing money from John Ringo. When he was unable to pay it back, Ringo threatened to kill him, and Galey made a hurried trip to Pittsburgh to borrow money from the Mellons. They lent it, but with reser-

vations, citing the fact that, although he was honest, he was "careless with money," and had been "scattering it here and there in the West . . . unwisely."

Certainly, borrowing money from Ringo was unwise. Far from being the romantic, poetry-spouting semi-hero that fiction has made him, Ringo was, instead, mentally twisted, a boyhood delinquent, a drunkard by the age of fourteen, and an all around wastrel. He met his end in July 1882, somewhere near the old road to Galeyville that ran out of the Sulphur Springs Valley and

open a stage line, but finding the routes already taken, they, as so many others, attempted to make their fortunes filing mining claims and claims for timber and water rights. They also gambled—a respectable occupation for gentlemen of the time—and Wyatt owned an interest in the gambling concession of the Oriental Saloon. He was also, from the first, an undercover agent for Wells Fargo. Virgil Earp was U.S. Deputy Marshal, and was appointed chief of Tombstone police in 1881. Wyatt, who had been riding shotgun for the stage line, be-

Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp, who had been lured to Tombstone by Behan with a promise of marriage and who became, unknowingly, Tombstone's Helen of Troy when she fell in love with Wyatt, instead, wrote in her memoirs that the County Ring's membership included "Art Fay, owner of The Nugget" (Tombstone's anti-Earp, pro-Democratic newspaper, as opposed to John Clum's paper, *The Epitaph*), "Harry Woods, Fay's editor and Johnny's undersheriff, and Milt Joyce, chairman of the county supervisors . . . these men were all outwardly re-



ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

eastward along Turkey Creek in the Chiricahuas. He was found shirtless, bootless, a pistol hanging in his watch chain, propped in a tree, one hole in his temple.

The verdict was suicide. The truth is that he was the last of the cowboy ringleaders tracked down and killed by Wyatt Earp and friends in a trail of vengeance unequaled in western history.

It happened like this.

Wyatt Earp and his brothers Virgil, Morgan, and James came to Tombstone in December 1879. Originally they had planned to

come deputy sheriff in July 1880. Later, when Cochise County was formed in February 1881, he expected to be appointed undersheriff by smooth politician Johnny Behan.

What was not immediately apparent was the fact that Behan was hand-in-glove with the cowboys and a member of what became known as "the County Ring," a clique of politicians getting rich on tax rake-offs and graft. Behan ignored his promise to Wyatt, who decided to run against him in the next election.

**Allen Street in Tombstone, looking northeast. This photo was taken sometime between 1870 and 1880.**

spectable and even prominent leaders . . . (who) regularly engaged the rustlers to perform their various touchy little jobs."

One of these "jobs" was the Kin near Stage holdup near the town of Contention in March 1881 in which the driver, Bud Philpott, was murdered. Mistakenly, as it turned out. The shot was intended for Bob Paul, a contender for the office of sheriff of Pima County,



who that night, instead of riding shotgun as usual, had taken over the reins for Philpott, who was under the weather.

A posse led by Deputy Marshal Virgil Earp pursued the highwaymen. It was joined by Behan and a few deputies, for appearance's sake, of course, because Behan had organized the holdup to get rid of Paul.

When Luther King, one of the highwaymen, was caught, he named his cohorts as Billy Leonard, Harry Head, and Jim Crane. (Actually Curly Bill, Frank Stilwell, who was soon to be one of Behan's deputies, and others were involved but were not named, probably because King realized his days were numbered if he squealed.)

Shortly thereafter, Harry Woods allowed King to walk out of the Tombstone jail and escape on a horse conveniently hitched beside the back door.

Worse, Woods came up with a story printed in *The Nugget* that Doc Holliday, Wyatt's friend since his days in Dodge City and Fort Griffin, Texas, had been involved in the robbery.

Wyatt, with his hopes of being elected sheriff, realized he had to clear Doc to clear himself. (The fact that Doc had an airtight alibi was ignored by the newspaper.)

Wyatt, working undercover for Wells Fargo, used a company reward as bait. He promised the money to Ike Clanton and Frank and Tom McLaury in return for helping him catch the fugitives.

The scheme backfired. Leonard and Head were killed in a robbery attempt in Hachita, New Mexico, and both Crane and Old Man Clanton were killed in an ambush in Skeleton Canyon by a posse that included Wyatt, Doc, Wyatt's youngest brother, Warren, and several others.

Skeleton Canyon, in the Peloncillo Mountains, is as rugged as it was in the last century. It is hiker's country and horseback country, several miles off Arizona Highway 80, where the San Bernardino Valley branches off from the San Simon. Lush pasture covers the cinder cones of a lava flow dating back three million years. Antelope and deer graze side by side with fat cattle. The canyon itself is approached through the yard of a working ranch.

Go through a wire gate, cross a wide, boulder-strewn wash, and time—the time of clocks, routine, the daily news—recedes and vanishes.

Birdsong, leaf rustle, sweep of wind, and the echoing cry of a hawk accentuate the silence of a thousand acres of wilderness. I find I am listening for hoofbeats, bawling cattle, the crack of gunfire.

It is impossible now to locate the actual site of the ambush. The old trail is overgrown and impassable, and in the canyon itself, high cliffs, boulders, and a dense growth of brush and trees offer a thousand hiding places.

But one thing is certain. The killing of Old Man Clanton in August 1881 led directly to the confrontation on the street at Tombstone.

The Earps had gone out looking for Jim Crane in the hope that his

Skeleton Canyon, in the Peloncillo Mountains—the site of Geronimo's surrender and the place Old Man Clanton was killed in an ambush by a posse that included Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday.

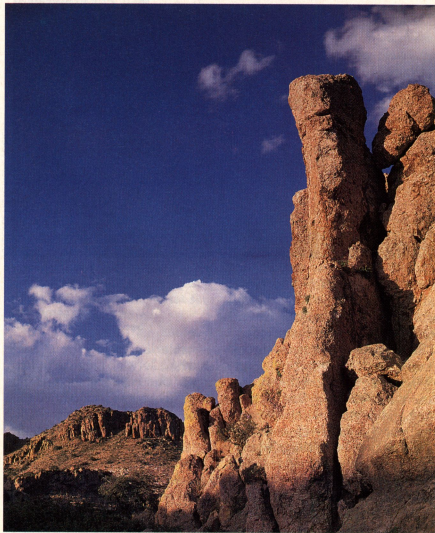


PHOTO BY JACK DYKINGA

testimony would clear Doc and give Wyatt his chance in the election for sheriff. But by accident they stumbled across him and a group of cowboys pushing a herd of stock stolen by Old Man Clanton.

They waited until morning and then called on the bunch to surrender. Instead the rustlers fought back, and all but one were killed, including Old Man Clanton.

The Earps went back to Tombstone. There were rumors that they'd done the killing, but most people thought it had been done by a bunch of Mexican irregular troops after the stolen cattle.

This, of course, makes sense. At the time, the Mexicans were unhappy with the whole situation. They were being robbed—by Apaches and whites—and there was little they could do about it. Private Mexican citizens were restrained from owning good firearms by a government fearing revolution.

Then Curly Bill, a very dangerous killer, entered the picture. He suspected that Ike and the McLaurys had been involved in a double cross, which they were. But Ike told Curly he'd set the Earps up by telling them they could trap Crane while intending to ambush them himself.

Curly wasn't dumb. On the surface he accepted Ike's story. But then rumors of the double cross started to circulate, and Ike was trapped. He accused Wyatt of spreading lies, and boasted to his gang about what he was going to do to him. So Curly called his bluff and told him to have a showdown and get it over with.

Ike had a Hobson's choice. He could risk getting killed by Curly Bill, or getting killed by Wyatt. He chose Wyatt, and that led him first to a confrontation with Doc Holliday on the night of October 25, 1881.

Doc wasn't the type to put up

# IKE CLANTON HAD A HOBSON'S CHOICE. HE COULD RISK GETTING KILLED BY CURLY BILL BROCIUS OR WYATT EARP.

with Ike's bluster. When Ike, with a few drinks in him, said he'd tried several times to ambush an Earp posse, Doc taunted him, saying, "We beat you to the punch. We killed your old man." Then he said, "If there's any grit in you, get out your six-shooter and go to work right here."

Ike said, "I ain't heeled."

Doc said, "You're too yellow to go without a gun."

But Doc couldn't goad Ike into pulling a gun. Hearing all this, Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan hauled Doc—who was drunk—away, probably saving Ike's life.

But from what had been said, they realized that they had to get Ike and his associates before they, themselves, were killed.

The stage was set.

The next morning Ike was on the streets drunk, carrying a Winchester and a six-shooter. He was yelling for blood.

About 2:30 that afternoon, he got more blood than he expected. When the smoke cleared over the empty lot next to Fly's boardinghouse and photographic studio, his brother Billy was dead, Tom and Frank McLaury were dead, and Ike had set a footracing record from the scene of the shooting, throwing away his pistol as he went.

That, of course, should have been the end of it, but the Cowboy

Gang was out for revenge. In December, Virgil Earp was ambushed from behind and crippled for life.

On Saturday, March 18, 1882, Morgan Earp was shot and killed, also from behind.

The next morning a coroner's jury identified some of Morgan's murderers, and Wyatt, for the only time in his life, became a ruthless killer set on revenge.

On Monday he put his family and Morgan's remains on a train for California, accompanying them as far as Tucson. Tuesday morning, the body of Frank Stilwell, one of the identified murderers who had followed the Earps to Tucson, was found next to the railroad tracks, shot by Wyatt.

Wyatt—and Doc, who was with him—returned to Tombstone, where Wyatt organized a federal posse. On Wednesday the next killer, Indian Charlie, was shot at South Pass in the Dragon Mountains (those same jagged hills where Cochise is buried).

On Friday, March 24, Curly Bill, outlaw leader, was killed at Mescal Springs in the Whetstone Mountains.

Then Wyatt, on the advice of Wells Fargo, left for Gunnison, Colorado, hoping to avoid extradition back to Tombstone, for Sheriff Behan was now openly his enemy.

A fifth killing occurred in July, when Wyatt, Doc, and a few others returned secretly to Arizona and killed outlaw John Ringo in West Turkey Creek Canyon, propping his body in a tree, where it was sure to be found. Ringo is buried beneath the tree, which was thriving until a few years ago, when it was damaged in a storm. High in the pine forest, Turkey Creek Campgrounds has become a peaceful spot for picnics and hikers.

The cowboy gang was broken. Many of them left for parts unknown.

For the first time, Tomb-





**John Ringo's grave in West Turkey Creek Canyon.**

stone and the county were fit places for law-abiding people. Ike Clanton was killed resisting arrest in 1887 in the White Mountains. John Behan continued milking the political till up to his death in Tucson in 1912.

And what of Josephine Marcus, the beauty who switched lovers midstream? She became the third and last Mrs. Wyatt Earp, dying in 1944, fifteen years after her famous husband.

Doc Holliday died in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, in November 1887. An interesting note is that his tuberculosis was in arrest during his years in Arizona and New Mexico—places known for their

beneficial climate. Perhaps of greater interest is the fact that his mistress, Big Nose Kate, refused to live with him in Tombstone, saying, "If you want to ally yourself with those Earps, you'll do it without me." She did, however, visit him three times and was a witness to the gunfight. She was also with him at the time of his death (Wyatt was not), and died herself in the Arizona Pioneer's Home in 1940.

For those visitors to Tombstone who want to relive the shootout, be warned. Although Stuart Lake in his 1930 fictionalized biography, *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, gave us the phrase that has become part of western history, the "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" actually took place in an empty lot next to Fly's photographic studio and on what is today Highway 80.

In the O.K. Corral itself, grotesque papier-mâché figures of the

participants make a mockery of fact and are hardly worth the price of admission.

Looking back on her time in Tombstone, Josephine Earp said, "Evil rises up out of the ground there." She may have been right. It is not uncommon to see the casual visitor change into a gunslinger with the acquisition of a Stetson, boots, and a cowboy swagger. More than once the law has been called to subdue someone brandishing a loaded pistol—a fact that prompted one old-time resident to shake his head in wonder and say, "If they're not here, they're on the way."

And Cochise County—Wyatt Earp country? Drive on Highway 80 through the vast valleys, under the hot sun, and marvel at the magnificence of earth and sky. Listen to coyotes howl and chuckle on the old trails at night. Watch eagles circle the mountain peaks by day. And now and then, if the wind is right, you might hear ghosts riding past, riding fast into history. ☐

#### FURTHER READING

*I MARRIED WYATT EARP*  
the memoirs of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp, collected and edited  
by Glenn G. Boyer. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976.

*WYATT EARP'S TOMBSTONE VENDETTA*  
by Glenn G. Boyer. Talei Publishing, Inc., Box 25098,  
Honolulu, HI 96825-1994.

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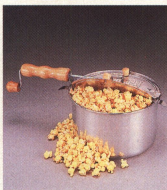


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If a fiction writer were to fetch up from his imagination an ideal upbringing for a western writer, Elmer Kelton's biography could serve as a model. This most honored and respected of all living western writers was born on the Scharbauer Cattle Company's Five Wells Ranch, near Andrews,

Texas, in 1926. His father was a cowboy, his mother a former schoolteacher, and as a youngster, he learned the cowboy trade. But, the story has been told about him, when Elmer was sent out as a jingler (horse wrangler) to watch the herd, he had one eye cocked on the horses, the other on a

A  
CONVERSATION  
WITH

# ELMER KELTON

BY DALE L. WALKER

western novel. Another story, which the author says has the stamp of truth, occurred when the Kelton family lived near the West Texas town of Crane and father Buck was foreman of the McElroy Ranch. Elmer had to tell his father that he aspired to be a journalist.

Buck Kelton absorbed this news stoically, fixed his son, the son says, with a "look that could have killed Johnsongrass," and said, "That's the way with you kids nowadays. You all want to make a living without having to work for it!"

But young Elmer had set his course and entered the University of Texas at Austin in 1942.

His studies were interrupted by World War II, in which he served as an army infantryman in Europe. He returned to the university in 1946 and earned his journalism degree in 1948, a year after he married Anna Lipp (known as Ann), the Austrian woman who would be his lifelong companion.

In all, Kelton worked for over forty years as a livestock journalist, reporting for the *San Angelo* (Texas) *Standard-Times*, serving as editor of the *Sheep and Goat Raiser Magazine* and for twenty-five years as associate editor of the *Livestock Weekly*. He retired from journalism in 1992 to devote his full time to writing.



“A GOOD NOVEL OF THE WEST IS JUST AS VALID  
AS A NOVEL SET ANYWHERE AS LONG AS IT IS HONEST AND  
REFLECTS REALITY.”

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While his newspaper work supported his family, Kelton's sideline of fiction writing began in the late 1940s. For a man who followed a demanding newspaper career for four decades, Kelton's industry in his “other life” is astonishing. He sold his first story to *Ranch Romances* in 1947; in 1955, his first novel, *Hot Iron*, appeared. In the thirty-nine years since that book debut he has published an average of a book each year to the present day—thirty-two novels, two story collections, and several nonfiction books. Most are under his own name, but some are under such pennames as Lee McElroy and Tom Early.

Among Kelton's novels are several considered to be among the best ever written: *The Day the Cowboys Quit* (1971), a pathmaking novel for Kelton and the entire western genre, based on the little-known 1883 cowboy strike on the Canadian River; *The Time It Never Rained* (1973), which introduced one of Kelton's most memorable creations, Charlie Flagg, a hard-headed, proud, and independent old cowman determined to wait out a seven-year drought in West Texas in the 1950s; *The Good Old Boys* (1978), *The Wolf and the Buffalo* (1980), *Stand Proud* (1988), *The Man Who Rode Midnight* (1987), and *Honor at Daybreak* (1991).

His most recent books are the novel *Slaughter* (1993) and two nonfiction books: *Elmer Kelton Country: The Short Nonfiction of a Texas Novelist* (1993) and *The Indian in Frontier News* (1993). His newest novel, titled *The Far Canyon*, is to be published by Doubleday in August.

Kelton has won five Golden Spur Awards from Western Writers of America, Inc., four Western Heritage Wrangler Awards from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, plus other awards and honors from the Western Literature Association and the Texas Institute of Letters.

He sums up his work by saying, “A good novel of the West is just as valid as a novel set anywhere as long as it is honest and reflects reality. My real subject is the human condition, and this is universal.”

Texas novelist Judy Alter, author of the standard critical work, *Elmer Kelton and West Texas: A Literary Relationship* (1989), describes the author as “very gentlemanly, soft-spoken, self-demeaning, and without a trace of author-ego, unfailingly polite with a lot of West Texas cowboy courtliness and a wry West Texas sense of humor. He is a thoroughly nice man.”

A lifelong West Texan, Elmer and Ann Kelton live in San Angelo.

**LLWM:** What can you tell me about Tommy Lee Jones and the film to be made from your *The Good Old Boys*?

**KELTON:** Well, I know very little. He was here early last December, scouting possible locations. I had dinner with him and his entourage. He told me it will be a TV movie for Ted Turner's TNT channel and that he intends to start shooting in May. He plans to write the script himself, direct the film himself—his first as director—and play Hewey Cal-

loway. I have not heard from him since.

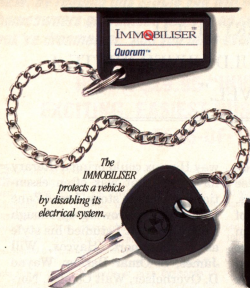
**LLWM:** Would this be the first actual film production of an Elmer Kelton novel?

**KELTON:** Assuming that it is actually going to happen, it will be the first film made from one of my books, though several have been optioned at one time or another. I have done a screenplay under contract on *The Man Who Rode Midnight*, but don't know if it will really be produced.

**LLWM:** My numbers may be slightly off, but I think you have something like thirty-three novels to your credit since *Hot Iron* appeared in 1955. Looking back on your early books—*Buffalo Wagons*, *Barbed Wire*, *Shadow of a Star*—what difference do you see in your work today compared to those novels? What have you learned?

**KELTON:** Looking back on those early Ballantine books, I would say the major difference today is that I place greater emphasis on character and less on action. But even the early books were relatively strong on character. Betty Ballantine was always more interested in *why* a character fired a gun than in simply showing the character firing a gun. She always valued strong characterization over strong plotting and she exerted an important influence over my manner of writing, then and now.

**LLWM:** Your more recent novels are longer and more “historical”?



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**KELTON:** Both. Longer, more complex, and in most cases, more deeply rooted in history than most of my early ones. *Massacre at Gol-iad*, which I wrote for Betty in 1965, was probably the turning point for me in that direction. My first Doubleday novel, *The Day the Cowboys Quit*, was another turning point. *The Time It Never Rained* is not a historical in the normal sense, but students today regard it as one because its setting is now forty years in the past! Probably the most deeply historical of my works so far has been *The Wolf and the Buffalo*.

**LLWM:** One of the surprising things about your career is that you were a full-time livestock journalist for forty-two years, yet still managed to produce nearly a book a year in all that time. Did the daily journalism help or hinder your fiction writing?

**KELTON:** In most ways I have looked on my journalism work as a plus. True, it took a major part of my time, but by having a regular job and a salary which paid the necessary family expenses, I was able to write more or less what I wanted to write. We did not live or die on whether or not I could sell a book, and I never had to write something I did not want to write simply because I needed the money to make the house payment or put groceries on the table.

**LLWM:** In that respect, the journalism was almost liberating?

**KELTON:** Yes, and helpful in other ways. My specialty was agricultural journalism, which kept

me in close association with ranch and farm people. In effect, these were the sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters of the people I was writing about in my fiction. In the case of *The Time It Never Rained* and *The Man Who Rode Midnight*, they were the people I was writing about. The stories I heard from them, the kind of people they were, greatly influenced the fiction I wrote.

**LLWM:** Your own rural ranch upbringing helped in those associations and in your fiction?

**KELTON:** Yes, and those associations influenced my own views on life. Ranch and farm people remain close to nature and still hold to most of the basic values that built this country. Having grown up on a ranch, among cowboys and ranch people, I feel very much at home in their company. Though I have spent my adult life living and working in a medium-sized Texas city, I am at heart still very much a product of the country. I could never write a modern urban novel. I do not relate to the big-city lifestyle.

**LLWM:** Somewhere you wrote about Luke Short's mastery of characterization, as in his book *Ramrod*. Have you learned from reading the great writers of western fiction?

**KELTON:** When I was trying to get started as a writer, I studied the works of Luke Short and Ernest Haycox in particular. I always considered Short a master at characterization as well as sharp, crisp narrative. And I admired the

way Haycox could bring a literary flavor to what was often essentially a formula story. I read Zane Grey as a boy growing up, though I can't say that I studied his style as I did Short, Haycox, Will James, S. Omar Barker, Wayne D. Overholser, Walt Coburn, Norman A. Fox, Thomas Thompson, Harry Sinclair Drago, and W. C. Tuttle when I was trying to learn the craft.

**LLWM:** What Texas writer taught you the most?

**KELTON:** In my viewpoint toward western history and tradition, I was strongly influenced during my formative years by Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie. Incidentally, like other critics, Dobie regarded Owen Wister's *The Virginian* as a watershed work in western fiction, but he pointed out that the Virginian was a cowboy who never seemed to work with cows. He was always busy doing something else. So, I have made it a point when I write about cowboys to show them out there with the cattle.

**LLWM:** I want to return to the matter of characterization because people who know western fiction regard that as a hallmark of your work. Do you consciously set out to establish strong characters—Charlie Flagg in *The Time It Never Rained*, Frank Claymore in *Stand Proud*, Gideon Ledbetter, Gray Horse, and Hannah York in *The Wolf and the Buffalo*, Wes Hendrix in *The Man Who Rode Midnight*, Hugh Hitchcock in *The Day the Cowboys Quit*, as examples—as the first requisite in planning a novel?



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However, while you are active in this business, you can also get a FREE CAR - we'll furnish you with a 100% paid-for "company car" when you reach certain goals.

### **THERE'S EVEN MORE. THE BUSINESS GETS EASIER THE LONGER YOU'RE IN IT. BECAUSE YOUR CUSTOMERS BECOME "SALESMEN" FOR YOU!**

Once your customers see their savings, they tell everybody they know about you! We even teach you a unique 'referral management system' that motivates your customers to refer others to you, so, quickly, you'll find your customers doing most of your selling for you!

### **WE GUARANTEE YOU'LL FALL IN LOVE WITH THIS BUSINESS**

We've put EVERYTHING you need to know about this business in an incredibly exciting, step-by-step Manual, titled, we think appropriately, "UNLEASH THE ENTREPRENEUR WITHIN" - because it WILL unleash the successful entrepreneur in you! Mary Anderson, the Executive Director of the Direct-Mail-Order Association said, "I'm constantly bombarded with new programs and, after reviewing 'Unleash The Entrepreneur Within', I personally rate it one of the best. It's not the very best opportunity around today." Robin Seymour, host of The Opportunity Show, seen on TV, calls this "one of the finest opportunities I've seen in 25 years."

You see, we believe you are simply going to fall in love with this opportunity - so we're glad to completely guarantee your satisfaction with everything we've put together for you. If, after studying the "Unleash The Entrepreneur Within" Business Manual, you feel that this opportunity is not for you, for any reason, you can return the Manual within thirty days and we'll refund your money. Every penny. Immediately. No quibbling. No hard feelings.

By the way, you'll learn a lot more from this Manual than just this particular business. For example, you'll learn about Residual Income, Multiple Income, Referral-Type Marketing, and the real secrets behind most self-made, wealthy peoples' success. You'll also get over FIFTEEN DIFFERENT WAYS to promote more than 14 various services...including payphones, phone bill audits, and a simple, dirt-cheap postcard you can send out so people call you, eager for what you offer...a way to help church, civic or school groups do the fundraising with you...and much more. If you are already in sales, you can, of course, sell this "old-fashioned way" too: face-to-face. The "Free 4 Hours of Service" can also be used as a premium. Jim Straw says: "As the publisher of some of America's leading business opportunity publications over the last 20 years, I have seen almost every business opportunity. I must say that 'Unleash The Entrepreneur Within' is the cream of the crop, the best of the best."

### **THE ONLY OPPORTUNITY WHERE MONEY IS NOT A PROBLEM.**

You DO NOT need to ask customers to give you money. There's NO startup fee, NO monthly fees. You even GIVE AWAY four hours of service, FREE. The customer will never notice anything different in his

phone service - the only difference will be his savings! (That he'll notice!)

And, YOU DO NOT need to risk or invest your hard-earned money to get going in this business. You work from home. There's no inventory to buy, no costly seminars or 'boot camps' to come to, no franchise fees. We start you in this business for just \$29.95, and that's even guaranteed!

### **HOW BIG IS THIS OPPORTUNITY?**

There are at least 20-Million potential customers for our service, who WILL save money with us. And we are on a mission to reach them all, to give each and every one of them 4 HOURS OF FREE LONG-DISTANCE SERVICE! We need you, right now, to get our message out. That's why we're willing to set you up in a business equal in income potential to distributorships and franchises requiring thousands of dollars, for just \$29.95. And to give you a money back guarantee.

### **WHY SHOULD YOU TRUST THIS OPPORTUNITY?**

Our company, Business Network Communications, is located in a 4,000-square-foot office complex in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Our Marketing Offices occupy 6,000-square-feet at 2770 Ridgway Court in Walled Lake, Michigan. (We do not 'hide' behind a P.O. Box, like some advertisers of get-rich information.) We are registered with Dun & Bradstreet. And, all of our commercial customers get genuine AT&T long-distance services. We have created the finest wholesale, "group" long distance service in America. We are now building the finest national network of Associates, to represent our services in their communities. We are interested in YOU, not your money - that's why we're putting you in business for just \$29.95. And, we guarantee your satisfaction or your money back.

### **LET'S SUMMARIZE:**

You can use any of our 15 different promotional methods to find business owners or homeowners interested in saving money on long-distance calls...let them try our services without paying a cent...even give them 4 hours' service FREE...and you'll receive a commission on every customer's activity not just the next month, but EVERY month, for life! EVERYTHING you need to start in this business is provided in our 'Unleash The Entrepreneur Within' Business Manual, for just \$29.95.

### **THIS IS, HOWEVER, A LIMITED TIME OFFER.**

Soon, we may change the way that people can get started. It will probably require considerably more than thirty dollars. In some areas, we may stop accepting new people altogether. This \$29.95 offer is a limited time situation, so act now.

### **HERE'S HOW TO GET STARTED:**

Order now and receive a FREE money making video valued at \$20. For VISA or Master Card orders, call Toll-Free, 1-800-523-8691 Operator 251. Or, mail your check or money-order for \$29.95 plus \$4.50 shipping/handling to: BUSINESS NETWORK COMMUNICATIONS, 2770 Ridgway Court #251, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390. Or, first, for even more information, call a Toll-Free Message at 313-458-1764. Do it now!

"I LIKE MY MAIN CHARACTERS TO HAVE VALUES AND TO ABIDE BY THEM WHATEVER COMES, EVEN THOUGH THEY MAY BE DEFEATED."

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**KELTON:** Yes, I like to create strong characters—strong yet vulnerable enough that the reader can be concerned about what happens to them. I like the main characters to have values and to abide by those values against whatever comes, even though in a physical sense they may be defeated. Charlie Flagg stands by his personal code at great cost to himself and his family. At the end he still has his dignity, his self-respect, and his hope, though he has lost most of his material possessions. By contrast, Hannah York in *The Wolf and the Buffalo* has little in the way of personal values, remaining subservient and ultimately ruined by those who use her. Gray Horse in the same book remains true to the Comanche values that have guided his life, and he gives up his life rather than turn away from them.

**LLWM:** Are some of these characters based on people you have known?

**KELTON:** I have borrowed liberally from real people. To a considerable extent, I borrowed from my father for Charlie Flagg, but Charlie has elements of a number of other people I have known—ranchmen who endured the long drought of the 1950s. Hewey Calloway in *The Good Old Boys* is something of an amalgam of several cowboys I knew as a boy growing up on a ranch in the 1930s, plus a liberal amount of my own imagination. Wes, in *The Man Who Rode Midnight*, is modeled after an old bachelor cowboy I knew during my boyhood.

**LLWM:** Another feature of your work is that you have created strong female characters in a genre which, until recent times, was not noted for breaking such ground. How did this come about?

**KELTON:** In the older westerns, in the words of the late Stephen Payne, the woman's function was mainly "to be chased and chased, but to remain ever chaste." She was put there for the hero to rescue, and not much else. But in real life, women had a very important part in the settlement of the West, and it took a strong-minded one to survive. I think back to my two grandmothers and to the one great-grandmother I was privileged to know. Two were ranch women in a time when life on a ranch was hard. One grew up on a ranch and spent most of her adult life in oilfield towns where the main improvement over ranch life was running water and electric lights. Survival was a struggle, but they all met life head-on, never wasting time waiting around for my grandfathers to rescue them from anything. They could take care of themselves, thank you, and did.

**LLWM:** And your black and Hispanic characters?

**KELTON:** Hispanics and blacks were a factor in the history of the part of the country I write about—West Texas—and to ignore them would be to deny part of history. The Hispanic influence has been particularly strong here, and this has often led to a clash of cultures, intolerance by and to-

ward both sides—a most natural type of conflict for fiction.

**LLWM:** *Stand Proud* is one example of a Kelton story in which a man is caught up in the pushing aside of the old order to make way for the new. Would it be fair to say that idea is prevalent in your novels?

**KELTON:** If there is a common theme in my stories, it is the challenge of changing times. This is a universal problem, and a timeless one. In this country, far back into prehistory, there was a constant shifting of tribal groups, one dominating a region awhile, then giving way to a stronger force. The arrival of the Europeans only intensified a conflict that had existed for untold thousands of years. The big difference was that the Europeans brought a vastly different culture and a more advanced technology. Their weaponry gave them a strong military advantage that made the eventual outcome inevitable.

**LLWM:** The Darwinian inevitability of change?

**KELTON:** Nothing stands still for very long; no generation goes untouched by change, usually drastic change. Our history has been one of constant challenge to the status quo. And in using this universal theme, we don't have to create a white hat and a black hat to make a story. We can use two gray hats—one trying to bring about change and one trying to resist it.

**LLWM:** With such a theme,



# 500 miles from nowhere, it'll give you a cold drink or a warm burger...

NASA space flights inspired this portable fridge that outperforms conventional fridges, replaces the ice chest and alternates as a food warmer.

By Charles Anton

**R**ecognize the ice cooler in this picture? Surprisingly enough, there isn't one. What you see instead is a Koolatron, an invention that replaces the traditional ice cooler, and its many limitations, with a technology even more sophisticated than your home fridge. And far better suited to travel.

What's more, the innocent looking box before you is not only a refrigerator, it's also a food warmer.

## NASA inspired portable refrigerator.

Because of space travel's tough demands, scientists had to find something more dependable and less bulky than traditional refrigeration coils and compressors. Their research led them to discover a miraculous solid state component called the thermo-electric module.

Aside from a small fan, this electronic fridge has no moving parts to wear out or break down. It's not affected by tilting, jarring or vibration (situations that cause home fridges to fail). The governing module, no bigger than a matchbook, actually delivers the cooling power of a 10 pound block of ice.

**From satellites to station wagons.** Thermo-electric temperature control has been proven with more than 25 years of use in some of the most rigorous space and laboratory applications. And Koolatron is the first manufacturer to make this technology available to families, fishermen, boaters, campers and hunters—in fact anyone on the move.

Home refrigeration has come a long way since the days of the ice box and the block of ice. But when we travel, we go back to the sloppy ice cooler with its soggy and sometimes

spoiled food. No more! Now for the price of a good cooler and one or two seasons of buying ice, (or about five family restaurant meals), all the advantages of home cooling are available for you electronically and conveniently.

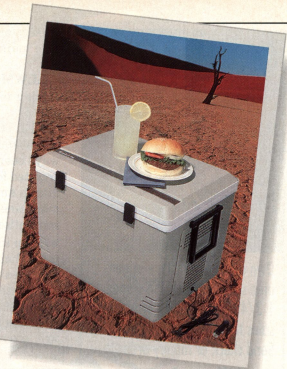
**Think about your last trip.** You just got away nicely on your long-awaited vacation.

You're cruising comfortably in your car along a busy interstate with only a few rest stops or restaurants. You guessed it... the kids want to stop for a snack. But your Koolatron is stocked with fruit, sandwiches, cold drinks, fried chicken... fresh and cold. Everybody helps themselves and you have saved valuable vacation time and another expensive restaurant bill.

**Hot or cold.** With the switch of a plug, the Koolatron becomes a food warmer for a casserole, burger or baby's bottle. It can go up to 125 degrees.

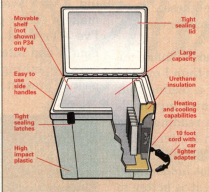
And because there are no temperamental compressors or gasses, the Koolatron works perfectly under all circumstances, even upside down. Empty, the large model weighs only 12 pounds and the smaller one weighs just seven. Full, the large model holds up to 40 12-oz. cans and the smaller one holds six.

**Just load it up and plug it in.** On motor trips, plug your Koolatron into your cigarette lighter; it will use less power than a tail light. If you decide to carry it to a picnic place or a fishing hole, the Koolatron will hold its cooling capacity for 24 hours. If you leave it plugged into your battery with the engine off, it consumes only three amps of power.



## The refrigerator from outer space.

The secret of the Koolatron Cooler/Warmer is a miniature thermo-electric module that effectively replaces bulky piping coils, loud motors and compressors used in conventional refrigeration units. In the cool mode, the Koolatron reduces the outside temperature by 40 degrees F. At the switch of a plug, it becomes a food warmer, going up to 125 degrees.



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Tight sealing lid

Large capacity

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We guarantee your satisfaction with any product from Comrad Industries. With the Koolatron you get our complete "No Questions Asked" 30 day money-back guarantee. Plus you get a full one year manufacturer's limited warranty. If you are not satisfied for any reason, just return the product for a complete refund.

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Koolatron (P9) holds 7 quarts.....	\$79	\$8 S&H
Optional AC Adapter (AC 10).....	\$39	\$6 S&H

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The versatile Koolatron is available in two sizes. The P24A holds 30 quarts and the smaller P9 holds seven quarts. An optional AC adapter lets you use them in your rec. room, patio or motel room. They plug into any regular outlet.





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your western novels are not concerned with such once-standard fare as the fast gun, saloon brawl, or runaway stagecoach.

**KELTON:** Uncle Henry Moore, a contemporary of my grandfather, had been here when West Texas was growing up and he said the gunfighters and outlaws, the gamblers and saloon women of the Old West were only the sideshow. They were never part of the main event, did little or nothing to build the West, and, if anything, held it back. The real builders, he said, the ones who counted, were the working people—the ranchers, farmers, cowboys, freighters, carpenters, blacksmiths, small-town bankers, mail carriers, ministers, and most of all, the school-teachers and homemakers. These people never received as much credit as they deserved, he said, while the sideshow got the most attention. In my writings, I have

tried to emphasize what he called “the main event.”

**LLWM:** Is the western story becoming more respectable?

**KELTON:** I don't know that it is, but it should. I think it has always been better than it has been credited for. It is an American tradition, and even the western pulp magazines were better than their reputation. Today we have many writers in the western genre who take their history seriously and who weave a really valid human story into the western locale. But the critical establishment still ignores them in favor of works that are often poorly conceived and shoddily written but are considered “important,” mainly because they are negative toward traditional American values. For many critics, a writer is important only when he savages his subject matter. If he writes with understanding and hope, with respect and love, he is considered trivial.

**LLWM:** You have reached a stage in your career where you are being treated seriously by academic critics. There are at least two books *about* you and your work and a lot of other scholarly essays and college theses. Does any of this make you nervous?

**KELTON:** It tends to make me more self-conscious than I used to be. I have more of a feeling that people are looking over my shoulder and sometimes reading more into my work than I intended to put there, finding hidden meanings where I had not hidden any. On the other hand, it is better to be overanalyzed than to be ignored altogether, which was the case for a long time. When any of this begins to bother me, I remember a story the late western writer Bill Cox told me about his neighbor and poker-playing friend Buster Keaton. After a long pe-

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riod of obscurity, Keaton was rediscovered by critics in the early 1950s and they began writing about his genius and the subliminal messages he placed in his silent films. Cox said Buster would slap his knee and laugh, declaring, “All I ever tried to do was make a funny picture.” Well, all I've ever tried to do is write an honest and interesting story that says something about our West, past or present, and about life. ☐

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