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THE COWBOY AUTHOR'S THRILLING NOVEL OF FIGHTING COWMEN—

OUTLAWED ORPHAN

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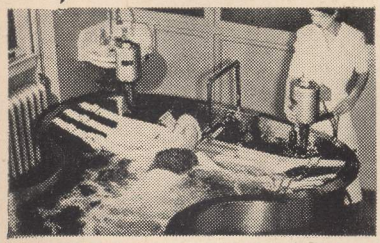

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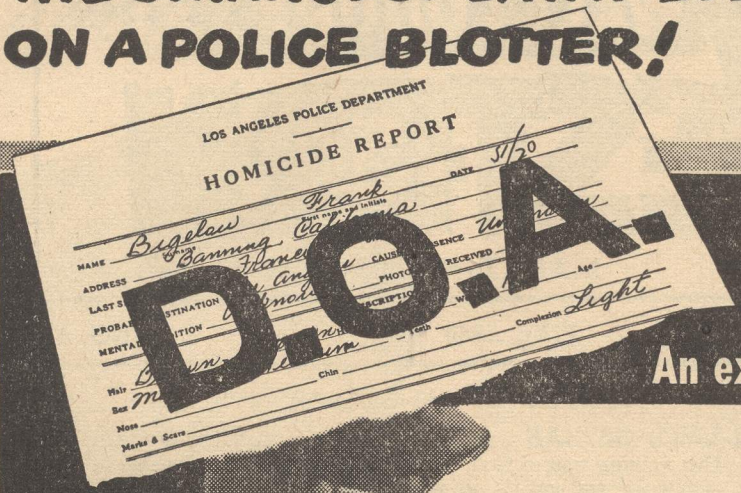

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WALT COBURN'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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VOL. 2 JUNE, 1950 NO. 4

THUNDERING RANGE-WAR NOVEL

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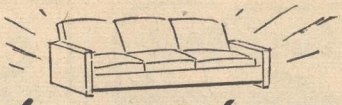
July Issue Published May 19th!

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

WALT COBURN'S WESTERN MAGAZINE is published monthly by New Publications, Inc., an affiliate of Popular Publications, Inc., at 123 18th Street, New Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Authorized by the Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada as second-class matter. Annual subscription $3.00. When submitting manuscripts enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in Canada.



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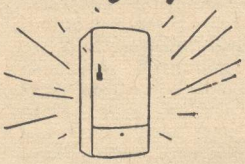

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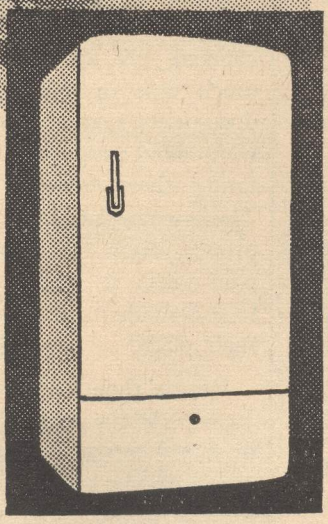

1850—ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ICE PROGRESS—1950

SWINDLER'S RIGHTS

By L. C. Davis

WHAT WAS perhaps the greatest real estate hoax in this country's history was perpetrated by a former Missouri woodchopper who had ambitions to be a Spanish don.

While dealing in St. Louis city properties, Jim Reavis fell in with George M. Willing, Jr. Willing claimed that a descendant of Don Miguel Peralta had given him a Spanish grant of over a million acres in Arizona. By hook or crook, Reavis obtained the fraudulent grant, and just to prove that he was no piker, he expanded his holdings to ten million acres.

To make his claim sound more plausible, the woodchopper, immediately upon arriving in the Southwest, decided to find himself a Spanish wife. He convinced a pretty Indian girl that she was an heiress to a great estate and married her in a fake ceremony.

Spanish and Mexican libraries next claimed his attention and he devoted much time to research among old legal documents, taking copious notes. He then went about preparing his own papers, dictating their contents to street scribes. These were placed in the sun to obtain the proper yellow tint denoting age. He then paid visits to monasteries, tore out the true documents and inserted the fakes in their place.

Reavis then assumed the title of Don James Addison de Peralto-Reavis and procured a red velvet suit and a shiny coach drawn by six white horses. With his beautiful Spanish wife, properly

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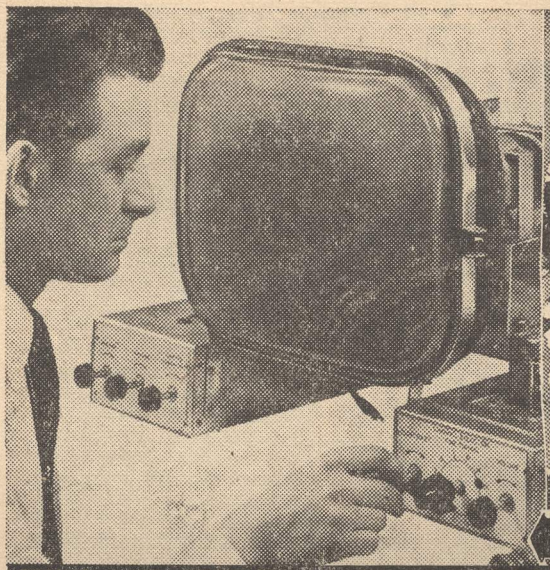

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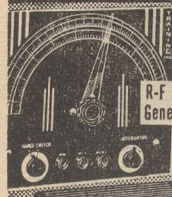

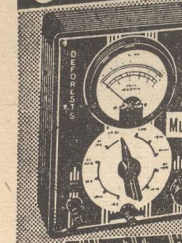

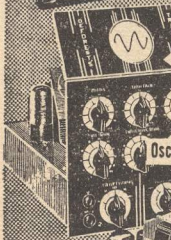

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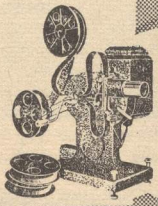

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(Continued from page 6)

garbed, beside him, the stately gentleman proceeded to drive to every small town in Arizona and announce that they had come to claim their ancestral estate, the Barony of Arizona, which included just about all of that territory.

A manifesto warned all residents of the area that they were subject to dispossession immediately unless they made arrangements to shell out tribute money to the Baron—or words to that effect.

Territorial residents were indignant but there seemed nothing to do but start paying rent, since his claims were substantiated at every turn, and the whole business looked genuine. The Peralto-Reavises were riding high, wide and handsome, and raking in the cash by the thousands.

Then a country printer by the name of Tom Weedin, whose hobby was the study of old documents, letters and type faces, got suspicious.

Fortunately, the records, which were sent to the court for examinaton and translation to substantiate the baron's claim, were not immediately returned to Spain and Mexico, but were placed in a vault in Phoenix until armed guards could take them away. Weedin obtained permission to see the documents in question, and examined them carefully.

He discovered that one old parchment, dated in Madrid in 1787, was printed on bond paper that bore the watermark of a Wisconsin paper mill that didn't exist before the Civil war. The printed portion of another old document, supposedly dated in the Spanish capital in 1748, was from type that wasn't even invented until 1875.

He showed his findings to the judge and in a hearing in June, 1895, Reavis was convicted of conspiracy to defraud the United States. He was sentenced to the Santa Fé penitentiary in 1896 and was released three years later.

BANDITS' UTOPIA

By John T. Lynch

THE LURE of a new gold-and-silver field was not quite enough, in the early '70s, to prod ordinary fortune hunters into making the long and dangerous journey necessary to get to the Panamint Mountains, far out in the desert at the edge of Death Valley. The new camp, where both gold and silver had recently been uncovered, was at the apex of a 160-mile triangle, at the other corners of which were Bakersfield and San Bernardino. Although both of these towns were stage-coach terminals, the Panamint Mountains were away out in the dismal desert, and there were as yet no roads.

Because it was so hard to get to, only such men as did not dare show their wanted faces elsewhere made up the bulk of the population of the little town of Panamint. The original silver strike had been made by honest men, and there were a few around, but they were in the minority. No matter who you were or what you had done, there was nobody in Panamint to question your past. No man of the law had ever come within miles of the place. It was truly a heaven and a haven for gentlemen on the lam.

Shortly after Joe Small and his partner-in-crime, Hoofs McDonald, checked in at Panamint's Hotel de Bum, they realized they had reached the promised land. Money and whiskey were plentiful, and the place was at once a satisfaction and a promise. Within two days the pair had staked a claim on what looked like rich land, and had taken stock of the situation in general. It was common talk that soon the big mining interests would come in to buy the good claims, and the town would start to boom.

Future plans looked so good that Small and McDonald, with acute and commendable foresight, realized that they needed some of their old friends and cronies to help them operate efficiently. As the two had been specialists in bank and stage-coach holdups in the Rocky Mountain area, most of their ex-partners were hiding out in and around Denver. To six of these men, Joe Small sent this letter:

> If you want to get in on the ground floor of a good thing, come here to Panamint right away. There's going to be a bank built here soon, and we can be the first to rob it. Also, there will be a stage-coach line that will carry silver in big shipments out of here, and money in. The stages will have to go through a lot of narrow canyons and will be a cinch to waylay as often as we want to. Besides this, we staked a claim and dug a little bit, and there is silver on it, which we can hire somebody to dig out for us.
>
> Now, here is the way to get to Panamint . . . Rob a bank in Denver and beat it to Salt Lake. Then go to Battle Mountain. Then take the stage south for ninety miles. Get off at Austin. After you check on the bank there—they handle the daily shipments of the Acme Mining Company—steal a good horse and ride south until you cross the Cedar Mountains. Just ask anybody around there how to get to Death Valley and how to cross it without dying on the road. If you can make it here it will sure be worth the trip. Yores truly, Joe Small and Hoof McDonald.

IN SPITE of Joe Small's foresight and long-range planning, the future did not work out the way he imagined it would. The six men who had received the letters decided to make the trip together. As Small had suggested, they "checked" on the bank at Austin, found it inviting—and were all killed in attempting to hold it up.

As for Joe Small and Hoof McDonald, they both got drunk and quarrelsome while waiting around for the local bank to be built, and were killed in a brawl.

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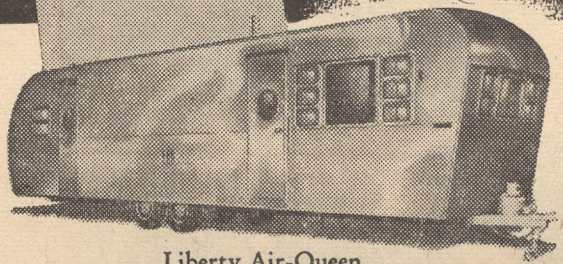

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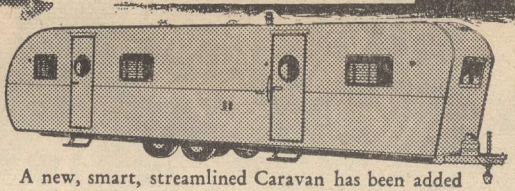

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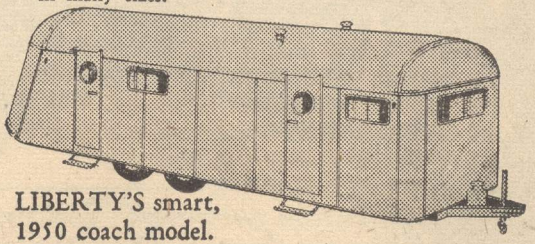

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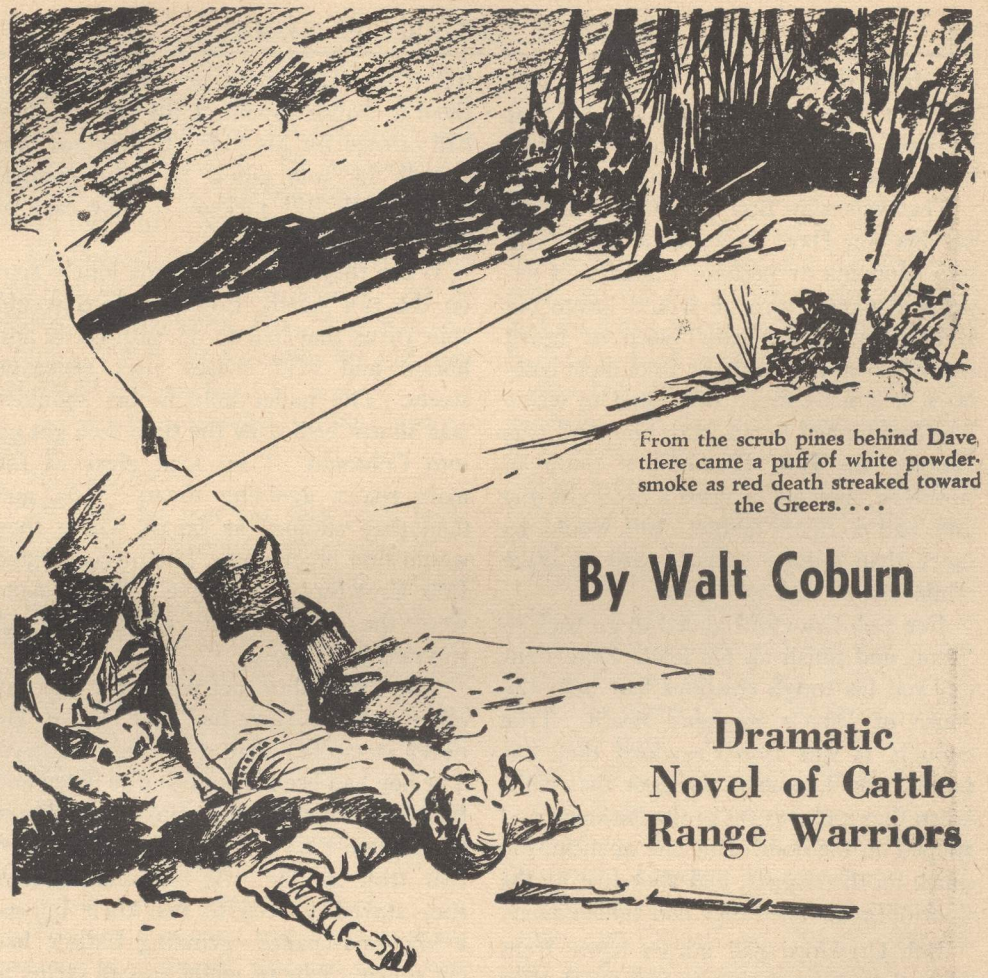


From the scrub pines behind Dave there came a puff of white powder-smoke as red death streaked toward the Greers. . . .

By Walt Coburn

Dramatic Novel of Cattle Range Warriors

On the rocks and cliffs that lined the hidden outlaw trails, Brimstone, militant man of God, painted his messages calling sinners to repentance. But what were words to men who understood only gunflame, and what was whitewash to those who themselves wrote in blood?

CHAPTER ONE

Wanted

TO THE fifteen-year-old Dave this leaving of the little ranch in Texas was a great adventure. To be headed for the skyline with his father, camping out, riding sometimes at night from the fall of darkness until the first light of dawn. . . . To take his turn standing guard over the horses and the camp, studying the far horizon with field glasses. . . .

Dave's father did his best to make a picnic out of it all. He tried to laugh and joke about everything, even about the bullet hole in his shoulder. He didn't want the boy to know or even suspect what had happened back there on the Pecos to make them quit the little ranch

and drift yonderly with a light pack outfit. He mustn't let Dave ever find out that he had killed Zeke Fenton, who had owned the big 45 outfit.

That was why Bob Crawford was taking his son Dave to a far-off range, up into Montana or perhaps Canada. It depended upon where he would locate big Bill Jackson. He hadn't seen or heard from Bill for a long time. Like most cowboys, he wasn't much of a hand to write. The last he had heard from him, Bill was running the Half Diamond F outfit in Montana. He had married a Montana girl and had a small family. Bill would be more than willing to take care of Dave while Dave's dad was gone.

For Bob Crawford aimed to go back to Texas and finish up his feud. Zeke Fenton and his tough cowboys had been the cause of Dave's mother's death. True enough, it was Bob Crawford they expected would come to the door that night when they rode up out of the darkness and rapped on the door. But one of them, too quick on the trigger, had shot just as the door opened. Then they had ridden away.

Bob Crawford had gotten home from town the next morning to find Dave, then eight years old, on the floor, his tanned cheeks stained with tears, a rifle across his knees, sitting beside his dead mother.

At the time the murder had been blamed on Mexican bandits who had slipped across the Border. Bob Crawford, then a Texas Ranger, had made it tough, always, on the Mexican raiders, even as he had fought the renegades on this side of the Line. It took him nearly eight years to learn who had murdered his wife. No longer a Ranger, he took the law into his own hands.

It had taken Dave quite a while to forget the killing of his mother, and Bob didn't want the boy's life to be scarred by more red memories. So he was taking him north. After that he would go back to **Texas and fight it out with the Fenton tribe.** He would go back and give them a chance to collect the reward they had offered for his hide. If they got him —well, he was going to leave enough money with Bill Jackson to take care of the boy.

When they camped at some lonely spot on the ride north, Bob Crawford would spin yarns that had to do with cattle and horses and wild chases after renegade steers. The bullet hole in his shoulder was almost healed by the time they got up into Colorado. They kept clear of the main roads, avoiding towns. Now and then they stopped at camps where they would find other men. The men accepted Bob Crawford and Dave. These spots were the way stations along the trail traveled by outlaws.

These men they met were just like any other cowboys Dave had ever known. He never suspected that they were outlaws. The boy had been brought up to listen and talk only when he was spoken to. These hard-bitten men of the hunted trails liked that trait in him. At one camp where they stayed a week to rest their horses, a big, tow-headed, grinning outlaw had cut down a pair of white angora chaps to fit Dave. The boy was to remember him afterwards, how he had joshed and played pranks.

UP NEAR the line between Wyoming and Montana, Bob Crawford's luck changed. The dread fear of the law that was hounding him became a tangible danger.

He had left Dave at a lonely camp and had ridden into a nearby town for grub. He had grown a beard and his hair was longer that it showed in the reward notices he had seen at different places, where he had ridden into town for grub and tobacco. He felt safe up here in Wyoming. Wyoming was a long way from Texas.

He was loading his pack horse when a **big, heavy-set man walked up. He stood**

there watching the loading of the kiak boxes. Bob Crawford seemed to pay the big man no attention but his heart was pounding a little hard. He had caught a glimpse of a law officer's badge underneath the man's coat.

He fastened the hitch on the pack and reached for tobacco and papers. As he rolled his cigarette, then dug into his jumper pocket for a match, the big man looked at him hard.

"Come far, stranger?" the lawman asked.

"Colorado."

"Where did you get that pack horse and that big bay geldin' you're ridin'?"

Bob Crawford had to think quickly now. He had been tempted to trade off these horses that wore his brand, but love of the animals and the way Dave had made camp pets of them, had decided against his getting rid of them. Now he wished he had done so.

"I swapped for 'em along the trail," he answered. "I never was much of a horse trader, but I got the best of the deal."

"What did the gent look like?"

"He was about my size, near as I remember, only heavier. He had a kid with him. Now don't tell me, mister, that I've been loco enough to swap for stolen horses."

"No, the horses ain't stolen. Whereabouts in Colorado did you make this horse swap?"

"Near Trinidad, close to the New Mexico line."

"Where you headed for?"

"Just driftin', mostly. I got a few dollars and I might locate somewhere if I find the right layout."

"Camped near here?"

"No," lied Bob Crawford. "I'll make camp wherever sundown finds me."

"You'll find water and feed about fifteen miles north. You can make it by dark. Good luck." The big man moved on.

Bob Crawford took his time about leaving town. That big peace officer had let him off easy. Too easy. He knew that he would be trailed. He wouldn't dare go to the camp where he had left Dave.

He seldom gambled and he very seldom took a drink, but in order to kill time until dusk, he left his horses at the hitchrack and sat into a poker game. Now and then he took a drink with the other players.

The big law officer took chips in the game for a while. Bob Crawford seemed to be getting more than tipsy. He bought drinks more often than need be and he played his cards with what seemed to be a drunken man's luck.

"What time does the barber shop close?" he asked finally.

"It closed an hour ago and that barber wouldn't open up for ten dollars," said one of the players. "Not while he's havin' luck like this." The speaker raked in a jackpot and grinned. "I'm the barber."

Bob Crawford grinned, too. "I'll get cleaned up at the next town," he said. "No rush. I reckon it's time I was goin'. One more hand and another round of drinks and I'll drift on. Sheriff, will the main trail take me to that water?"

"You can't miss it."

The fugitive's long legs seemed unsteady as he got to his feet and shoved a handful of money into the pocket of his overalls. He laid a heavy hand on the shoulder of the deputy sheriff.

"Lemme know if there's anything wrong about them horses, mister," he told him. "Write to me in care of the sheriff at Chinook, Montana. That's about where I'll land. My name is Bob Sanders."

He left the town in the gloom of dusk. For a mile or two he kept to the main trail, traveling at a long trot. Then he swung off the trail. He was traveling now at a fast lope.

An hour later he was at camp. Dave sat by the fire, playing wheezy tunes on a battered harmonica.

"Gosh, Dad, I'm glad you got here," he said. "It was lonesome, sort of."

"Anybody been here, Dave?"

"Two cowboys. They just left about half an hour ago. I cooked 'em supper. One had a badge on. They joshed and talked."

"Did they ask questions?"

"Some. I told 'em what you said always to say. That my name was Dave Smith and I was with my mother and dad on a pack trip into the mountains and that we came from a ranch about a hundred miles from here. I said my dad and mother had gone to town and would be back at camp tomorrow."

"Good boy. I hate to make you lie, son, but it has to be done. Now saddle up and we're on our way. I'll take care of camp stuff. Rattle your hocks, cowboy. Give you five minutes."

THE FIRE was kicked out. They rode hard now and without talk. Bob Crawford knew that the law was close behind him. If those law officers compared notes, which was likely, they would be hot on the trail.

They pushed on with their two pack horses. An hour, two hours, with the law trailing them. They had about an hour's start, so Bob Crawford figured. Not much of a lead when the posse would be forking fresh, grain-fed horses. They cut off the trail and took across the rolling prairie.

Ahead was the Powder River to cross. Bob Crawford reckoned they would hit the river before morning. If they could only get across the line into Montana, he'd feel safer. But it would be a long, hard race. He stopped long enough to unload the two pack horses. They might need those horses to change on. The kiak boxes and their grub, their bed and warsack full of clean clothes, were left behind in a brush thicket. Each leading a mount, the man and boy rode on.

The topography of the land was changing. The hills became more broken. They were nearing the river. Coulees filled with buck brush and buffalo berry bushes. Then the trail they had hit took them down a draw towards the river, which was lined with cottonwoods and willows. The trail struck a wagon road. Now the river showed, there in the light of a half-moon.

Bob Crawford, riding in the lead, pulled up at the river bank. He slid his carbine free. Something told him that danger waited here.

"Hit the river, son," he said. "Turn the pack horse loose. When you get into swimming water, slide out of the saddle and grab your horse's tail, like I've taught you. I'll follow as soon as— Quick, son!"

He leaned from his saddle, and his arms went around his son's shoulders.

"Be a brave man, Dave. Head north. Stay at cattle ranches or cow camps. Keep asking for Bill Jackson. When you find him, tell him who you are. Here's my money belt. Tie it on your saddle. Whatever you do, keep ridin'. Head for the north star. Don't wait for me. So-long, son. Good luck."

"But, Dad, I don't want to leave you behind."

"I got some men to see. Hit the river, boy. Good luck." He slapped Dave's horse with his quirt, then slid free from his own saddle as he saw the horse carry the boy into swimming water. He saw Dave slide out of the saddle.

Then Bob Crawford pulled his horse and the two pack horses into the brush. He had barely concealed them when hoofbeats pounded. Half a dozen men rode up on a run.

"Yonder he goes, across the river!" he heard them cry.

Bob Crawford's carbine spewed fire. His first shots were purposely high.

"I'm the man you want," he called. "Dead or alive. Play your cards, gents.

I'll kill the first man that tries to cross that river. Fill your hands and fight, hombres!"

Hell tore loose now. Bob Crawford was fighting for the one thing in life he loved most. That was Dave, his son, out yonder. No man would take that boy back to a reform school in Texas as long as his finger could pull a trigger.

One of the men had quit his horse and was lying on his belly by the river bank, shooting at Dave, out there in the river that was like a wide strip of silver in the light of the moon.

With a snarl, Bob Crawford shot. The man rolled over, twisting with pain.

One man against six, but Bob Crawford was not afraid. His gun barrel grew hot. A shot burned his thigh. He gritted his teeth and shoved fresh cartridges into the magazine of his carbine.

A man started his horse into the water. Bob dropped him out of the saddle before the horse reached swimming water. The man floundered ashore, moaning and cursing.

Crouched in the brush, the lone man fought his desperate fight, taunting them, cursing them, his lips twisting in a grin that showed through a smear of blood that came from a wound in his cheek.

"Come and get it!" he taunted them.

Four of them were wounded now, out of the fight. The other two kept shooting. Their bullets were coming close. One crashed through Bob Crawford's gun arm, ripping the carbine from his hands. He jerked out his six-shooter and used his left hand. But his aim was uncertain. It would be only a matter of minutes now.

He gritted his teeth as more riders came up on a run. The game was up. He could only hope that they wouldn't get Dave. A fusillade of bullets ripped the brush. The empty six-shooter slid from Bob Crawford's hand as he slipped forward on his face and lay still, his blood wetting the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

Brimstone

THERE was a hard lump in Dave's throat as he rode on. His eyes smarted. He had heard that shooting back there. One of the bullets had ripped a gash in his arm, but he didn't feel the pain. He kept thinking of his father, back there in that gunfight. He would have turned back, but he knew his father wouldn't want it that way. He couldn't have helped any, because he didn't have a gun; yet it seemed cowardly to ride on like this, into a crimson-streaked dawn, alone. But he was used to obeying orders. He had been raised that way. When his father told him to do a thing, he did it without question. He kept swallowing that hard lump in his throat. He had to be a man, not a cry-baby.

His horse was getting leg weary. Dave, who savvied a horse, could feel the game-hearted beast tiring. He slowed down to a shuffling trot.

The sun came out and the shivering boy welcomed its warmth. That night ride in wet clothes had been a cold one. The chill of it had cramped his bones, adding to his discomfort.

It was an hour or two after sunrise when he rounded some big boulders and came suddenly upon a camp at a creek crossing.

There was a campfire going, and a blackened coffee pot simmered at the edge of the coals. A few slices of cooked meat lay in a battered skillet on the ground. Dutch-oven bread. An old spring wagon with covered top. Two burros grazing where the grass was highest. A big, shaggy-coated mongrel hound asleep near the fire.

Then Dave saw the owner of this strange outfit. He was a short, thick-shouldered old man with a bushy white beard and a white mane that came to his

shoulders. He had a bucket half filled with white paint. In his other hand was a brush. He paid no attention to Dave. He was painting a sign on a big boulder. It read:

PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD!

Dave watched him finish the sign. Then the old fellow put the cover on his can and wiped the paint from his brush. Through the bushy white beard that reached the man's high cheekbones there showed a pair of the bluest eyes Dave had ever seen. Eyes undimmed by age, shrewd, quizzical, kindly eyes with a twinkle of humor.

"Git down, son, and unsaddle," the old man said. "You and your horse need food and rest. Wet, too. I'll git you some hot grub."

He put wood on the fire and from his wagon brought out dry underwear and a thick blanket.

"Undress by the fire and git into these dry clothes. They're too big, but they're warm."

The big shaggy hound got to his feet and came over to get acquainted. Dave scratched the animal's head and the ungainly tail wagged.

"His name is Sooner," his owner said. "I named him that because he'd sooner eat and sleep than tend to his job of guarding the camp. I found him in a deserted 'breed camp when he was about as big as my fist. Raised him on canned milk. Thought he'd never quit growin'. When the wolves and coyotes sing at night he joins in the chorus. He's took up with you right off. . . . Lemme take a look at that arm of your'n, son."

From the wagon came clean bandages and salve. Warm water, a carbolic solution, and the job was done. By then the meat was cooked and the biscuits heated, a jar of wild honey brought forth.

When he had eaten, Dave was put to bed between clean, warm blankets. He was just dropping off to sleep when he thought of the money belt his father had given him. He got up and went over to his saddle. The money belt was gone. He might have lost it in the river or along the trail somewhere. He'd forgotten all about it.

The old man with the white beard and long white hair was mending his patched harness, puffing away on a blackened old corncob pipe, humming to himself.

Dave went back to the tarp-covered bed and dropped off to sleep in a few minutes. He had not asked about the money belt. He would do so when he woke up.

As the boy tossed restlessly in his heavy slumber, the blue eyes of the rock painter watched. . . .

IT WAS noon when Dave awoke. His dry clothes were there on the ground beside the tarp-covered bed. The old man was harnessing the burros.

"This 'un," he said, "I calls Ornery. The other 'un is Stubborn. They look alike and they act alike. They'll eat anything a goat will eat and the minute it starts to rain, they balk. What's your first name, son?"

"Dave."

"A good name, taken from the Bible. David. You've read about David, who slew Goliath with the jawbone of a burro?"

"No, sir. I never read the Bible, mister. Just books at school and some my dad gave me. I'll clean up the dishes and help you load up before I go."

"Where you goin', son?"

"I'm huntin' for a man named Bill Jackson."

The old rock painter eyed the boy sharply. "You know Bill Jackson?" he asked.

"No, sir. My daddy knows him. Do you know where I can find him, mister?"

"Not offhand. Ain't sighted Bill Jackson for a long time. Now, David, you saddle up. We'll camp tonight at a shore purty spot. You'll know it by a pile of big granite boulders. On one of them boulders is wrote in white letters, 'Judgment is coming!' Ride on ahead till you git there. Hide your horse and saddle up the creek, then keep out of sight till I git there, about sundown. I reckon I kin help you locate Bill Jackson, but it'll take time, especially if there comes rainy weather and these burros balks on me. Take Sooner with you for company."

After he had ridden away with the big shaggy hound, Dave remembered the money belt. He reckoned that if the queer old man had the money, there would be no use trying to get it. The old man didn't act like a thief, though. He had his Bible and his signs on the rocks. He might be a little loco, but he didn't act like he was a robber. And he acted like he knew Bill Jackson.

Dave rode with a heavy heart. He wanted to go back, see what had happened to his father. But he knew that his father wouldn't want him to do that. No, the only thing to do was to keep on. He'd stay that night with the old man, then ride on.

He found the camping place beside a creek crossing. He hid his horse and saddle about half a mile from camp, where the feed was good. Then, while the horse grazed, he and Sooner explored around as a boy and a dog will do.

Towards sundown they made their way back to the camp ground and Dave got a fire started. Then the rattle of wagon wheels heralded the coming of the old man and his team of shaggy, mild-mannered burros. As he came driving along the trail, the old man was singing in a deep bass voice a camp-meeting psalm.

Dave, glad again at sight of a friendly face, unhooked the two shaggy gray burros and rubbed their long ears. Supper was soon simmering on a bright campfire.

"Mark ye, David," said the old man, "the words ye find painted on the rocks. They're painted along the trails for the guidance of sinners who follow evil ways. The men who ride these trails I follow are often deep bogged down in sin. I try to snake 'em out of the black bogholes."

HE TALKED on in a rambling fashion as he cooked supper, there near his painted rocks. Quoting bits of Scripture, talking of the wrath of God, hellfire and brimstone, of saving the souls of sinners. And before they ate, he thanked God for the food. It was the first time in his life the boy had ever heard anyone say grace. It impressed him greatly. Dave thought he smelled whiskey on the old rock painter's breath.

It was dark when the shaggy hound got up, growling deep down in his throat, his black hair bristled.

"Into the brush, David," whispered the old man. "Quick, boy!"

As Dave crouched there in the brush, motionless, he saw a man ride up into the firelight. He recognized the rider as the tow-headed, yellow-mustached man who had made him his white angora chaps.

"H'are you, Brimstone?" grinned the wide-shouldered man as he swung from the saddle.

"Glad to see ye, Butch. How is everything goin'?"

"Finer'n frawg hair." He poured himself a cup of coffee. "Close call back at Powder River," he said. "They were hot behind me when I cut into rough country. They shot hell out of a gent—"

Some sort of signal must have passed between the two, because the man called Butch went suddenly silent. Then the old man called to Dave.

Butch greeted the boy with a wide grin. "Howdy, Dave," he said. "Looks like this old Bible-readin 'cuss has got hold of you. You're in good hands. Brimstone

will look after you better'n a mother."

"You ain't seen my dad?"

Butch shook his head. "I ain't seen him, Dave. But he'll be showin' up, I reckon. You stick with Brimstone. He'll learn you how to paint rocks. That beats punchin' cows. It might be some time before your dad ketches up with you. I'll get word to him that you're plumb safe and studyin' to be a circuit-ridin' preacher. Dave is a mighty good boy, Brimstone. I punched cows with his dad, Bob Crawford. Bob got delayed yonder at the Powder River crossin'."

There in the firelight the eyes of the rock painter and the outlaw met in a swift glance of understanding. At the suggestion of Brimstone the boy went to see if his horse was all right. When he had gone, the two men looked at each other. Butch shook his head.

"Bob Crawford has as many holes in him as a sieve," he said. "The posse that was after me got him. He's likely dead by now. Take good care of the button. He's a good kid. I'll send you money so you can put him in school, with the right kind of people to look after him."

"He's headed for Bill Jackson's place, he told me."

"He couldn't find a better home. Get him there. Keep him hid, because if they locate him they'll drag him back to Texas. He ain't done a thing, Brimstone, but Bob Crawford killed Zeke Fenton down in Texas and them Fentons will take it out on the kid, now Bob's dead."

"I'll take care of Dave. Have some supper?"

Butch got to his feet, hitching up his gunbelt. He shook his head.

"Got to be driftin'," he said. "When the sign is right, break it to Dave that his dad got killed by a horse or somethin', or that he got drowned crossin' Powder River."

The old rock painter nodded. Butch swung up on his horse and with a careless, "So-long, you old rascal," rode away into the night as suddenly as he had come.

"Repent, ye sinners!" Brimstone called after him.

Butch's rough laugh came floating back out of the night. For that was the way of Butch Cassidy, leader of the notorious Wild Bunch, sometimes self-named the Train Robbers' Syndicate.

There was a strange softness in the blue eyes of the old rock painter as he stood there by his fire, listening to the vanishing hoofbeats. As he put fresh wood on the fire he hummed under his breath. But it was no psalm he hummed. It was the tune of "Sam Bass." Sam Bass, the outlaw.

CHAPTER THREE

Snowbound

IN THE Montana badlands a wolf howled under the November moon. The stars were like white diamonds, white and cold as the snow that drifted into the broken country.

The shaggy hound, Sooner, there in the log cabin, took up the song. Dave let the big dog outside and shut the door. Brimstone packed his pipe with natural-leaf tobacco which he whittled from a plug.

"David," said Brimstone, "now with that howlin' bonehead outside, let's git on with this book learnin'. We'll take up with the 'rithmetic after we git shut of this readin' lesson. I made a good swap when I traded my shotgun for them books at that second-hand store. That shotgun couldn't hit a moose ten feet away. Tradin' thataway, David, ain't no sin. The other gent is tryin' to git the best of it, same as you are. A fair swap is no robbery, as the sayin' goes. And, David, you got to git book learnin'."

As Dave went back to his book, which was Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, reading aloud by the stove, Brimstone

mixed himself a hot toddy. For his rheumatism, he said.

It was four months now since Dave had ridden into the old rock painter's camp. Together they had slowly drifted into the Montana country. Times when strangers rode up, Brimstone passed off Dave as his nephew.

The brand on Dave's horse had been changed by Brimstone. That had seemed strange to Dave. How come that a man who painted Biblical warnings on rocks knew how to alter a brand?

It was Brimstone who, one starry night in September, had told a glorious lie. A man had visited their camp on the Yellowstone River. He had come and gone, even as Butch Cassidy had paid that visit down in Wyoming. Brimstone had called him Harry. The man was Harry Lonabaugh, one of the Wild Bunch. He was known as the Sundance Kid. When he had ridden away old Brimstone put wood on the fire and whittled plug tobacco into his blackened pipe. Then, in his deep, soft voice, he told Dave that his father was dead.

"He died, David, as he lived," he said. "A brave man. He gave his life to save the lives of others." And so, while the boy listened, fighting back hard sobs, Brimstone wove a tale of great heroism about the death of Bob Crawford. How he had upheld the traditions of the Texas Rangers in righting the wrongs of the persecuted.

Tears had trickled down the boy's cheeks as he listened. And that splendid old liar afterwards said it was the toughest job he had ever tackled when he told that tale of the passing of Bob Crawford —because Dave had taken it so gamely. The one person in the world he loved was dead. But as the old rock painter's words painted the picture of that death, it softened the aching hurt in his boy's heart.

It was great to have such a father, Brimstone had told him. He could be proud of Bob Crawford. And then, in his soft voice, there in the firelight, the old man painted another word picture—the picture of death in all its sublime beauty. And after a time, after the boy's jerked sobbing was over, when his tears had dried, the old rock painter talked of other things. Of a log cabin in the Montana badlands. Of a big blacktail buck that was as tame as a goat. He spoke of rabbits that would eat out of a man's hand, a family of skunks that lived under the cabin and played like kittens, and a camp-robbing bear that loved syrup on his bread and would grunt and sniff and loaf around for more grub. Of a scolding magpie that would fight off the greedy bluejays.

"We'll winter there, David," he said. "I'll git some books and truck and we'll holeup there till spring comes. We'll hitch Ornery an' Stubborn to the sled and go down the river to visit the river folks. I got a fiddle there that I'll learn ye to play. You kin make a sled and we'll rig up a harness fer Sooner so's he kin drag you around. I got to put in a supply of popcorn and some candy. Why, son, we'll have the best time you ever had. I'll learn ye to make quirts and rawhide ropes. And wait till you git rigged out in a beaded buckskin shirt and moccasins. You'll learn how to talk Injun, too. We'll be in that cabin before the first snow falls, makin' up with them pets of our'n."

So old Brimstone, in his own fashion, salved the wound of that terrible hurt.

And Dave did not suspect that the word brought to camp, there on the Yellowstone, brought by the Sundance Kid, was that Bob Crawford had not died. They had taken him back to Texas to be tried for the killing of Zeke Fenton. Tried in a county owned by the Fentons, by a jury that was either too friendly with, or too afraid of, the Fentons to bring in a fair verdict. Bob Crawford would be sentenced to hang. No two ways about it.

THOSE snowbound months at the log cabin in the badlands gave Dave an education few boys ever find. He learned about the habits of wild things. He listened to the queer philosophy of old Brimstone. He became accustomed to the silence of it all, there in the white wilderness. He grew to love that big, snowbound silence . . . the crack of river ice, the howl of the wolf, the boom of a white owl, the slap of a beaver tail. He loved the sting of a blizzard; bucking snowdrifts, shoveling a tunnel from the cabin door when the drifts piled as high as the sod roof. Then a warm fire. Sooner twitching and whining in his sleep. The books of Mark Twain. The old fiddle.

Then there was the moaning whine of the warm Chinook wind one night in spring, and the winter was over. When the snow had melted they quit the cabin and headed for Bill Jackson's ranch at the foot of the Bear Paw Mountains. Dave hated to leave the cabin. He had grown to care a lot for Brimstone and the life the old fellow led. He wanted to stay; he wanted to travel the rambling trail marked by painted rocks.

"No, David," Brimstone told him. "You're young. You got a long life ahead of you. Me, my life is behind. I'm takin' you to Bill Jackson's."

Brimstone, however, seemed in no rush to get there. They would camp along the way, staying for a day or two. To rest the burros, so Brimstone excused these delays. But that explanation fooled neither man nor boy. The old rock painter was dreading that day when he must say so-long to this boy whom he had grown to love. Dave's laughter, his very youth, his character that was in the making, had lightened the burden of the old man's winter. Brimstone was sorely tempted to keep Dave with him, but he knew that the boy deserved an education and the com-

panionship of youth. He sighed audibly.

When the spring freshets were gone, when the last snow had melted in the mountains, when the hills and coulees were again green and meadowlarks sang, they loafed along the trail. Brimstone showed Dave how to pan for gold along the gravel beds of the creeks. Dave's buckskin pouch was filling with dust and small nuggets.

Cowboys often stopped to talk with them. They stayed at horse camps and roundup camps, and Brimstone seemed to know every man in the country. Once a sheriff stopped for dinner with them, and Brimstone talked alone with the law officer for quite a while. They seemed to know one another well.

One night a rider stopped for an hour or two. He had black hair and was restless. His hands moved quickly and he kept out of the light of the fire. Brimstone called him Harvey. That man was Harvey Logan, better known as Kid Curry, the deadliest killer of the Wild Bunch.

One morning in late June they rode up to a ranch. A cluster of log buidings and corrals were set in the cottonwoods, on the bank of a tumbling creek that came down from the pine-covered mountains behind the horse pasture.

A big, wide-shouldered man with keen brown eyes and a drooping, iron-gray mustache met them at the barn. He greeted Brimstone warmly. But even as they shook hands, the dozen or more hounds around the barn were at Sooner. Sooner, his shaggy back against the wagon wheel, snapped and snarled, tossing aside the foremost of the attackers. But the others closed in.

DAVE quit his horse with a leap. With his quirt he was among the dogs, whipping them back, fighting with Sooner against odds. His tanned, frost-bitten face was white, and his dark gray eyes blazed as he lashed at the snarling dogs.

Then, from the barn, there dashed a small girl, tanned, black haired, with snapping black eyes. She, too, had a quirt and she came at Dave like a tiny hurricane. Her quirt caught him across the face. Dave paid no attention to her. He whipped back a big brindle hound, then held Sooner's bristling neck in his arms. The big man stepped into the dog fight, and his hounds, at his sharp command, went back to the barn.

Dave, holding Sooner, stood erect now. There was an ugly red welt across his cheek. He looked down at the little girl. With a sob, she threw down her quirt and ran to the log house, crying.

The big man grinned at Brimstone, then put his hand on Dave's shoulder.

"She'll come around later, son," he said, "and tell you she was sorry. You see, Judith claims these hounds."

Dave nodded. He was breathing hard. "Sooner can lick any dog in her pack," he said huskily. "But they all jumped him. It wasn't fair. I ain't sorry I quirted her dogs."

Brimstone had gotten down from the spring wagon. He tried to hide the twinkle in his blue eyes.

"David, she's just a little girl," he said. "She loves her dogs just the same as you feel about Sooner. She's only ten years old, and she's a girl. She's feelin' almighty bad by now. Supposin' we unhook these two Rocky Mountain canaries, then you put up your horse and we'll go find Judith. Now, David, shake hands with Bill Jackson."

"This is your home from now on, Dave," said the big man gravely as Dave held out his hand. "You got to be a big brother to Judith. She's a good little girl for a kid that ain't ever known a mother. Hers died when she was a yearlin', and the only mother she knows is old Mary Muddy Water, the squaw that's raisin' her. Judith is quick tempered once in an awful long time. Mostly she's as shy as an

Injun kid. She's bawlin' her eyes out right now. Brimstone, I'm takin' Dave up to the house. We'll be back directly."

Dave wasn't used to girls. Especially small girls that quirted you, then ran off crying to hide under a bed. Bill Jackson pulled her out from under the bed and held her in his big arms. His rough hands brushed away her tears; then he tickled her until she laughed shakily.

"And now, Papoose," he said, "shake hands with Dave, then we'll go down and see Brimstone and his burros and Sooner."

Judith Jackson looked like a little Indian, with her hair as black as a crow's wing and her brown eyes that, when angry, turned black. She wore a buckskin dress and moccasins and her legs were as tanned as her face.

"I didn't aim to hurt your dogs," said Dave.

"I—I wish I hadn't hurt you," she answered.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sworn Enemies

SO DAVE came to the Jackson ranch to stay. Brimstone stayed on a week; then one night he handed Dave a bulging money belt. It was the money belt that had belonged to Bob Crawford. Never once had Dave asked about it. Now it was returned to him, twice as full as it had been when it had been given the boy back yonder on the south bank of Powder River.

"Bill Jackson will take care of it for you, Dave," Brimstone said. "Seems like it's drawed a little interest. Butch and the other boys fed it some. Here's some dust and nuggets to go with it." He tossed a heavily laden buckskin pouch on the table. "There's enough there to start you up in the cattle business when you come of age, son, even after some is took out to educate you and pay for the sowin' of your wild oats."

The next morning Brimstone left. Dave had helped him hook up Ornery and Stubborn. He had fed Sooner his breakfast out behind the house and his tears had wet the dog's shaggy coat as he held the homely head in his arms. A moist tongue had washed away a boy's tears.

He tried his best not to cry when he shook hands with old Brimstone. And the old rock painter's voice was husky when he said his farewell to the boy.

"So-long, David. Be a good man."

Dave hadn't watched him leave. He had gone on down the creek. There, on the grassy bank, he lay sobbing brokenly. Great, racking sobs that tore his heart. After a while they ceased. He lay there, his head buried in his arms.

A moist tongue licked his neck and head. He looked up with a start. Sooner was there, his ungainly tail wagging. Beside the big hound stood Judith, her brown eyes soft with pity.

They sat there on the grassy bank of the creek, the boy, the girl, and the big hound. Then Bridget, a big Irish wolfhound found them. She had brought along her litter of twelve shaggy balls of roly-poly pups. For more than an hour they watched the clumsy playing of the pups.

Perhaps that was the real beginning of that wonderful friendship between Judith Jackson and Dave Crawford. Or it might have begun with Judith's quirt lash.

When the dinner bell rang they walked back to the house. Judith went to the kitchen. Dave went to the bunkhouse to wash up. There were a bunch of cowboys there who had come in from the nearby roundup camp. With them was a freckled-faced youth a little older than Dave. He had pale-blue eyes and reddish hair. His nose and jaw were blunt. He wore boots and spurs that were silver mounted; his Oregon pants were foxed with buckskin; and his hat was as good

as money could buy. He walked with a swagger. Now he looked at Dave with a crooked grin.

"Where did you come from, button?" he asked. "Part Injun, ain't ya?"

Perhaps Dave did look like an Indian, with his straight black hair and frost-blackened, tanned face. He was wearing a buckskin shirt and moccasins.

Dave's gray eyes hardened. His strong fists clenched. He was about to knock the leering grin from the red-haired boy's face when Bill Jackson and a lanky, red-headed man came into the bunkhouse.

"Dave," said Bill Jackson, "this is Ed Greer of the OX outfit. That's his son Henry. Henry's about the best bronc rider and roper for his age in Montana. You boys ought to get along first rate. Henry, shake hands with Dave Jackson, my adopted son. I want you boys to be friends."

Dave shook hands with the red-headed Henry Greer. It had come as a shock to him when Bill Jackson had said his name was now Dave Jackson instead of Dave Crawford. But he reckoned there must be a reason for it. He washed up and went on with the others to the big mess cabin.

His food tasted like sawdust and he ate in silence. Then he quit the table and went outside. He wanted to be alone. He kept trying not to think of his father and old Brimstone. He went on down to the barn, followed by Sooner. He was saddling his bay horse Cricket when Judith showed up.

"Take me on behind, Dave," she said.

He could not refuse the appeal in her eyes. He jerked the cinch tight and swung up in the saddle. Then he pulled Judith up behind him. As they rode out of the barn Henry Greer came up. He halted, his legs spread apart, tilted back his hat, then laughed.

Dave twisted out of the saddle and lifted Judith none too gently to the ground. The next minute he was tearing into the older boy with swinging fists.

The fierce attack caught the leering Henry unawares. He reeled backwards, lost his balance, then went down under a rain of hard-fisted blows that brought a spurt of blood from his nose.

WITH a snarling, gritted curse, Henry Greer rolled from under.

Bigger, heavier, stronger than Dave, he smashed his big fists into Dave's face as he sat on his chest, his weight holding down the twisting, squirming boy. Blood streamed from Dave's broken nose, from his battered mouth. From underneath he fought with the fury of a terrier.

Now Judith, her face white, beat at Henry Greer with her small fists. She grabbed his hair and pulled at it and Henry sent her reeling with a hard slap across the face. She flew at him again, only to be slapped harder.

Henry Greer, spitting blood, gouged at Dave's eyes with his thumbs. Pain tore the younger boy's eyes.

Then there came a savage, low-throated growl and a hundred pounds of shaggy fighting hound was on top of Henry Greer. White fangs ripped at his clothes.

Frightened by this new attack, Henry leaped to his feet. But Sooner was at him.

Dave, dizzy, blind with pain, managed to get hold of Sooner as the big dog knocked Henry to the ground. Dave's arms were around the dog's neck, and he quieted the growling animal.

"You'd better get your horse and pull out before Sooner takes to you," gritted Dave.

"I'll kill your damn dog."

"You shoot Sooner," said Dave hotly, "and I'll shoot you."

Bill Jackson, Ed Greer and some cowboys came up. Henry Greer wiped dirt and blood from his face with the back of a skinned hand.

"He set his dog on me, Dad," said Henry. "I'm chawed up. Let me have your gun."

Ed Greer looked at his son's torn clothing and the blood that came from the lacerations made by Sooner's sharp teeth. His pale gray eyes grew hard. Ed Greer hated dogs. He had put out more than a few baits of strychnine around the country. Now he took his gun from its holster.

Dave crouched there on the ground, his arms around Sooner's neck. Beside him stood Judith, panting hard, her dark eyes wide with terror.

"If I was you, Ed," said Bill Jackson slowly, "I'd put up that gun. You ain't shootin' Dave's dog."

"That cur bit Henry. Chawed him up. How do I know he won't die from hydrophobia? He set that dog on Henry. He ain't man enough to fight fair."

"That's a lie!" Judith's voice was high pitched, tense. Her eyes blackened with hot anger. "Henry had Dave down and was pounding his face. I tried to pull him off and he slapped me twice. Then Sooner jumped in. Daddy, don't let him shoot Sooner."

"Don't worry, Papoose, he ain't shootin' Sooner."

"What's to keep me from it?" sneered Ed Greer.

"I will. Take that kid of your'n and get off my ranch. Don't ever set foot here again. Put up that gun, Greer, or I'll make you eat it."

Ed Greer nor any other man in that part of the country wanted real trouble with the big, soft-spoken Bill Jackson. No man had ever seen him use that cedar-handled six-shooter he packed on a human target; but they had seen him shooting at marks for a dollar a shot. They had seen him draw and fire from the hip with lightninglike speed, bettering the carefully aimed shots of other men who

claimed to be handy with a six-shooter.

Then there was something about the eyes of Bill Jackson that told men that he was not running a bluff when he said fighting words.

Ed Greer and his son and the OX cowboys rode away. Bill Jackson loaded his pipe and smiled at Dave and Judith. A bloody Dave who still had one hand in the shaggy coat of Sooner. Judith was still white, still panting, and her little fists were knotted.

"He laughed at Dave," she said, her voice beginning to break, "because Dave was takin' me for a ride on his horse."

"Supposin' we forget about it. Dave's nose needs fixin' and you need your dinner, Papoose. Likewise Sooner needs an extra feed."

"I'll lick him some day," insisted Dave.

"You bet you will, son."

"I'll ride broncs with him or rope with him before I'm done."

"You bet you will, Dave. And you'll trim him." Bill Jackson chuckled softly.

At the house he set Dave's broken nose. The boy stood the pain without a whimper, though cold sweat beaded his forehead and he was faint and sick.

Alone, Bill Jackson smoked thoughtfully. He did not want Ed Greer for an enemy. Greer owned one of the biggest outfits in the country and he had devious ways of asserting his power. An uncertain friend, Ed Greer, and a bad enemy...

CHAPTER FIVE

Brimstone's Find

YEARS, to a boy, pass swiftly. They are years crammed with fun and excitement and great dreams of high adventure. Dave took each day as it came. Winter time with its school, its short days and long evenings when he would read or play checkers or tune up the fiddle Bill Jackson had bought him. Chopping kindling and doing barn chores, there in the black early morning and the early darkness. Taking out a teakettle full of hot water to thaw out the pump. Saddling up the horses that he and Judith rode to school, five miles away. Doing his homework. Reading *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* by the lamplight. Studying catalogues sent out by makers of saddles and boots and spurs.

There were occasional visitors, men like Butch Cassidy and Kid Curry and the Sundance Kid. And Brimstone came each year. Always, when he left, there would be a hard lump in Dave's heart. The old rock painter didn't seem to age a bit, nor did the burros. Sooner would get as excited as Dave when Brimstone drove up.

Dave didn't know that his father was doing a life sentence in prison. Only Bill Jackson and Brimstone and the members of the Wild Bunch knew that Bob Crawford was alive.

On one visit Brimstone brought a many-colored bridle made of horsehair and a quirt to match. They were for Judith, he explained. For Dave there was a belt and hatband of horsehair, prison made. Bob Crawford had sent them up the trail from Texas.

Summer time, from early spring until late fall, Dave worked on the roundups, breaking broncs between the spring calf roundup and the beef work in the fall.

At Miles City he rode a bronc that had piled Henry Greer. At Chinook he beat Henry Greer's time in the calf-roping event. Dave was as good a cowhand as you could find. He broke out Bill Jackson's broncs, gentling them so that even Judith could ride them. He was making cow-horses out of them.

Three times in those five years Dave had locked horns with Henry Greer. Twice he had taken a terrific beating. The third time he had whipped the burly Henry until the latter begged for mercy.

The feud between the two grew. It

was the opinion of the cow country that some day that feud would end in gunsmoke.

Henry Greer went to college in California. He was making quite a name for himself as a football player. Dave, finishing high school at Great Falls, refused to go to a university. He had returned to the ranch in June.

There had been a hard winter, followed by a bad storm in late spring. That winter had hit Bill Jackson hard. He had suffered tremendous losses. The hides and bones of his cattle were piled deep under the melting drifts. He had run short of hay. The local bank had refused to lend him more money. Ed Greer was president of the bank. He had waited a long time to get his revenge, but he was getting it now. The other banks Bill Jackson had gone to had turned him down. If Ed Greer's bank would not extend a loan to a neighbor, then Bill Jackson must be a bad risk. That was the way they looked at it.

THEN again, ugly rumors had gotten around. Ed Greer had taken care of that, perhaps. Those rumors linked Bill Jackson with the Wild Bunch. Around the saloons and bunkhouses it was said that Bill Jackson was a member of that notorious outlaw gang, that he was the brains of the bunch. No bank was lending money to an outlaw.

Those rumors had reached Dave. That was the cause of his last fight with Henry Green, in Chinook.

So Dave had quit school and come back to the ranch. True, he had half wanted to go to college. He had captained his football team in high school and a great coach from the East had talked to him about going to a big Eastern university. But Dave had turned him down.

And Dave, coming home, had pulled on his overalls and boots and gone to work. He wanted to draw his money from the bank, but until he was twenty-one he could not touch it. Even then he must have the consent of Bill Jackson before he could invest it.

"I heard all about the trouble you've been having in Chinook, Bill," he said. "Let me draw out that money. It'll save the outfit. Gosh, it's a cinch we can come out ahead in a few months."

"No can do, Dave. They got me in a tight, but I'm not takin' your money."

"How far would two thousand dollars go?" asked Dave.

"Meanin' what, son?"

"Meanin' that I got that much laid aside. Money I've won at Calgary and Cheyenne and Prescott and Pendleton. Bronc-ridin' money, ropin' money. And that gold dust and nuggets that I have in the safety deposit box will make the ante about three thousand. I'm puttin' it into the jackpot. I'll ramrod the outfit and we'll come out ahead. There are lots of places where we can cut down expenses. Give me a chance to make good as boss of a cow outfit. Won't you, Bill?"

"Have at it, Dave." Bill Jackson's voice sounded a little husky. He gripped Dave's hand hard, then loaded his pipe.

News of Dave's fight with Henry Greer at Chinook had preceded his homecoming. Bill Jackson had not asked about the black eye and puffed lips Dave brought home; but Mary Muddy Water and Judith fussed over him. The old squaw with raw beefsteak and big green leaves of some kind, Judith standing by asking him questions. Judith, blooming into early womanhood, just home from boarding school, beautiful in a gypsy-like way.

"Ask me one more question, Papoose," Dave told her, "and you don't come out to the roundup wagon tomorrow."

And he took the raw beefsteak from his black eye and fed it to Sooner.

"I'm home for keeps," he grinned at Bill Jackson after supper that night. "We'll push the OX outfit off the Mon-

tana map before we're finished. They'll not be branding many mavericks from now on. I'll work that range like it's never been worked."

DRIED hides and bleached bones were the marks of that hard winter. Piled against drift fences and cut-banks. Hundreds of cattle had perished. More than one cattleman had gone to the wall.

Dave, roundup boss, was driving his men hard in hopes of gathering a few mavericks. His cowboys were all top hands. He spared neither them nor himself. They worked the badlands and came out with some maverick stuff. Whenever Bill Jackson's Spur brand burned a maverick hide, that was money in Bill Jackson's pocket.

"That's beatin' the OX to a few slick-ears," he grinned as he looked over his tally book.

But still he couldn't see anything but failure ahead for Bill Jackson. They wouldn't gather enough beef in the fall to pay winter expenses. It would take something like a miracle to prevent failure. And Dave wasn't much of a hand at performing miracles.

They were camped not far from Brimstone's place. On circle that morning Dave came upon one of the old fellow's painted rocks.

REPENT, YE SINNERS!

Dave's smile widened. The paint on the rock was fresh, hardly dry. The old rock painter's tracks were fresh. Dave headed for the cabin where he had spent that first winter in Montana. He let loose a wild cowboy yelp when he saw the burros grazing near the barn. Old Brimstone came out of the cabin to meet him. They sat in the shade talking for a long time. Dave told him about Bill Jackson's heavy losses.

"Figured he'd come out loser," nodded the old rock painter. "I'd hate to see Bill

go broke. He's helped a heap of people, one way or another, David. Any of the boys along the hoot-owl trail will tell you how he's in debt to Bill Jackson. A fresh, stout horse, mebbyso, when he was in bad need of one. Grub, mebby, or cartridges. He's patched up more than one bullet hole. Never once would he take a dollar for anything.

"What folks say about him bein' one of the Wild Bunch is a lie. Bill is always after the boys to pull out for South America and make a new, honest start. There ain't a crooked hair in Bill's head. Yep, I'd hate to see Bill Jackson go broke. So would the boys. I'll be at Bill's in about two weeks. I reckon we kin talk it over then. We ain't lettin' Bill go broke, son. I've been workin' a few gravel bars along the river and they've paid big. I ain't sayin' fer sure, but if I was a bettin' man I'd bet I've struck the lost Piegan Pete mine. Come inside."

The old man's blue eyes were dancing as he lifted one of the planks that made his floor. He dug for a few minutes, then pulled out a big, bulging sack of heavy buckskin. It was all he could do to lift it. He opened it and reached inside, groping around. His hand came out with a nugget the size of a man's fist.

"There's more like it, David," he said. "Heft this sack. It's all yellow. Two months' clean-up. That'll run Bill Jackson's outfit a few days, I reckon. He's welcome to it. Dave, when the roundup is over, you better slip on down here for a month. There's more where this came from and two kin work faster than one. Come on down with me, son."

Dave put his hand inside the big sack. He took out a handful of dust and nuggets. In his eyes danced the same sort of light that was in the eyes of Brimstone.

GOLD! What man who has ever handled pick and gold pan can forget that hunger for the sight of yellow metal that he takes with his hands from the earth? The feel of all that gold made Dave tremble like a horse at the start of a great race. Here was more gold than he had ever hoped to see. And there was more to be had for the digging. Yellow nuggets as big as goose eggs.

"I want you down here, David, for my pardner," Brimstone said. "Your muscles are stronger and harder than mine. Times when it rains I git stove up. Wet feet ain't so good for a man my age, and my boots leak. Where this stuff is, a man is workin' part of the time with his feet in the water. I need a pardner.

"I tell you, son, I've located the lost Piegan Pete mine. I worked on a hunch which I got from an Injun yarn I heard once. This old Injun told me how this squaw-man—Piegan Pete they called him, on account of he's married to a Piegan woman—come down the river with his young squaw. He'd bought her from her old man. Paid ten ponies for her.

"Now ten ponies is more than a certain young buck Injun named Takes the Shield kin pay and this young Takes the Shield is stuck on this purty squaw. So he trails Piegan Pete down the river. That night when the white man and his young squaw make camp, the young buck Piegan slips into the camp. He kills Piegan Pete and scalps him. Then he takes the young squaw and sort of disappears.

"The prospectors that run into Piegan Pete's dead body the followin' spring when the snow melts, identify him by stuff he has in his pockets. But likewise they discover a big poke with big nuggets.

"Seems like Pete tells this squaw-bride of his where they're headed for. They're goin' down the river to his mine. But that don't mean anything to young Takes the Shield who don't know what gold is and who measures wealth by the number of ponies he has. He has his squaw and the white man's ponies, which he takes

after he lifts the hair of Piegan Pete.

"That was a good many years ago. A few months ago an old Injun told me the story. How that squaw described the place she was headed for with Piegan Pete. How the place was marked by a big rock with Injun carving on it. Well, David, I located the rock and went to work. She's a-payin'.

"That old Injun didn't lie, son. I'd knowed him for many years and had kep' him and his squaw from starvin' to death last winter. His name, you see, is Takes the Shield."

Brimstone put the big nugget back in the bag, then buried his treasure again.

"And so, David, I'm makin' you a pardner in the Piegan Pete diggin's."

"I'll be down as quick as I can make it," promised Dave. "I'll work for wages, though."

"You'll be my pardner, or nothin', young feller. I got no use for gold. Gold is for young folks. Tell you what, David. Say nothing to Bill Jackson. I won't go up to the ranch. You come on down here and when we work that diggin's clean, we'll show Bill how prospectin' beats punchin' cows. Man, when he sights our clean-up I bet his eyes will booger out till a man kin knock 'em off with a stick. Bill Jackson has done many a kind act. He saved my life once. Bread cast upon the waters, saith the Scriptures, shall be returned a hundredfold."

Dusk was falling when Dave left the cabin on the river bank. The miracle had happened. It had come about through an old man whose friends were outlaws and who wrote Biblical words in white paint upon granite rocks.

CHAPTER SIX

Blood for Gold

DAVE'S outfit swung over towards the boundary of the OX range. A week or ten days more and they would pull into the ranch. Then he would go on down and pan gold with Brimstone. It would be good to camp once more with that old man whose character was an enigma.

Dave had wondered, sometimes, whether his Bible reading and quoting of the Scriptures were just a sham. Then, when some story of Brimstone, told by a rancher's wife, got to Dave, he felt ashamed of himself for ever valuing lightly the rock painter's sincerity in his Biblical leanings. He had, so the cow country knew, cared for the sick and injured. He had brought babies into the world and baptized them. He had knelt and prayed for the dying. He had buried men, good and bad, with a prayer and a few words that brought tears to eyes unaccustomed to crying. In outlaw camp or honest ranch house he was welcome, always. He preached his hell's fire and brimstone for the sinners, yet the men who rode the outlaw trail trusted him with their secrets and their ill-gotten gains.

Yes, it would be good to get back with old Brimstone, to listen to his quaint philosophy. He would take along that battered copy of *Huckleberry Finn*. Sooner would go with him. The big hound would enjoy a few weeks with Brimstone and the burros. Dave whistled as he rode along, dreaming of raw gold and the happiness it would bring to his foster-father, Bill Jackson.

He came to a cut coulee filled with bleaching cattle bones. He started to ride around that monument of bones, then suddenly pulled up. He swung from the saddle and bent over the skull of a big steer. Square between the horns was a bullet hole. He examined other skulls. He spent an hour there, then rode on grim-lipped, the gold dreamer's look gone now from his gray eyes.

Back at the roundup camp he spoke briefly to his men.

"Boys," he said, "whenever you run across a pile of bones, take time to exam-

ine the skulls. I've just discovered that bullets, not blizzards, killed a lot of Bill Jackson's cattle that should have wintered without any trouble. I counted fifteen in one bone pile. I'm not accusin' anybody, but this is within a mile or two of the OX range and there's a line camp or two near here that are used in the winter. . . ."

Other cowboys nodded. They, too, had seen what Dave had found. Signs of murdered cattle, wantonly killed. The OX had cowboys who would do that kind of work for a few extra dollars. Ed Greer was cattle king of that part of the state and he had no regard for the rights of smaller ranches.

"A cattle-rustlin' outfit, Dave, if ever I worked for one," said one cowpuncher who had been with the OX. "Ed and his son is snakes. Ed tried to put me a proposition, feelin' me out about butcherin' Spur beef and other beef not wearin' the OX iron. He knowed I'd done time once for bein' careless with a runnin' iron when I owned my own little henyard spread. He thought I'd take a chance. So I come out and told him I reckoned he'd have to worry along without me somehow because when I got pardoned out of Deer Lodge I'd given my word I'd go straight. I drawed my time and got a job with Bill Jackson."

Dave listened to the others talk. His jaw muscles bunched and his coffee grew cold in its cup.

"I'm goin' to smash the OX outfit if it takes me the rest of my life," he said. "I'll beat the Greers at their own game. If it's fight they want, they've called on the right outfit. From now on you boys draw fightin' wages."

THE CALF ROUNDUP over, Dave paid off his cowboys and let them go to town for a spell, until it was time to start the beef work in the fall. Some of them were coming back in a few days to help put up hay.

Dave told Bill Jackson about the skulls of cattle that were marked with bullet holes.

"The Greers don't have to work dirty thataway, Dave," Bill said without surprise, "but Ed Greer would rather steal from a man than eat a turkey dinner with champagne on the side."

"I've picked a couple of men I can trust," said Dave. "They'll have nothin' to do but ride around, keepin' their eyes and ears open and their mouths shut. And yesterday, in Chinook, I fired a man. One of the best men we got. That long-geared feller that did time at Deer Lodge. He was makin' some drunken talk about how I'd worked 'em too hard and fed 'em poor grub and made 'em ride sorry horses. He was makin' this talk in the OX saloon. You could hear him a hundred yards away. I walked in and shut his mouth with my fists, then paid him off."

"The man you mean is Long Jim. It ain't like him to get drunk and run off at the head like that. . . . What you grinnin' about, anyhow?"

"The OX saloon belongs to Ed Greer. There were some OX cowboys in there, includin' Greer's wagon-boss. Long Jim, by now, is probably working for the OX."

"What are you drivin' at, Dave?"

"I'm after the Greers. I'm using every weapon I can. I fired Long Jim after I'd licked him. But he's still drawin' Spur wages. Top fightin' wages, at that."

"You mean—"

"We need a spy in the enemy camp. Long Jim seemed the likeliest one of the boys to hold down the job. Long Jim is what you might call the undercover rep for the Spur outfit."

Bill Jackson whistled soundlessly. "You sure have took a-holt of things, son," he said. "I don't want trouble with any man, but I ain't dodgin' it, neither, if it has to come. I'm glad you worked it like you did. As long as we're goin' against the wall, we might as well go down fightin'."

"When I get the hay crews started," Dave said, "I'm goin' down on the river for a few weeks. Brimstone is down there and I'd like to drop down and spend a little while with him. There won't be much to do around here for a spell."

"Go right now and stay as long as you like, Dave," Bill Jackson answered with a chuckle. "I'll run the ranch. Only thing is the Papoose may set up an awful holler. She's got it figured out that you was to quit work and do nothin' but ride around the country with her. If I was you, I'd slip away in the night, sayin' nothin'. She's been sittin' up nights workin' on pack saddles and kiak boxes and loadin' 'em with grub. She's aimin' to go up into the Bear Paws and Little Rockies, then down on the old Missouri River."

Dave hated to disappoint Judith. Boarding school had not in any way spoiled her. To her father and Dave she was still the Papoose. She still belonged here with her dogs, her horses, the open country. He knew how eagerly she had been planning that long-promised pack trip. They had exchanged letters all during the winter, and each letter added some detail to that glorious trip.

"I reckon," said Dave, grinning, "that Brimstone is goin' to have the Papoose as well as me."

The worried look left Bill Jackson's eyes. "You're a good man, Dave. Don't let her pester you too much. I wouldn't let you be bothered with her, only—"

"The Papoose is never any bother, Bill. And Brimstone thinks the world of her. She'll have a good time down there. Catching catfish and makin' friends with the pets. We'll take Sooner along."

"She's been learnin' how to make sourdough bread and how to do all kinds of Dutch-oven cookin'."

"There's a tepee down there that she can use. Some old Injun gave it to Brimstone. Tepee poles and everything. She'll sit on the river bank at night with Brimstone and listen to the beaver work, making dams. She'll get to know the magpie and the bear and the skunk family and the blacktail buck. I reckon she'll like it."

Bill Jackson nodded as he puffed on a cold pipe. "You're a good man, Dave. Just like my own son. You'll find the Papoose in the kitchen with Mary. Tell her that the two of you are pullin' out in the mornin'."

SO IT was that about sunrise Dave and Judith with their pack horses and Sooner headed for the badlands together.

As they rode along, Dave told her little anecdotes of Brimstone and his wild animal friends.

"I know you're disappointed, Papoose, but I—"

"I'm not disappointed. It's more than I hoped for. Dave, there are times when you're just plain stupid. I'd rather be with you and Brimstone than anywhere I know of, except with dad. I'm not a baby any longer, either, and you can't go on 'Papoosing' me as if I were a child in pigtails. Dave, is dad going broke?"

The direct question stunned Dave for a moment. He was about to make some clumsy reply when Judith answered her own question:

"I heard it in Chinook when I got off the train. A girl who goes with Henry Greer broke the news to me. And there I was all last winter, spending money. Dave, I've seen the worried look in dad's eyes. How bad is it?"

"Not half as bad as you think, Papoose. We'll come out all right."

"Don't lie to me, Dave."

"Have I ever lied to you, Judith? We're coming out all right. You'll see why in a few days."

"Tell me now. Please. Quit acting so mysterious."

"I'm not telling anything. I wish Mary Muddy Water had taught you how to be patient."

"But when it concerns dad, Dave, I—"

Dave leaned from his saddle and put his arm across her quivering shoulders.

"Don't cry, Papoose. Everything is going to come out great. I'll not tease you any more about it. It's just that I want to give you a surprise. Bill Jackson won't go broke, but we'll smash the outfit that tried to bust him. We'll hang the OX hides on the fence before we're through. You'll go back to school next winter and finish up."

"How about you?"

Dave kissed her on the cheek and grinned. "Me? I'm through. I don't fit in with the college dudes. I'm a cowboy. That's all I ever wanted to be. It's all I want to be now. "

Dave reached in his saddle pocket and brought out the battered copy of *Huckleberry Finn.*

"Huck Finn didn't like school any more than I do."

Dave meant it. This was the life he loved. This was where he belonged. Judith's heavily lashed eyes studied him. Old beyond her years, this daughter of Bill Jackson.

"You do love it all, don't you, Dave?"

"More than anything in the world."

"So do I."

THEY ate a cold lunch, rested their horses, then rode on. It was after sundown when they rode down the ridge through the scrub pines to Brimstone's cabin.

The burros grazed down in the pasture. There was the song of a meadowlark. Sooner, up in the lead, whined softly.

They rode up to the cabin. The door was ajar, but no answering hail met Dave's cowboy shout.

Dave swung off his horse and stepped inside. For a moment he stood there, his blinking eyes focusing on the dim shadows of the cabin. Then with two quick strides he was across the room. He was down on his knees, bending over the motionless form of Brimstone. Brimstone, whose hair and beard were matted with blood. He lay there on the floor beside the upturned plank beneath which he had hidden his gold. The hole was empty. The gold was gone.

Dave lifted the limp form onto the bunk. His hand reached for Brimstone's pulse.

He turned at a slight noise behind him, to see Judith standing there.

"Is he—is he dead, Dave?"

"No. Light a light. We'll need warm water and clean bandages. I'll make a fire while you get the bandages out of that big cupboard."

Half an hour later the ugly wound in Brimstone's back and the one that had cut open his scalp were dressed.

Dave had probed for the bullet in the old rock painter's back, had fished it out neatly, then dressed the wound skillfully. He had made Brimstone comfortable and now sat there beside the bunk, watching the heavy breathing of the wounded man.

Sooner lay at the foot of the bunk, his red-brown eyes watching. Then Brimstone moved, his eyes opened. Sooner, with a low whine, got to his feet, tail swinging.

"Take it easy, Brimstone," Dave said gently. "Drink this whiskey. Don't try to talk. There's a bullet hole in your back, but it will be healed in no time. The one that knocked you out was the bullet that parted your hair. Drink this now and lie quiet so you won't bleed."

"You and Judith and Sooner," said old Brimstone, when he had swallowed the whiskey. "I'm in good hands. So I got shot, did I? Lemme see now, where was I? I can't recollect offhand."

"Don't try to," said Dave. "Take it easy."

"David, is the gold safe?"

"I reckon so," lied David. He had put the plank back in place.

"I begin to recollect now," said old Brimstone, despite Dave's warning not to think. "I'd fetched in the day's pannin'. It was dark when I got home. I started the fire and put the coffee on to boil. It was dark outside, and rainin' a little. Enough to wet the ground.

"The Piegan Pete mine played out. I got all there was to git. I was plantin' it with the rest when— Looky yonder, David. That window's busted. He shot through the window. David, he got the gold, didn't he?"

Brimstone was a hard man to lie to. Dave nodded. "The gold is gone, but I'll get it back. You say it was raining?"

"Kind of a slow drizzle. Some lightnin' and thunder."

Dave scowled thoughtfully. He had seen storm clouds last evening, down in the badlands. That meant Brimstone had been lying there on the floor about twenty-four hours.

"Come morning," he told the old rock painter, "I'll take the snake's trail. Judith will take care of you. I'll leave my Winchester with you."

"I got my own equalizer, son. Under my pillow." He pulled out an old long-barreled .45.

"Never knew you owned a gun," admitted Dave.

Old Brimstone's blue eyes twinkled. "All you needed to know, David," he said, "was that I packed a Bible."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dead Man's Return

IT HAD rained harder than Brimstone thought. Dave had no difficulty following the tracks left by the lone rider who had shot and robbed Brimstone. He had taken the trail at dawn and now he followed it, grim lipped, hard eyed.

The tracks he followed led along Cottonwood Creek, a twisting, winding course. Dave pulled up suddenly. No man would ride that trail at night. There were bog-holes and washouts, shale banks and soap-holes to avoid. This trail had been made by daylight. Somewhere back yonder the rider had spent the night.

Dave did some swift calculating. No man would be riding along with all that gold, which Brimstone had guessed at being about two hundred pounds, in daylight. He'd cache it, figuring on returning later. He had left Brimstone for dead. He would lie low until the killing of the old rock painter was forgotten. Then he would lift his cache. He would come down with a pack horse.

Dave rode back along his trail. He rode slowly, watching for sign. Near the mouth of the creek that twisted its way through the canyon he found what he had been watching for: a caved-in cutbank, boot tracks. Underneath that dirt would be the stolen gold. Up above was a long

rimrock ledge. Dave climbed up the bank. In the shelter of the shelving rock he found many cigarette butts.

One by one Dave picked up the butts. They were not the hand-rolled quirly of the cowboy, but machine-made cigarettes of expensive tobacco, bearing the name of the maker and the brand. The OX brand. Henry Greer had his cigarettes made with his brand stamped on them.

Dave rode back to Brimstone's cabin at a long trot.

"Back so soon?" asked Brimstone.

Dave smiled grimly. "I didn't bring back the gold," he said, "nor did I track down the man. But I know where the gold is and I reckon I know the man that shot you.

"Brimstone, you got killed last night. Papoose, I'm sending a letter to Bill. You'll take it to him. Bill will get word to the sheriff that you were killed. The news will spread all around the country. After a week or two that murderin' gent will come back to lift his gold cache. I'll be there, waitin' for him."

Judith's dark eyes were bright with excitement. She sat there on the edge of the bunk, watching the two men, silent, trying not to fidget.

"It's a lot of gold to leave buried there," Brimstone said when Dave told him where the cache was. "I doubt if there's any more at all to be had there at the Piegan Pete mine. And you know how much we need what's already been panned. No, Dave, we don't dast risk it. Take one of the burros along and dig 'er up. Pack it back here and we'll ride herd on it."

"But gosh, Brimstone, it's the big chance to catch the snake that shot you."

"Judith, tell Dave what you saw with my field glasses."

"There's a man up there in the timber," said the girl. "He's up on the ridge and he's watching the cabin. I don't know whether he saw you ride away, but he saw you come back."

"Did you get a good look at him, Papoose?" asked Dave.

"He has a beard on his face. He's too far away to recognize. Take the glasses and see if you can find him. Up there on that ridge by the sandstone cliff."

Dave took the glasses. For ten minutes or more he looked through them. Then he came back to the cabin.

"I could pick him up plain," he said. "He didn't know I was watchin' him. He got up and moved around, sort of dragging himself around with a crutch of some kind. Brimstone, are you sure you didn't get in a shot at the snake that was tryin' to kill you?"

"My gun was under my pillow, David."

"That man up yonder is hurt. Why don't he come down?"

"Scared, mebby, David. Scared of meetin' folks. You take Judith along and dig up the gold. Wouldn't su'prise me if the feller would ride down if he knowed I was alone."

"I'm not leavin' you alone," said Dave firmly. "I'll ride up and take a look at the gent's brand. We'll take no chances on another shooting here at the cabin."

DAVE left the cabin and mounted his horse. It took him quite a time to reach the ridge in the scrub pines. He saw a saddled horse grazing with dragging bridle reins. And there on the sandstone ledge squatted a man, his face covered with matted iron-gray beard. His battered hat was pulled down across bloodshot eyes. The cocked carbine in his hand covered Dave.

"Lift 'em high!" He spat the words from tightly pulled lips.

Dave lifted his hands. "I saw you watchin' Brimstone's cabin," he said. "I'm a friend of his. If you're the man that shot him the other night I'm goin' to kill you. You might have me covered but that gun barrel is wobblin'. I'll live long enough to pay off the debt. Did you shoot

old Brimstone?" Dave's voice was harsh.

The carbine in the man's hands lowered slowly. When he spoke his voice was husky, harsh, strained.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Dave Jackson."

"Dave . . . Dave Jackson!"

"Bill Jackson's son."

"I savvy. Bill Jackson's son. Then ride along your trail, Dave. I mean no harm to you or yours."

"Mister, you're hurt." Dave started to get off his horse. The man picked up his gun.

"Ride back the way you come," came the harsh command. "You say Brimstone is dead?"

"No, just hurt. He'll be all right."

"You lookin' after him?"

"Yes. You'd better ride back with me. You look sick."

"I'll make out all right."

"If you're on the dodge or something like that," said Dave, "you needn't be afraid to ride down to the cabin. There's nobody there but him and the Papoose and me."

"What papoose?"

Dave grinned a little. "Judith Jackson. We call her Papoose. I wish you'd come on down with us. You wouldn't be the first hunted man to stop at that cabin. Every man is welcome there, the same as at Bill Jackson's."

"I might ride down later. Now ride on back."

The man's tone was final. Still Dave hesitated. The man with sunken, bloodshot eyes and matted, iron-gray beard looked sick. Too sick to be left alone like this.

"Judith and I are takin' a ride," Dave said. "We'll be gone until dark. If you'll give me your word that you won't harm Brimstone, you can ride on down and talk to him alone."

"I'd be the last man in the world to hurt Brimstone," said the man.

"Then ride down when you see Judith and me ride away. Stay with Brimstone till we get back. I don't like to leave him alone because the man that shot him in the back might come back. So-long, mister."

"So-long, Dave."

Dave rode away. Something in the sound of the man's voice haunted his memory.

The man sat there on the ledge, watching him out of sight. Tears streamed down from his bloodshot eyes into the matted beard.

"Dave . . . Dave . . . Thank God for letting me see him. . . ."

BRIMSTONE looked at the crippled man who gripped his hand.

"You're Bob Crawford?" he asked.

"Yes. The boys down the trail told me where to find you. I broke prison last month. You see, I was sick. Tuberculosis. Kept having hemorrhages. They give me six months to live. I wanted to see Dave before I died. I don't want him to recognize me. I don't think he will. I weighed nearly two hundred pounds when he saw me last on the bank of Powder River. I wouldn't tip the scales at more than a hundred and thirty now, and I'm gray headed. He didn't recognize me, but I knew him. God, it was hard not to talk to him. I couldn't trust myself. I sent him away. Tell me about him."

"Take a good pull at that jug," said Brimstone. "Then tie into that grub the two young 'uns cooked for you. I'll tell you all about Dave. He's the finest boy livin'. Bill Jackson will tell you the same."

All afternoon the two men talked. Once during the afternoon Bob Crawford was seized with a coughing spasm that left him weak and shaking. He had gone outside and there on the ground where he had lain was left a puddle of blood. There was little about this man who was slowly dying to remind even his own [illegible] of the

laughing, stalwart Bob Crawford who had been all shot to pieces there on the bank of Powder River, then sentenced to life in prison, crippled, his bullet-punctured lungs that gave him his sentence of slow death far more terrible than the hangman's rope.

"Stay on here with us," said Brimstone. "Dave won't recognize you. You ain't fit to travel."

Bob Crawford shook his head. "I can't trust myself. Butch told me how you'd lied for me, how Dave thinks I died like a great hero. I can't undo that. It wouldn't be fair to you or Dave. I'll make out. I'll camp up there in the timber for a few days, just to watch Dave from a distance. That's all I want. The law will be on my trail. They ain't far behind. A cripple with a cough can't disguise himself much. They'll be along soon. I don't want them to locate me here."

Brimstone, seeing he could not change Crawford's mind, made him help himself to some blankets and a gunnysack full of grub. Then he gave the crippled ex-Ranger a quart of whiskey.

"I'll tell Dave that you want to be left alone up there," he said. "He'll savvy."

He waved aside Bob Crawford's choked words of thanks. At sundown the outlaw rode back up the ridge. He saw Judith and Dave ride up to the cabin. When they had gone inside Bob Crawford made his lonely camp in the scrub pines. He risked lighting a fire and sat there by its yellow blaze far into the night. The firelight made him feel less alone. And he thanked God, over and over, for letting him see and talk to his son.

Dave's digging had netted him nothing. There was a lot of dirt to be moved. It would take a few days.

Dave was up before daylight getting breakfast started. Then he called Judith, who slept in her tepee pitched alongside the cabin. Dave had spread his bed outside, where he could guard the cabin.

After a hasty breakfast he saddled up and pulled out, leaving Judith with Brimstone. Every hour counted. Whoever had caved that bank in on top of the gold might return any time. As he worked feverishly in the early morning sunlight, he could not shake off that feeling that he was being watched. Grimly he wondered if he would get a bullet in the back.

Now and then he would quit shoveling and look all around. But not a sign of anyone. Sooner lay asleep near where Dave had staked out his horse.

It was laborious work, there under the tall cutbank. His hands were blistered and his back ached. But he was moving dirt away from the buried gold. More dirt kept slipping from above. One slide buried him to the waist and he was forced to shovel himself free. Sundown found him utterly weary, every muscle aching, his blistered hands cramped inside his buckskin gloves.

HE SADDLED his horse and rode back to Brimstone's cabin. As he left his work and rode away from the bank, a man up in the pines also mounted and rode into the sunset.

Dave had been right. He had been watched as he worked.

Dave bathed in the river and changed clothes. He made light of the fact that he was tired and that his hands were raw. Judith fussed over him in a manner that brought a twinkle to Brimstone's blue eyes. Dave grinned foolishly as the Papoose mothered him. Then he and Judith dressed Brimstone's wounds again.

"See anything more of the gent up on the ridge?" Dave asked Judith.

"No. I couldn't find the field glasses. I must have mislaid them."

Brimstone's white beard hid his faint smile. He had given the powerful glasses to Bob Crawford.

"So as you kin sight David better," he had said.

They were eating supper when Sooner's growling outside interrupted the meal. Dave, his six-shooter in his hand, stepped out into the dusk, shutting the door behind him.

Dave, crouched with Sooner behind a pile of cordwood, saw a man ride up. The man dismounted and walked towards the cabin door. Dave's voice halted him.

"Rearch for the sky!"

"All right, Dave, but don't make me keep 'em up too long. I had to work my passage all the way on this jughead thing Ed Greer calls a horse."

"Long Jim!" Dave cried. "It's good to see you, cowboy."

Inside the cabin Long Jim's lean, bronzed face wrinkled into a grin.

"We got 'em where we want 'em, Dave," he said. "The two OX men that killed them steers last winter both talked too much the other night, when we'd finished butcherin' two Spur steers and peddled the meat to Greer's hay contractors. We had to deliver the meat, and the hay contractor's camp is only a mile or two from a whiskey still. What they said was loosened outa their systems by that moonshine likker.

"I started the game by braggin'. about all I'd done. Then they opened up. And they both said that Ed Greer come out two or three times hisse'f and shot down Spur steers just to see 'em kick. And the whiskey peddler cut into the deal by sayin' how Henry Greer was as slick a cow thief as ever changed a brand or butchered another man's beef. Seems like this bootlegger's place is quite a hangout for Henry, though his old man don't know it. This whiskey peddler has as purty a quarter-breed daughter as ever you seen. Her mother's half Cherokee. Henry Greer is stuck on the girl. It's her that fetches Henry down there so often. Naturally Henry has done some braggin' for her to hear. We got 'em, Dave. Got a tail-holt on the OX spread."

"But those two cowboys and the whiskey peddler and the girl won't testify in court," said Dave.

Long Jim's grin widened. "I had a man planted there, Dave," he said. "He works for the government. Sort of stock detective and about the best in his game. I worked with him punchin' cows in Wyoming. He offered to he'p me out and he did. Palmed hisse'f off as a renegade that has stuck up a bank. He had money to spend and he spent it there. I'd tipped him off about the place. So he was there, pretendin' drunk, when all this talk come off. Likewise he was there a few nights ago when Henry was there, drunk. He hears Henry talkin' about gold to the girl and how they'll run off soon and git married and make Ed Greer like it, because they'll have enough gold to buy a big outfit of their own. Seems like Henry dropped a pile of money gamblin', and

he's scared his old man will find it out. Ed Greer and Henry don't agree on gamblin'.

"So when the talkin' had played out, this government man shows his badge and arrests the pack of us. They're bein' held right now at the Spur ranch and they've all squealed like rats. We got it in black and white, signed and swore to. Enough to send Ed Greer and Henry to the pen for a long time.

"Outside of that," he finished, "I've been loafin' around on the job."

"Did you nab the Greers?"

"Henry's been missin' for two days. And we couldn't locate Ed Greer. It might be they got wind of what was up and hid out. They're foxy thataway."

CHAPTER EIGHT

War at the Cut-Bank

YELLOW gold. Countless men have fought to the death for it. Men will always fight for gold. Men will risk their lives to get it. Even as Henry Greer had attempted murder to get the dust and nuggets from the Piegan Pete lost mine. Now the lure of its yellow color had drawn him back to the caved-in cut-bank. He and the three men with him worked in the white light of the moon, shoveling away dirt.

"Enough for us all," he told the three OX cowboys who were helping him. "You boys will get a cut of it. The Argentine looks good to me."

"If we ever get there," grunted one of the men. "Henry, I'm leery."

"Quit talkin', damn you. Keep on shovelin'. That fool Dave Jackson has cleared away most of it. Work, I said."

A man rode down the treacherous trail toward them in the moonlight. Their guns covered him. The rider was Ed Greer.

"Put down them guns," he barked. "Git at that shovelin'. Damn your heart, Henry, you better not be lyin' about that gold. We ain't got time to lose."

Ed Greer had a shovel in his hand as he quit his horse. Now he slid down the bank and began working with the others. Five of them now, digging desperately. . . .

A gray, crimson-streaked dawn showed above the ragged skyline of the badlands. Ed and Henry Greer were superintending the loading of the pack horses. The horses were no ordinary pack animals. They were the top of the OX remuda, even as were the saddled mounts that stood waiting. Stout, grain fed, swift.

Ed Greer had hefted the gold. Its weight brought a twisted, cunning grin to his cruel mouth. In his saddle pockets were stuffed neatly wrapped bundles of currency which he had taken from his bank. He was heading for a new country. He was taking Henry along, Henry and this gold. But he was not taking the three men who had been shoveling dirt since moonrise last night.

"When they get that stuff loaded," he whispered to his son, "we'll let 'em have it. Then we'll cave in the bank on their carcasses. We'll let Dave Jackson dig 'em out. Careful you don't hit a horse. We need them horses. Get 'em where their suspenders cross."

Henry nodded. He took a long pull at a big silver flask and handed it to his father. Ed Greer shoved it away.

"Now when that last pack is tied hard and fast, open up on them three gents. Then we'll hightail it for a country that will make this look like two bits. I've got cash money enough to start down in South America. Sold the OX, lock, stock and barrel yesterday. Took a little loss but I got it in cash tied in my slicker. We'll leave here with close to a million in real money. Deer Lodge won't ever hold a Greer. We'll— Look out! Yonder comes two riders!"

Ed Greer called to the three OX cow-

boys, "Never mind the packs. Drop everything! Tie the horses! Then pick off the two men comin' up the trail!"

Henry cocked his carbine. "That's Long Jim and Dave Jackson," he said. "Dave is my meat. This time he'll get what I've waited a long time to let him have."

As he raised his gun, crouched with his father and the others now behind the boulders, he called out to the two riders on the narrow trail:

"Come and get it, you Spur snakes!"

Dave, riding in the lead, quit his horse, even as Henry Geer's gun cracked. Henry's bullet thudded into his right shoulder, smashing the bone. But as he quit his horse he jerked out his carbine with his left hand.

He heard Long Jim grunt with pain, there behind him. The two wounded men dove into the brush for shelter. But it was an ineffective sort of shelter. A few clumps of buck bush and chokecherry bushes. Bullets ripped around them, snarling, whining. The two men crouched there, fighting against impossible odds. Dave's right arm was useless. Long Jim had been shot through the thigh.

Then, from the scrub pines above, there came a puff of white powdersmoke. Ed Greer slumped forward on his face, then lay still. Another thin wisp of gun smoke from up there and Henry Greer dropped his gun, groaning as he writhed with pain.

Now Dave and Long Jim were crawling forward through the brush. Crawling cautiously towards the nest of granite rocks that sheltered the OX faction.

There, in the scarlet-streaked dawn, Dave saw the painted words on one of those big granite rocks:

VENGEANCE IS MINE,
SAITH THE LORD!

Two of the three OX gunmen came from behind the shelter of those rocks, their arms held high. The gun up above in the scrub pines had gone silent. Henry Greer rolled over on his back and his glazing eyes looked red in the sunrise.

THE racking cough brought blood the color of the badlands sunrise. Bob Crawford clung feebly to the strong hand of Dave. His tortured, bloodshot eyes softened. His bearded lips smiled.

"So-long," he whispered feebly. "So-long, Dave."

Dave wiped the bloody froth from the unshaven lips. "So-long," he said huskily. "You saved my life. When you cross the Big Divide, look up my father. His name is Bob Crawford. He's brave, like you. Brimstone will be prayin' for you both. So will I."

Bob Crawford's lips smiled.

"So-long . . . son."

That was how Bob Crawford died, there in the badlands. That was where his trail ended. They buried him there in the scrub pines, with a great granite boulder as his headstone.

Across the huge boulder is written in white letters that are kept ever fresh by the brush of old Brimstone:

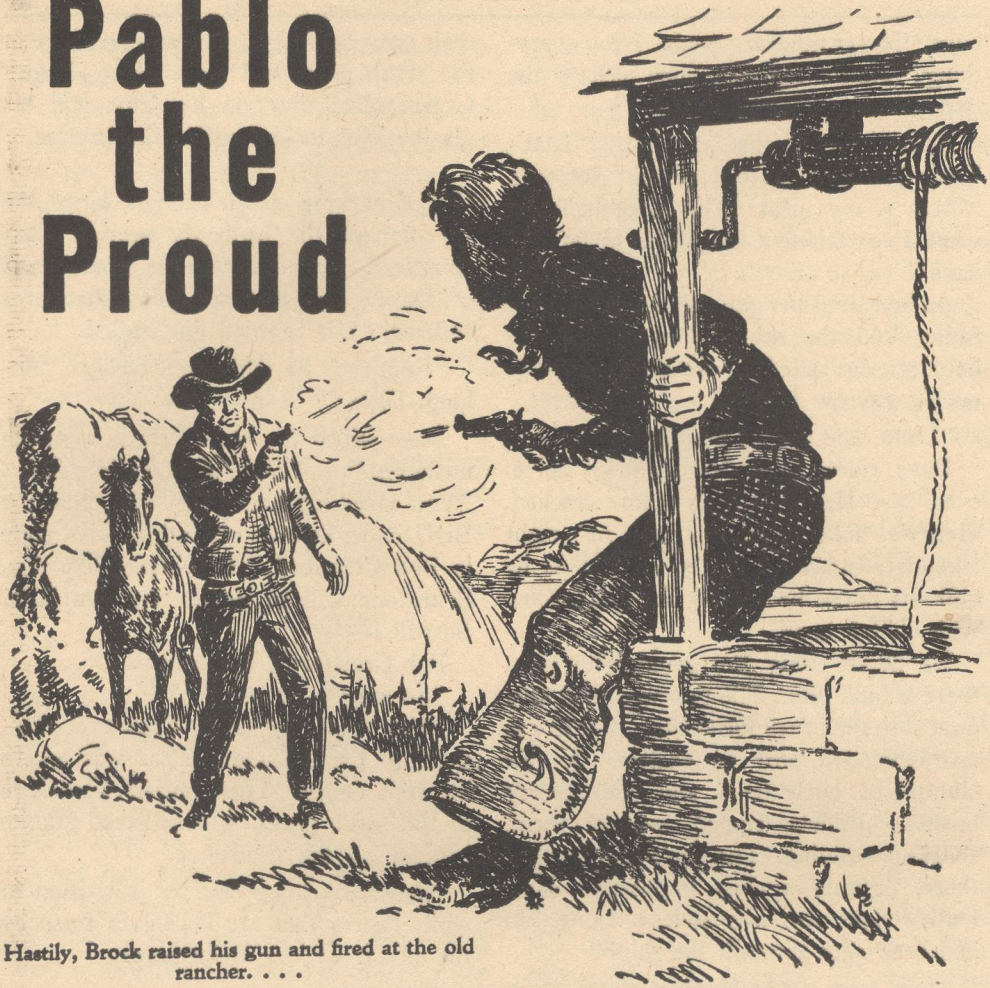
MAY YOU FIND THE RANGE GOOD
IN THE SHADOW HILLS

Brimstone still paints his messages on the rocks. Sooner still twitches his aged legs and whimpers as he dreams by the fire of a winter night. Bill Jackson and Mary Muddy Water often quarrel to see who will heat the milk and tuck into bed the small boy who is the real boss of the Spur outfit.

It was Judith who insisted on naming the baby Bob instead of Bill. You see Judith knows what Dave does not and never will know. That the man buried down yonder in the badlands, with a painted rock for a headstone, was Bob Crawford.

THE END

Pablo the Proud



Hastily, Brock raised his gun and fired at the old rancher. . . .

By Grant Taylor

FOREST RANGER CANEY was carrying news of a death. No one had yet died, but someone was going to.

Live or die, Old Dobe McGilloway stood by the code of the West that said each man must fight his own battle, and all a man's son could do for him in a fight—was to dig his father's grave!

Someone always died when Sleeper Brock went gunning—and so far it had always been the other party. Now Sleeper Brock, just released from the penitentiary, had announced that he was going to kill old Dobe McGilloway.

Ranger Caney first brought his news to Pablo's sheep ranch, stuck in a small, rocky corner of the McGilloway ranch.

A harmless little fellow, Pablo—slight, brown faced, very polite, very hospitable. When Caney arrived Pablo was busy

digging a new well; that is, Pablo was ossing two men who were doing the work, one winding a crude windlass to hoist out the buckets of dirt which were filled by the other man at the bottom.

To blurt out the news of the threat by Sleeper Brock would be too great a shock to Pablo. So Caney, as a preliminary, called it gently to the attention of the sheep rancher that he had cut fence posts from the forest without a permit.

Pablo was thunderstruck. "The permit!" he exclaimed. "Sure, I know. I should have got the permit from you. But me, I forget. I am so absent of the mind. There is no head under my hat," he confessed sorrowfully. "What grows on my shoulders is no head—it is only the *sandia,* the watermelon. "

"Yeah?" said Ranger Caney with a cynical grunt. But there was no use trying to be stern with Pablo, so he said, "Oh, hell!" and let it go at that. The death message he carried was more important than Uncle Sam's fence posts.

"Pablo, there's hell to pay. Sleeper Brock is out from behind bars and he's going to kill old Dobe for testifying against him in that cow-stealin' case. Pass the word along to any riders that come by. Tell 'em to warn Dobe if they see him that Sleeper's back on this range, gunning for him. . . . Hey, what's wrong? You act like Brock was out for *you.*"

Pablo was standing like a statue, his cheerful face turned suddenly grave and pale. Old Dobe McGilloway was under sentence of death. Sentenced by a young fellow half his age, a snake blood with a cold nerve, who spent hours each day practicing whipping a gun from a holster.

"But Meester McGilloway, his eyes are very poor," protested Pablo. "And he has a lame arm, a very slow right arm. The pinto stallion, she kick him three-four days ago. He can hardly hold a gun in his hand, even if he could see to shoot."

"His hard luck," groaned the ranger. "That damn gun-totin' Brock won't wait for his arm to get well or his eyes to improve, and McGilloway wouldn't let anyone interfere. I'm burnin' the trail to warn him. You stick here and if Brock comes by, grab a horse and slip around to notify the ranch."

"*Si,*" said Pablo sadly. Tears were standing in his eyes. He could already see Dobe McGilloway stretched out, cold, dead.

"You think a lot of Dobe, don't you?" said the ranger.

Pablo nodded. "He has been to me like a papa," he stated simply. "Me, when I am a boy left all alone with no relations except in old Mexico, what happens, eh? This Dobe McGilloway, he ride by and say, 'Son, you come live with us.' I grow up in the McGilloway family—like one of Dobe's own children. That is why I speak sooch good English. Dobe treat me just like a real son. My name is Pablo Salazar, but always I call myself Pablo McGilloway. When I was grown big, but no damn good with the cows, Dobe buy me some sheeps.

"One of the family—a McGilloway—that is me. And we McGilloways are a very proud family." Pablo lifted his shoulders. "And as one who belongs to sooch a great family, I am too proud to forget my debts. If Sleeper come by here, I get in a quarrel with him. I shoot him without warning. Like that! Ha! He will not expect a fight from Pablo. I will take him by surprise."

RANGER CANEY knew this threat was not an idle one. "Forget it," he advised. "Old Dobe does his own fighting, lame arm or no lame arm. There's plenty of friends would go against Brock for Dobe if he'd let 'em. But this happens to be a personal scrap. Dobe is old, but not too old to fight his own battles."

"I onderstand," said Pablo. "Am I not a McGilloway also? I tell you we are one

damn proud family. Too proud for our own good."

The Ranger rode away with a hard clump of his blue roan's hoofs on the trail that led to the McGilloway headquarters ranch. Pablo looked at the sky wondering what had come over it. Before the coming of Caney, it had been so beautiful, the sun so bright. Now a cloud darkened it, and looming ominously on the hill was the huge wooden cross that had been put over the grave of a man who had been killed and buried there. Pablo shivered.

He turned and saw that the two men who labored on his well had been idle all during the talk. "Son of a goat, how long does it take you to fill a bucket?" he shouted at the man on the bottom.

The well bucket came up, to be promptly forgotten by Pablo.

"Ah, that coyote of a Sleeper Brock," he murmured. "That Apache, that sidewinder who crawls on his belly."

He dismissed the well laborers. "You go home. I wish to be alone," he told them.

The man who had been digging in the narrow quarters of the well bottom came up in the bucket. His bare feet were clay encrusted, for the well had been sunk some eighteen feet, far enough into the ground to be wet from the seep of water-bearing sand.

"Ah, that coyote!" Pablo repeated as he watched the two ride away. Only the day before, Pablo had seen Dobe McGilloway make one unsuccessful cast after another trying to catch his mount. With an arm he could hardly raise, what chance had the rancher against the lightning-handed draw of Sleeper Brock?

PABLO was still standing by the well muttering to himself when along a trail into the ranch, the hoofs of his horse clattering aloud on the rocks, came a rider. Sleeper Brock! Pablo thought of the shotgun in his little adobe shack and how its double barrels, rested across a window sill, could blast this menace of a Sleeper Brock to pieces. But that would be only to betray and disgrace his friend and benefactor. Never again would the proud Dobe McGilloway be able to raise his head. People would say that being afraid, he had asked Pablo to murder Sleeper. And to have people say that a McGilloway was afraid of a polecat like Brock was unthinkable.

"Ah, that we McGilloways should have sooch pride," mourned Pablo aloud, as he watched the approach of the notched-gun killer, Brock.

"If it ain't Pablo, the old baa-baa!" Brock said insultingly. Sleeper had a way of looking at you as if he were considering how amusing it would be to put a shot into you for the sake of watching you kick. As his gaze now wandered contemptuously over the little Mexican, Pablo had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being examined as a candidate for a con. Then Brock grinned, a malicious twisting of his tight lips.

"Good friend of Dobe McGilloway, ain'tcha?" he said. "Raised in the family?"

"That is so," admitted Pablo in a dead voice.

"This is Tuesday. On Thursday you will be asked to be a pallbearer for your good friend," said Brock. "To carry him in a black coffin to his grave."

Pablo shivered. This man was a demon, to be so cold-blooded and so sure of himself. Yet he had a right to be sure. Poor old Dobe with a lame arm and his failing sight, he would be a child against Sleeper.

"After the funeral maybe I'll drop around and kill me off a few of the pallbearers," announced Brock carelessly.

Pablo, who was inclining an ear to a succession of sounds he heard up the canyon, said nothing to this proposal. A rapid low drumming was sweeping down the canyon and growing louder. A bunch

of horses coming at a lope, as yet out of sight.

"You made one big mistake, Meester Brock," said Pablo suddenly. "You bragged too far ahead of the killing of Dobe McGilloway. Those are his cowboys that are coming, you onderstand? Hear their horses? They come with a rope, to lynch you."

Brock glanced up the canyon, but the horsemen were not yet in sight. "So that's the lay!" he snarled. "Dobe got in his men to fight this battle? I knowed he was yellow. And the McGilloways always claimed to be a brave outfit. Afraid of nothin' and nobody." He laughed sneeringly, and then choked the laugh off short.

THERE was one thing Sleeper Brock never liked to consider: the chance—and a very likely one it was—that he might die some day kicking at the end of a rope.

His mount was no race horse and could not outrun the cow ponies thundering down the canyon. There would be too many to fight. He looked about for a hiding place. He was too far from Pablo's little house. Where he stood was nothing but a low-walled sheep corral—and the hole of the dug well.

Brock looked into the cavity, was satisfied. He turned to his horse, yanked off the saddle and bridle, flung them into the well.

His gun flashed out, menaced Pablo. "You want to live!" he rasped out. "I'm hidin' down there. Don't give me away or I'll kill you."

Pablo flinched away from the gun. "Don't shoot, Meester Brock!" he begged. "I promise not to tell."

"Good!" said Brock, satisfied that he could rely on the fear of the Mexican. With that he popped over the edge and slid down the bucket rope. He was five feet from the bottom when the rope suddenly gave way. Brock landed with a jarring thump. He let out an infuriated yell. Pablo had cut the rope.

Hoofs pounded around a bend in the canyon and swept by the ranch. The horses were all riderless, they were part of the McGilloway remuda being brought from a mesa pasture for roundup. Hazing them along was Link Butters, who had passed by early that morning and told Pablo where he was headed. Butters went by with a wave of his hand.

Pablo watched the dust raised by the horses settle while he leisurely rolled a cigarette. A voice came from below.

"Hey, you, Pablo," Sleeper called cautiously, "Have they all went by?"

"*Si*, they have all went by," said Pablo, and he started humming *La Paloma* in an absent-minded sort of way.

"All right!" growled Brock. "Git me outa here, yuh dam Mex. Let down another rope."

"You give an order to a McGilloway?" said Pablo indignantly. "The McGilloways do things on request, not on orders."

"Yuh git me out of here, or I'll carve out yore heart and feed it to the buzzards!" shouted Brock. "I'll shoot you to ribbons!"

"You have a gun that can shoot in a curve up out of the well maybe?" asked Pablo skeptically.

At that Sleeper Brock exhausted all the epithets he knew in English and Spanish, with some smattering of Hopi Indian. Pablo overlooked them by walking out of earshot.

The sun went down and brought on the night; the night went by and brought on the sun again.

During the morning Pablo provided food and water for Sleeper Brock, some of the ribs of lamb and a stack of tortillas placed in a bucket and lowered by a cord. The remarks that came out he listened to uninterestedly.

Having fed his captive, he made a covering for the well hole, a few sheets

of galvanized iron tacked to a couple of boards. These shoved over the hole with a little dirt piled on top made it sound proof, and eliminated the chance of Brock's shouts being heard by passing riders who might rescue him.

AGAIN the sun and night played tag, and then once more. Brock had been on the bottom of the moist and dark well hole nearly seventy-two hours, with a daily feeding and watering, when Dobe McGilloway happened to ride by the sheep ranch. Pablo greeted the stooped, slightly gray rancher with the respect he would have given his own father. Dobe gave Pablo the same genial greeting he would have given any of his own sons.

"Your arm, it is no better, eh?" he asked solicitously as he guided Dobe to a spot some forty yards from the well.

"Nope," said Dobe. "Worse, if anything. I've tried every kind of hoss liniment on the ranch, but it don't limber up none, dang it." He lifted his right hand and arm with a grimace of pain.

"It is not possible then," said Pablo, "for you to draw a gun very quickly. You don't see so well as you used to either, do you, Dobe?"

"Nope, I don't for a fact, you sharp-eyed little cuss. It's a funny thing—I can read a brand perfect a ways off, but I can't see nothin' but a blur when it's under my nose."

"That's what I thought," said Pablo. "And still you would not let anyone else take care of this Sleeper Brock?"

"I'll handle him myself," said Dobe quietly. "It's my fight, and when I git so old I can't fight my own fights, I'm fit to be killed."

"Ay, we are a very proud race, we McGilloways," said Pablo, admiringly. "I am proud to be of a family that when a man has a matter brought up, he handles it himself, even from a sick bed. Your gun she is loaded, yes, Dobe? Then you stand here, and be on your guard, please."

"What is all this about?" asked Dobe wonderingly.

"You will see," promised Pablo. His hand went out to pat his benefactor's shoulder. "I have only a watermelon on my shoulders," he said modestly, "but I feel everything is going to be all right."

Dobe McGilloway remained where he had been placed, standing squarely on his two feet, a big man who, innately peaceful, lived by the code of the country, including the custom that when a man has to fight, he must fight his own battles alone.

Pablo walked over to the well and pulled off the sheet-iron covering. "You still wish to come up?" he asked politely. And then cutting into the growling imprecations, "You will then first send up your gun in the bucket," he ordered.

"I'm damned if I do!" Sleeper Brock growled.

"Then you are damned," Pablo returned. "You will send up your gun." He let down the bucket on the cord and Brock, having no other course, dropped his gun into it with a loud clang. Pablo pulled it up and laid the weapon on the ground a few feet from the well opening.

"And now you will make a knot in the rope and throw it up to me," he ordered. "I will be pleased to fasten it to the windlass again and pull you up."

Brock obeyed this also, and a half-minute later he stepped from the bucket and stood looking blinkingly around him. On his face was a three-day growth of stubbly whiskers. His clothes were filthy, as he had been forced to lie in the moist dirt to sleep.

For a few seconds Brock stood, then "Damn you!" he bellowed, starting for Pablo. "I'll—"

"Your gun, she is lying on the ground," said Pablo. "You have come to kill Dobe McGilloway. He is waiting for you."

Then Brock saw the man he had announced he was going to kill, standing at a greater range than Sleeper cared to shoot with a belt-gun. But he stooped to go for his triggerless six-shooter, although not at all in the usual lightning-swift fashion. Instead he bent stiffly for the weapon, clutching at it with fingers that were slow to fasten about the handle. He was, in short, like a fumbling old man trying to make haste.

There was the hasty roar of the gun he finally raised, and a shot that sailed wide of McGilloway, just a second before the rancher fired. Dobe's first shot, carefully aimed, struck Brock in the heart.

Old Dobe put his big arm around Pablo's thin shoulders. "I don't quite savvy all this," he said. "What you been up to, Pablo? But let it go until later. He had the first shot and missed, the first time I ever knew Sleeper Brock to miss."

THE CORONER'S INQUEST was only a matter of form. The verdict was that Brock had come to his death from natural causes: the bullet had been fired into his heart and had just naturally killed him.

Caney, the forest ranger, had his own ideas about certain phases of this matter, and when he got Pablo alone he asked a few leading questions.

"They said Brock's clothes was damp and dirty," he remarked. "He'd been in this well, hey, for quite a while?"

"Maybe I did forget and leave him in there a few days," admitted Pablo. "Except I did remember to give him a little food occasionally. He went into the well to hide from Dobe's cowboys, but I had forgotten and told him wrong—it was only the remuda. The brains she is not here," he said, tapping his head.

"And Sleeper must of got sorta rheumatic and stiff down there in that damp?" guessed Ranger Caney.

"I am afraid so," Pablo admitted regretfully. "Stiff and slow like old Dobe."

"With a cover over the well it must have been pitch dark down there, too," remarked Caney. "I reckon when Sleeper came up into the sun he couldn't see very well."

Pablo threw up his hands. "Meester Caney, you speak it true!" he exclaimed. "I am afraid so, yes. He could not see very well," he went on sorrowfully. "I did not think about his eyes. The dark made him just like Dobe, it was hard for him to see. But to think that I have forgot what the dark and the wet would do! Ah, thees damn fool head of mine. It is only a *sandia*—a watermellon."

U. S. Forest Ranger Caney looked sternly at Pablo Salazar McGilloway. Then he shook his head in mock consternation and rode on about his business.

By T. T. Flynn

San Miguel had its hour of laughs when the sheriff pinned a deputy's badge on little Two-Bit Higgins, that soft-talking, scared-looking warthog of a man—with the fighting heart twice the size of his shiny tin star.

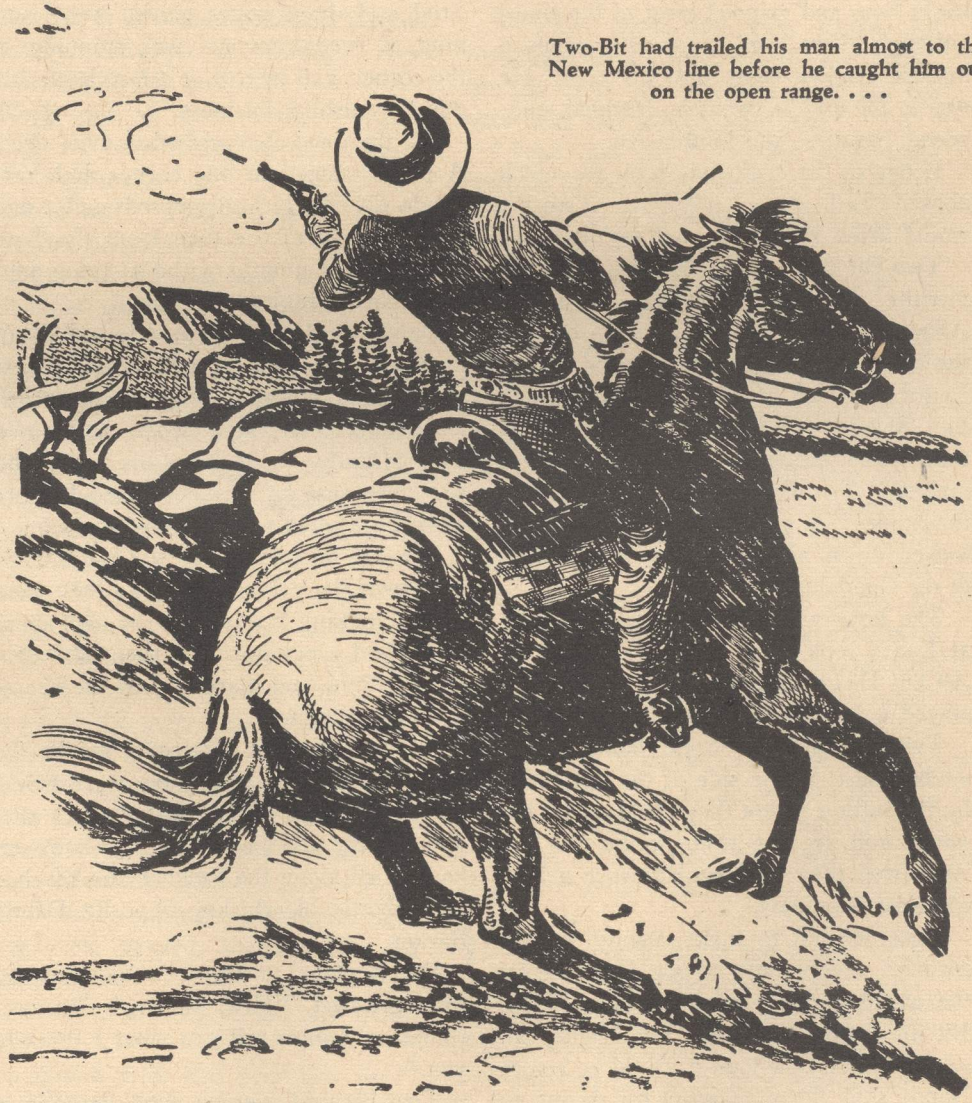
CHAPTER ONE

Pint-Size Hero

PAT DEWEY had been sheriff one week, and had at least two pints of whiskey in him when he appointed Two-Bit Higgins a deputy. It was all very funny. Perhaps the only men in the Guadalupe Bar that night who did not get the full humor of the joke were Two-Bit Higgins and Dandy Barker; and even Two-Bit smiled a little and looked tremendously grateful, as if a load had left his shoulders.

Where Two-Bit had come from or who he was, no one around San Miguel knew. The town of San Miguel itself had been there only a few short years, although the battery of stamps up the hill at the San Miguel mine pounded and roared by day and by night as if they

Half-Pint Son of Hell



Two-Bit had trailed his man almost to the New Mexico line before he caught him out on the open range. . . .

Thrilling Gun-Law Novelette

had always been there and always would. Things like that happened in southern Arizona in those days.

Two-Bit Higgins, meek and unassuming, had been in town for days before anyone in particular noticed him, and by then he was tending bar in rush hours at the Guadalupe. "Climbing on a chair to put the corks back in the bar bottles," some wag spread around. "That little two-

bit runt with a grin on his freckled pan!" So San Miguel tagged him Two-Bit and let it go at that.

Two-Bit Higgins was a short, thin, rawhidy young man who walked with a slight limp and grinned most of the time; although there were moments when a morose shadow came into his eyes. He was in the middle twenties, freckled, pug-nosed, harmless and inoffensive.

If one of the customers took too much aboard and grew talkative, Two-Bit would listen attentively, but say little.

Two-Bit had tended bar less than six months when his marriage to Laura Allan, whose father was a night boss at the mine, elevated him to general notice. Laura was one of the prettiest girls in San Miguel. Few folks in town knew they were acquainted until they were married. Two-Bit was small for work in the mines; a good bartender was not looked down on socially, so he kept on at the Guadalupe.

The boys who had been making eyes at Laura took their loss philosophically. All but Dandy Barker, who got ugly and stayed ugly in every inch of his six feet.

Two-Bit and his bride built a new adobe house on the side of the hill down by the station where they could sit on the *portal* and see the trains come and go. And from then on Two-Bit wore a look of dazed happiness.

That seemed to make Dandy Barker madder. Every time he got drunk he let the world see how much he hated Two-Bit for cutting him out. San Miguel began to bet on how long it would be before Dandy took Two-Bit apart for daring to marry Laura. If Two-Bit knew what was in the air he gave no sign, other than to keep out of Dandy Barker's way and to stay very silent when Dandy was around.

IF TWO-BIT knew what was coming this Saturday night, he didn't let on. The Guadalupe was crowded with miners just paid off, with cattlemen who had sashayed for a day's ride from every direction. San Miguel was young, lusty and hairy-chested, and Saturday nights in the Guadalupe were occasions to remember. Stud and draw poker games were running, a roulette wheel was spinning in the corner, and next to it a faro bank was doing a rushing business.

At the bar men crowded two deep. A piano banged in one corner and Fernando Gomez' girls dispensed smiles and cheer. Some of the men from the back country went months without seeing anything but a Mexican woman.

Dandy Barker came in drunk and got drunker. He was a tall, solidly built young man whose face got red, mouth loose and voice loud when he drank. The "Dandy" tacked on his name did not mean that he was not a bad hombre when he wanted to be. He was.

Leaning on one end of the bar, Dandy put down the drinks as fast as they were poured, talking loudly with the men about him. And every now and then he leaned on his elbow and glared down the bar at Two-Bit Higgins.

Maybe Two-Bit noticed; maybe he didn't. The three bartenders were working hard and Two-Bit managed to stay down at the other end. Finally, however, he hurried along the backbar and reached for a bottle of whiskey opposite Dandy Barker.

Dandy glared at him for a moment and then growled, "Hey, shrimp! Turn around an' lemme tell you what I think of you."

Two-Bit said over his shoulder, "Some other time. I'm busy."

"Some other time, hell!" Dandy yelled. "I been puttin' this off long enough! C'mere!" He leaned across the bar, grabbed Two-Bit by the shoulder and jerked him around.

The talk at the end of the bar stopped. Every eye went to them. You could feel

them pity little Two-Bit, but no one took it on himself to cross Dandy Barker. Two-Bit had gambled with it when he married Laura. He'd have to deal his own deck now.

The man beside Dandy Barker laughed nervously. "Forget it, Dandy. Have another drink. My treat."

"Keep out of this, Sam!" Dandy snarled. "I been itchin' to do this—an' now he's gonna get it!"

"Get what?" Two-Bit asked mildly. He looked surprised.

Dandy reached out and shook him. "You know what!" Dandy yelled. "You was the skunk who told a lady I was buyin' high-grade ore."

Two-Bit stood there wtihout trying to get away. Not a muscle in his face moved. But his eyes, those mild eyes in his freckled face, went smoky, opaque. Two-Bit's voice stayed mild, however, as he asked, "Was you?"

Somebody snickered.

Dandy Barker's fine clothes never went to work. Talk had it he was buying high-grade—the richest ore from the tunnel faces, which the men brought up in their boots, pockets and lunch pails and sold to the few buyers who were willing to take the risk for the profit—but no one had ever proved it on Dandy Barker.

Dandy heard the snicker. His face got redder. "You accusing me again of high-grading?" he bawled, shaking Two-Bit once more.

"I just asked you," Two-Bit said apologetically.

"I'm gonna drag you over this bar!" Dandy howled. "An' I'm gonna wipe up the floor with you!"

Dandy yanked—and his hand came away empty. Two-Bit had twisted suddenly, jerked loose. With an oath Dandy jerked out his gun. Two-Bit ducked behind the bar. And Dandy Barker cut loose twice, smashing two bottles of good whiskey on the backbar.

Two-Bit popped up with a quart bottle in his hand. It caught Dandy between the eyes. The gun clattered on the bar. Dandy collapsed against the man behind him.

Two-Bit broke the gun, tossed the cartridges on the floor, slid the gun across the bar. His face was still calm, but his eyes held that cold, smoky look.

"Take him out," Two-Bit said indifferently. "We're too crowded tonight to give room to a busted-down fuzz-tail like that."

And Two-Bit picked up a damp towel and turned to mop up the mess on the backbar. The men let out a shout of laughter. They had been looking for slaughter and little Two-Bit Higgins had turned it into a joke.

Pat Dewey, the new sheriff, was down on the other end of the bar celebrating the recent election. Pat had a quart of whiskey under his belt and was still sober. He stood six feet, six inches in his boots and was built like a mountain pine. A dead shot with both hands, Pat never dodged a fight or passed up a joke. Now he laughed with the rest of them.

"He's too good for a barkeep!" Pat yelled. "Take that apron off him an' I'll put a gun in his hand! I'm making him a deputy, boys! Watch yore step in San Miguel from now on!"

THAT brought down the house. The idea of little Two-Bit Higgins keeping order among those hell-raising sons-of-guns was the best joke of the evening. Two-Bit had played in luck with Dandy Barker, but the first he-man he came up against would pulverize him.

Two-Bit stood behind the bar, smiling faintly. When the laughter died down he called to Pat Dewey, "D'you mean it?"

"Sure!" Pat chuckled. "You're a deputy now, son. Here's yore badge an' here's a gun. I'm countin' on you to keep law and order in San Miguel on Saturday

nights. The boys do like to cut up behind my back."

Pat Dewey took a badge from his pocket, a gun out of his holster, and slid them down the bar past the glasses and bottles.

Two-Bit took a deep breath. His shoulders came back a little as he looked at the badge. He yanked off his apron, stuck the badge on his shirt.

The men started laughing again. Two-Bit was smiling too as he said, "You're laughing at the law, boys."

That made them laugh harder.

Two-Bit rapped on the bar with the gun. When they quieted down he said gravely. "Just so there won't be no mistake, cast yore eyes on that moth up there on the *viga* by the light."

They all looked up. Sure enough, there was a big tan moth on the *viga*. And while they looked Pat Dewey's gun crashed in Two-Bit's hand—and the moth vanished. Two-Bit had hit it square at twenty feet. Hardly a man in San Miguel could place such a shot in that uncertain light.

The boys were not laughing when they looked back at the bar.

Two-Bit blew smoke from the gun muzzle and shoved it inside his belt. "I just thought I'd show you," he said mildly.

You could have heard a mosquito buzz as Two-Bit walked around the end of the bar. Suddenly his freckled face and his mild eyes were no longer funny. Two-Bit was a man who could be dangerous if crossed—a *man,* and one very much entitled to respect.

Pat Dewey was the only one who laughed. Pat laughed harder than ever.

"Now who's the joke on?" Pat howled. "Everybody step up an' drink to my new deputy. An' don't forget I warned you!"

Two-Bit put down one small drink, and then calmly went about his first piece of official business. He ordered Dandy Barker carried to the adobe jail and locked him up for disturbing the peace.

The next morning Dandy Barker was wild when he found out what had happened. He refused to believe Two-Bit had had anything but a wide streak of luck.

"Gimme my gun!" he raved to Pat Dewey who had let him out of the cell. "I'm gonna show up that little sawed-off skunk once an' for all!"

Pat Dewey warned, "You better climb down off your hind laigs, Barker. Two-Bit Higgins is bad medicine for you. He'll put a bullet between yore eyes, and I don't know whether I'd blame him. I'd be tempted to myself."

"Gimme my gun!" Dandy said viciously.

So Pat Dewey gave it to him. "I'm warning you again," Pat said.

"I've got ears!" Dandy snarled, making for the door.

"Then God be with you," Pat called out to him. "You'll need Him."

Pat Dewey admitted afterwards that he did it to see how Two-Bit held up under fire. If Two-Bit backed down from Dandy Barker, cold sober, San Miguel would need a real deputy.

Two-Bit Higgins was down at the railroad station when Dandy Barker found him. The 9:10 train had just pulled out. Two-Bit was on the platform talking to Billy Bowers, the station agent, when Dandy stepped around the corner. Two-Bit had bought a gunbelt, holster and new hat. He was spruced up. Quiet, honest pride shone on his freckled face.

Dandy Barker's hand streaked to his gun. "So you're the little worm they made a deputy?" he yelled. "I'm gonna shoot off your tail an' nail it back of the Guadalupe Bar! Climb down on yore knees, you sawed-off pinto burro!" And Dandy put a bullet in the platform at Two-Bit's feet by way of emphasis.

Billy Bowers ducked for safety, tripped

over his feet and fell through the door of the waiting room. Two-Bit looked down at the white splinters near his boots and smiled thinly. "Put up your gun, Dandy Barker," he said calmly. "You're askin' for trouble."

"Trouble? Who from—you?" Dandy yelled. "Get down on them knees!" And Dandy put another bullet on the other side of Two-Bit's feet.

Four men were across the track, and three in the waiting room were peeking out the window. They told what happened.

Two-Bit shot through the open bottom of his holster so fast it was all over before any of them knew what was happening. Just one shot, and the gun dropped from Dandy Barker's hand and he began to prance around, howling with pain and shedding blood from his smashed knuckles.

Two-Bit lighted a cigarette and walked to him. "You asked for it," Two-Bit said coolly. "You're a disgrace to San Miguel, Dandy Barker. You're a stink in the nostrils of law-abiding men an' women, an' you better start down the track an' keep going. Look back once an' I'll throw down on you. Now get goin' before I change my mind."

"You can't do that to me, damn you!" Dandy groaned.

"I've done it," said Two-Bit calmly. "Git!"

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Mission

DANDY BARKER looked at his bleeding hand and then at Two-Bit's face. The men swore Dandy must have seen something there that looked unhealthy. He turned and started down the tracks, swearing under his breath and half crying. He passed the bottom of the hill where Two-Bit's new adobe house sat, and looked at it once, and went on.

And so Two-Bit Higgins ran Dandy Barker out of town and went on about his business as if nothing had happened.

Two-Bit made a good deputy that summer. He never hunted trouble and never dodged it. When he arrested a man he arrested him polite and fair. He met no gun play. The saga of Dandy Barker had spread so fast no gun artists wanted to try and prove that a streak of luck.

San Miguel liked Two-Bit. And when he went single-handed and broke up the Juan Ortiz gang of rustlers from across the Border, they were downright proud of him. Six men were in the gang. Juan Ortiz and three of his men never went back across the Border. From then on San Miguel boasted that Two-Bit was the gamest little bantam cock between Yuma and Douglas.

It was a sight to see Two-Bit escort

the weekly shipment of gold from the mine to the Wells Fargo express car. Old Tom McDonald, the superintendent of the mine, would put the heavy chest of gold bars in the back of a wagon and drive it down to the station himself. And Two-Bit would sit on top if it, smoking a cigarette, gun on his hip and a grin on his freckled face. Everybody on the street saluted him as he rode past.

Pat Dewey was proud of Two-Bit, but Laura Allan was twice as proud. You could see it shining in her eyes when she looked at him. You could see it drawing them closer together. Laura had married a little sawed-off runt that no one thought much of but herself, and he had turned out to be man-size, body and heart. They were probably the happiest couple in southern Arizona.

And then Pat Dewey got bucked off a horse and broke his leg. When the leg was set, Pat sent for Two-Bit. Doc Carter was there when Two-Bit tiptoed in.

Pat Dewey, with lines of pain in his face, grinned from the pillow. "Walk on yore heels, Two-Bit. You're not comin' to a wake. All I got busted is a leg, now I got me plenty o' time to lay here an' count my sins and' get drunk."

"I'll go out an' get you a quart," Two-Bit offered quickly.

"No you don't!" Doc Carter ordered testily. "He'd drink it and probably get up and walk."

Pat Dewey laughed. He could always do that.

"The Doc's probably right at that," he agreed. "Two-Bit, I just wanted to tell you I'll be laid up here for a long time. You'll have to do the sheriffin' for both of us." Pat Dewey went silent for a minute. His big hand plucked at the cover. "Two-Bit, I've took a lot of pride in keepin' things orderly and law-abidin'. It's up to you now. I'm countin' on you to keep it so folks'll never know Pat Dewey has been off the job."

Two-Bit swallowed. "Sure, you can count on me, Pat."

"I know it," Pat said gruffly. "Well—so-long. Don't run your laigs off comin' up here to see how I am. Now I'm goin' to sleep with an easy mind an' keep it thataway."

Pat Dewey's huge hand shoved out and engulfed Two-Bit's small one. And Two-Bit walked out, sheriff, deputy sheriff, and law and order in San Miguel County.

INSIDE of a week Two-Bit was tested. The Pinto Kid, a bad hombre from over around Silver City, New Mexico, shot a man at the Red Horse Bar, winged two more as he hightailed out of town and headed back to New Mexico.

Two-Bit was at home eating supper when it happened. In half an hour after the Pinto Kid left, Two-Bit was plugging along after him alone.

Four days later he came back, herding the Pinto Kid ahead of him on another horse. Two-Bit had trailed him almost to the New Mexico line, caught him out on the open range, dropped the Pinto Kid's horse in a running fight and shot it out at close quarters. The Pinto Kid was wounded in three places and mighty rueful about it.

"Hell!" he said disconsolately in the jail. "I got behind a rock an' he throwed lead around the corner at me, an' then said he'd give me a chance to pitch out my guns before he killed me. I pitched," said the Pinto Kid with resignation, "an' now I reckon they'll hang me."

They did, but that was later on.

Two-Bit was pretty much of a hero after that. San Miguel got so law-abiding it was almost painful. Two-Bit took it all calmly and fell more in love with his wife. And then one evening two weeks later old Pegleg Coleman steamed into the Guadalupe and breasted the bar, with his scraggly white beard bristling and his wooden leg thumping the floor.

"Gimme a drink!" Pegleg yelled in a squeak falsetto. "Where's yore sheriff? They told me he was in here!"

Two-Bit was at the end of the bar talking with Fernando Gomez, his old boss. He stepped out and said, "You want the sheriff?"

Pegleg Coleman looked him up and down and spat on the floor.

"Hell!" Pegleg squeaked. "I said *sheriff!* You ain't big enough to hatch a nest of bantam eggs!"

Two-Bit grinned. "Sheriff Dewey is laid up with a busted leg," he explained. "I'm riding herd on the office until Dewey is on his feet again."

Pegleg Coleman was an old desert rat who lived up on Sun Fish Creek, back of the Palo Verde hills. It was months between times he came out for supplies. He had a little placer claim he worked hard; and he had the only gold on Sun Fish Creek, so he hadn't any company.

PEGLEG combed gnarled fingers through his beard, batted his eyes and grumbled, "Hell—if yo're the best I can find, I reckon you got to do. I had durn near six hundred dollars wuth of dust in my poke when some low-down jasper stuck me up about ten miles north o' town. Just this side o' Twin Rocks it was. He took my dust, cut my hoss loose from the wagon an' told me to walk in. An'," squeaked Pegleg hoarsely, "I durn near never got here! I hit a patch o' soft sand by Salt Wash an' bogged down. My peg went two foot in every step an' I come out walkin' like a sidewinder. It like to ruined me."

The boys were crowding about them by then. Two-Bit asked gravely, "What did the fellow look like?"

"How in tarnation do I know?" Pegleg spluttered. "He wore a bandanna over his face an' his horse was hid over the hill. But," added Pegleg venomously, "it was a black horse."

One of the boys snickered. "You looked over the hill at it, I bet."

Pegleg glared at him. "I had me an old telescope hid under the seat. I climb the hill an' watched the snake ride fer ten mile. He headed north like he was aimin' for the Turkey Neck country, an' then cut back over toward Squaw Crick. He's over in them Squaw Crick breaks some-'eres, figger'n to ride in an' spend my dust. Now, Mr. Sheriff, are you takin' a posse out or ain't you?"

"Shucks!" someone on the edge of the circle growled. "It's a all-night ride over to them Squaw Creek breaks an' back."

The boys eased back as Two-Bit's eyes wandered around speculatively. Pegleg slopped himself a drink, tossed it in his ragged beard and glared at them.

Two-Bit grinned thinly. "I reckon I won't need a posse," he said easily. "I'll ride out an' look for him."

"Alone?" Pegleg sneered.

"Uh-huh."

"Gimme another drink!" Pegleg choked. "My poke of dust is gone to blazes now for sure."

Leaving Pegleg to drown his sorrows, Two-Bit walked out. What followed, Two-Bit never told anyone but Pat Dewey.

With his slight limp, Two-Bit walked to the sheriff's office, filled his belt with ammunition, got his rifle and a bandolier of shells and rode out alone, west, toward the Squaw Creek breaks.

Two months before, up a draw back in the Squaw Creek breaks, he had found a small, half-ruined adobe hut. It was deserted, apparently unowned; but lying on the roof was a shovel, not very old. One corner of the dirt floor had been disturbed at some recent date. Digging there, Two-Bit had uncovered a cache of canned food. Someone had intended using that adobe hut at a future date. Two-Bit rode through the moonlight toward the

adobe hut now. Maybe he'd find something.

Some three hours later he reached the jumbled mass of gravely hills that formed the edge of the breaks. Scattered greasewood and rabbit weed grew out of the gravel, and the white sands of dry arroyos cut here and there haphazardly. The Squaw Creek breaks were a forlorn, God-forsaken stretch, and the farther you went into them the worse they got. Squaw Creek ran through the center. If a man was lucky he would find a twelve-inch trickle of water in the stony bed.

Two-Bit did. He watered his horse sparingly and rode up Squaw Creek. The hut was about two miles ahead.

A mile from it, Two-Bit circled to the left and came in from the west, where a rider would not be suspected. A quarter of a mile from the hut he dismounted, looped the reins around a greasewood bush and went on foot.

The moon had dropped toward the west by now. His shadow wavered ahead of him, black and grotesque. Small stones slipped underfoot. The coyotes were yapping and howling like mournful ghosts. Now and then a rabbit scooted off like a frightened spirit. But that was all. Two-Bit might have been moving through a dead land where death held silent sway.

HE TOPPED the last rise, looked down a short slope—and there was the old adobe hut at the bottom of the slope, half set in the hill. Just beyond it a horse pawed the ground.

Two-Bit stood in the moonlight, looking, listening. No one seemed awake. But the pungent smell of wood smoke drifted to him.

He went down the rise cautiously, made the back of the hut, stole along the side to the front. There he saw the horse, a pinto pony. That didn't jibe with Pegleg Coleman's statement, but Two-Bit moved to the door, found it standing ajar, and stepped in quickly, gun ready.

A snore come from one corner. In the moonlight pouring through the open door, Two-Bit saw a dark figure sprawled under a blanket. Gunbelt and gun lay beside the sleeper. Two-Bit pushed them over with his foot and shook the man.

The stranger sat up quickly. "What is it?" he growled.

"Get up," said Two-Bit calmly. "I'm the sheriff of San Miguel county. Don't get rambunctious or I'll have to plug you. What's your name, mister? Where you from?"

He got a surly answer. "Cinch Willet's my name. I rode down this way from Flagstaff. Ran onto this cabin about dark an' stopped. I'm headin' for San Miguel."

In one corner a fireplace held glowing embers. From a small pile of brush before it, Two-Bit worked up a blaze. It showed Willet to be short, chunky, bowlegged, with a ragged stubble on his face and a scar across one side of his chin.

"Ever been this way before?" Two-Bit asked.

"No," Willet denied irritably. "What's the idea of all this, anyway?"

Then Two-Bit asked, "What'd you dig that hole in the corner for?" The shovel that had been on the roof was leaning there by the hole. Some of the cans stood by the fireplace.

Willet scowled. "I got curious. None of your business, anyway."

As the fire blazed up higher, Two-Bit looked keenly about the room. There was no sign of a poke of gold dust.

"You were seen over on the San Miguel road yesterday afternoon," Two-Bit stated.

Willet sneered. "If you think I got any gold dust, look around."

"Who said anything about gold dust?" Two-Bit asked softly.

Willet looked confused, lapsed into a sullen silence. Two-Bit glanced out the door at the pinto pony. Pegleg Coleman

had claimed the man rode a black horse. Something funny here. Pegleg couldn't mistake a pinto hide for a black one, especially when looking through a telescope.

Two-Bit scratched his head. Pegleg might have been wrong about the horse, but this Cinch Willet had blurted out knowledge of the gold dust.

"We'll poke along to San Miguel and look into this. Before we leave, you clean out that hole an' see if there's any dust buried there."

Cinch Willet did it. There was no gold dust.

"Let's go," Two-Bit said curtly.

Willet picked up his blanket and stamped out the door. Two-Bit followed, and as he stepped through the doorway a sudden movement at one side made him whirl there. He was too slow. A rifle barrel caught him above the ear. Two-Bit went down.

CHAPTER THREE

Glory Blast

THE RUDDY firelight was warm against his face and the shadows were dancing grotesquely on the ceiling *vigas* over his head when Two-Bit opened his eyes. He felt sick, dizzy, and his head hurt. He was lying on his back before the corner fireplace. A boot in his ribs had jarred him back to consciousness.

Four men were standing around him. One of them exclaimed, "His eyes are open. Kick him again!"

A second voice growled, "Come on, Shorty! Get up!"

The sickness in Two-Bit's head was nothing to the sickness in his heart when he heard that voice, that name. He got to his feet unsteadily.

The man who had called him Shorty was towering in front of him, grinning. "So it's little Shorty Owens again. Four years it's been, ain't it, Shorty? An' by God, you turn up with a sheriff's badge. Ain't that a laugh?"

Dandy Barker was the next man in the circle. Dandy was grinning, too. Two-Bit looked around. To the man behind him he said, "Hello, Joe."

The first speaker laughed. It wasn't pleasant, that laugh. "Yep, it's Apache Joe an' Buck Peters. Your old sidekicks, Shorty, come back to see you. Dandy Barker told us where you was hiding out."

Cinch Willet made the fourth. All were armed. Two-Bit felt the side of his head. His fingers came away wet with blood. He hardly saw it. For the first time since Pat Dewey had made him deputy sheriff, the slump was back in Two-Bit's shoulders. "So Barker tipped you off," he said heavily.

"That's right," Buck Peters chuckled. "We ran on to him up in Cheyenne. He got drunk an' began cussing the sheriff down in San Miguel. Before he was through I had you spotted, Shorty. Only one mild little freckled fellow in the West could sling a gun like that."

"Which one of you held up that old miner over on the San Miguel road this afternoon?" Two-Bit asked.

Apache Joe showed strong white teeth in the flickering light. He was a slender, pantherish young man with only a slight trace of coarse flat features to betray the Indian in him. "Me, Shorty," Apache Joe admitted.

Two-Bit wrinkled his brows. It was hard for him to think. He said slowly to Buck Peters, "The rest of you was waiting here?"

"That's right," Buck agreed with heavy humor. "Willet went into San Miguel the other day an' heard all about you, Shorty. We figgered you wouldn't come after one man with a posse."

"What do you want?" Two-Bit asked without emotion. "If you fellows got the

old man's gold dust, don't bring up old times. I'm a lawman now an' I'm playing straight with my job."

"Playing hell, you runty little lizzard!" Dandy Barker snarled. "By God, I told you I'd get you, an' I have!"

"Shut up!" Buck Peters snapped. "I'll handle this. Shorty, forget that old coot. We got his dust an' we aim to keep it. But don't figger we rode clear down from Cheyenne for a measly poke of placer dust."

"What did you come for then, Buck?"

"To see you, Shorty. The thing couldn't be sweeter if I'd planned it. The sheriff's laid up an' you're all the law. I got plans, Shorty. Big plans."

"What plans?" Two-Bit asked. His throat felt tight; he found it hard to keep his mind on the men about him. He was thinking of San Miguel, of Pat Dewey, of Laura in the adobe house on the hill.

Buck Peters had built a smoke. He lit it; the match flare showed his set face.

"We're after the gold that's shipped every week from the San Miguel mine," Buck said bluntly. "Dandy here says some weeks it runs as high as a hundred an' fifty thousand dollars."

"You won't get it," said Two-Bit. "Not a chance, Buck. You fellows better ride back to Cheyenne."

"We'll split it five ways," Apache Joe urged softly.

"No!" Two-Bit told him harshly.

Dandy Barker burst out angrily: "Don't argue with the stubborn little fool!"

"I won't," Buck Peters grunted. "We're after that gold, Shorty. We're going to get it. You're helpin' us."

"So that's why you got me out here? You're wasting your time, Buck."

Buck Peters bent close. "They gave me twenty years!" he said angrily. "Twenty years for that Union Pacific train we held up. I skipped after three. The Pinkertons are still lookin' for you, Shorty. There's a thousand-dollar reward standing."

"I know it," Two-Bit said heavily. "I was a fool kid. I made a fool play in tying up with you an' Joe. I've been trying to live it down. I changed my name an' landed here in San Miguel as barkeep. They sort of shoved this deputy job on me—an' I've been trying to be a good one."

"You talk big," Dandy Barker sneered.

Two-Bit ignored him and went on calmly. "I didn't get any money out of that express car. Buck, you an' Joe ride off an' forget about me. That ain't much to ask."

Cinch Willet laughed unpleasantly. "Don't he sing a mournful tune?"

"Buck, we never had any trouble. I—I'm beggin' for this."

"Hell!" Buck sneered. "You been a gunman an' a train robber, an' you're swellin' around like you never batted a crooked eye. I ain't goin' to stick a gun in your ribs. You'd be fool enough to tell me to shoot. But the Pinkertons are after you. I got twenty years. You can figger on about the same."

THE FIRELIGHT flickering on Two-Bit's face showed it drawn and gray. He looked past Buck Peters as if he saw something beyond the hut where he stood.

"I'm married," Two-Bit said huskily. "She—she's going to have a baby. All I ask is to be let alone. Twenty years would make me an old man, Buck. It'd come pretty close to killing her. You wouldn't do that to us?"

"Stop whining!" Buck snapped irritably. "You heard the deal."

Dandy Barker laughed. "I hope he takes the Pinkertons. I'm good at comforting a woman."

Two-Bit looked at Dandy Barker fixedly. What passed through Two-Bit's mind

he never told. But slowly he drew a deep breath.

"All right, Buck. What do I do?"

"I said he'd come through," Buck chuckled. "First you get us some dynamite from the mine, Shorty. Dandy, here, says sometimes the box goes out empty, as a blind. You know when the gold is in. If there's a good shipment Saturday, you chalk a line by the door of the express car. That'll tell us if the gold is there. We'll stop the train somewhere down the line, dynamite the box open an' hightail for the Border. Then you take the posse the other way.

"That all?" Two-Bit asked heavily.

"Uh-huh. But don't figger you can double-cross us. If the posse catches us, the Pinkertons'll hear about you.

"Take your guns an' ride back, Shorty. They're empty. Cinch'll ride into town tomorrow an' get the dynamite. You can tell him if the mine is figgerin' on sendin' a shipment this week or not. Don't try to make trouble for Cinch. We'll be hidin' out waitin' for him."

* * *

Two-Bit Higgins came back to San Miguel empty handed. He claimed to have been unable to track the bandit. Pegleg Coleman got drunk and spoke out at every bar in San Miguel.

"I knowed that sawed-off excuse fer a sheriff was no good!" Pegleg frothed to anyone who would listen. "He rode out an' he rode back—an' that's the end of it. A real sheriff'd had a posse out an' done something. He ought to be kicked off the job!"

No one paid much attention to Pegleg. San Miguel knew Two-Bit. If he figgered there was little chance of catching the man, that was all right. But there were remarks about how bad Two-Bit looked. His face was drawn, haggard. His eyes were red and lifeless.

The man who visited Two-Bit's house and rode away carrying a sack gingerly in his arms was not noticed.

As the week ran out, Two-Bit's shoulders squared up again. But he did not smile. The cold, smoky look was in his eyes all day long. In public Two-Bit would stand and look at Laura as if a great hunger in his heart was reaching for her. . . .

Saturday came—and Two-Bit went up to the mine office early.

He was in Tom McDonald's office a long time. Later Tom McDonald drove his wagon as usual down to the station. And as usual Two-Bit sat on the gold shipment smoking a cigarette.

It was remarked that the mine must have hit a paying streak of ore. Two-Bit sat on two boxes today.

The Eastbound train pulled in at 5:20. Two-Bit helped Tom McDonald and the express agent lift the heavy locked boxes of bar gold into the express car. No one paid any attention when Two-Bit drew the express messenger aside and talked earnestly to him. And no one noticed when Two-Bit climbed down and casually took a piece of chalk from his pocket and made a long mark by the express car door.

AN HOUR later Billy Bowers, the station agent, ran wildly up the street shouting the news. The train had been stopped at Stony Cut, some twenty miles away, by rocks rolled on the tracks. Masked men had fired a volley of shots to keep the passengers inside. The two boxes of bar gold from the San Miguel mine had been unloaded and the train forced to go on. It had stopped several miles away and the conductor had hooked on a telegraph wire with a portable key and sent back the alarm.

A rider galloped to Two-Bit's house. He found Two-Bit sitting on the *portal* talking to his wife, holding her hand.

Two-Bit's horse was saddled before the *portal.* Two-Bit's rifle was in the saddle scabbard, his belt gun on his hip. Two-Bit kissed his wife good-bye, held her close for a moment. The man who had brought the news heard him say, "Stand here on the porch for a few minutes, honey."

When Two-Bit reached the station where he turned out of sight, he reined in and looked back for a long moment. He waved to the small, pink-aproned figure that stood on the *portal.*

A posse was already gathering. Tom McDonald was there, grim and silent. He said nothing when Two-Bit addressed the armed men gathered about them.

"You men know we're going after gunmen. They'll shoot to kill. They'll ride for Old Mexico, of course. It may be a long trip. I hope you boys will stay with me."

The moon was up and silver glory lay over the country when the hard riding posse reached Stony Cut. Two-Bit was first. Two-Bit found the bandit horses, four of them, and two extra pack horses, tied to trees nearby.

But Tom McDonald found the spot where the gold had been unloaded and carried off to one side. They gathered to his shout—to see a great hole torn in the ground. The bandits were there, four of them, blown to death.

In the moonlight old Tom McDonald dismounted at the edge of the hole and looked about calmly. Beside him Two-Bit said weakly, "What happened here?"

Tom McDonald spat. "I reckon this settles it," he said evenly. "Here's a hole to plant 'em. We might as well take their hosses and get back."

"They're dead!" Two-Bit muttered.

"Uh-huh," Tom McDonald agreed. "They won't make any more trouble. Boys, Two-Bit told me he had a tip the train might be held up somewheres along the line here. He didn't know where, so he couldn't plant a posse. But he asked me to fill the boxes with rocks an' let him ride the train with the posse.

"I told him," said Tom McDonald, "he wouldn't have no hosses to follow them. He might just as well sit back in San Miguel an' wait. I told him I'd send the boxes full of rocks an' we'd see what happened." Tom McDonald spat again. In the heavy silence a coyote howled nearby. Tom McDonald's voice rang out harshly. "I filled the boxes with dynamite! They had to be blowed open—and that set off the dynamite inside. It saved us a ride over the Border."

Two-Bit said thinly. "I didn't know you were going to do this, Tom."

"I know, son," old Tom McDonald said kindly. "It wouldn't tie with your idea of law an' order. But there ain't much law agin' shipping dynamite an' keeping my mouth closed. No use of you gettin' killed by a lot of ornery gunmen. San Miguel needs you."

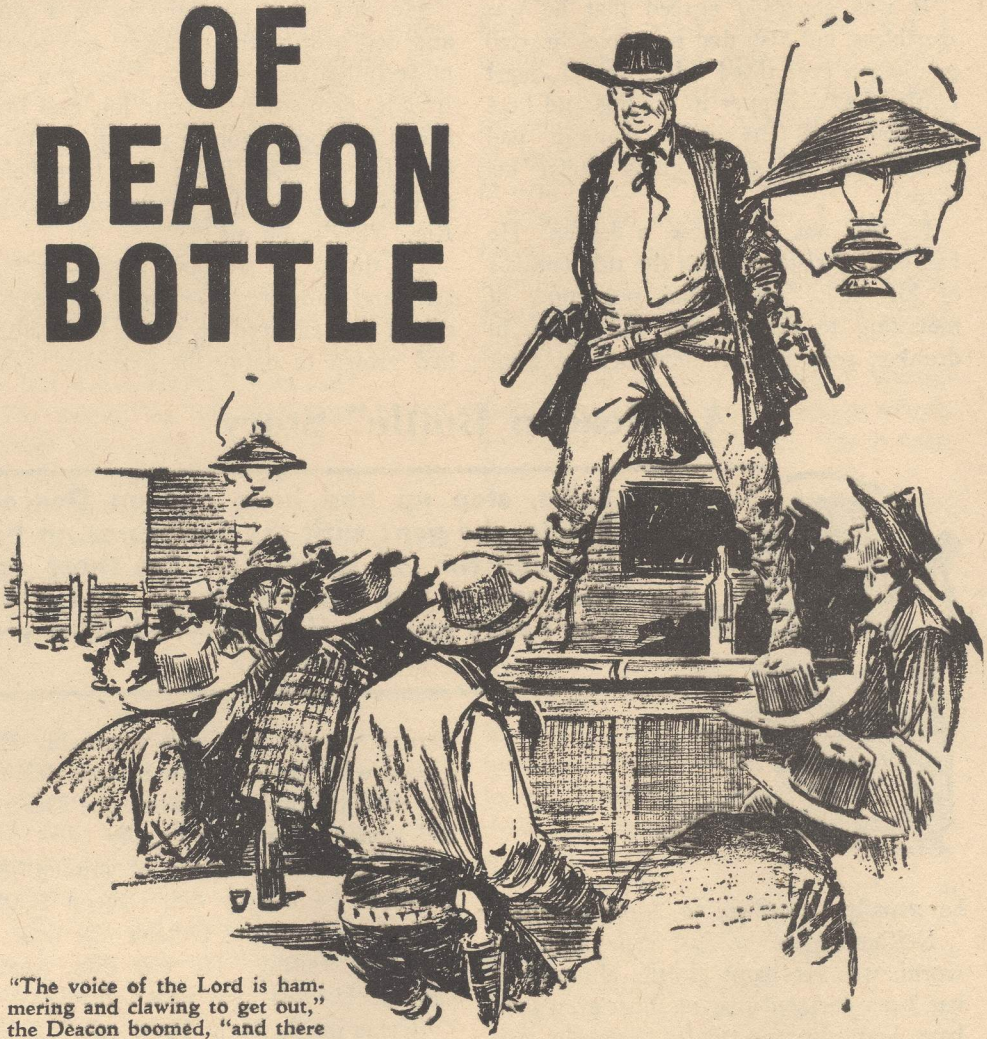
The men standing about them said afterwards that Two-Bit sounded like a new man. His voice filled up so he could hardly speak.

"I wouldn't have done it," Two-Bit said huskily, "b-but I'm glad you did it, Tom. Might have been gun play an'—an' trouble. If San Miguel figgers like you do, I'll keep on doing the best I can. God bless you, Tom!"

They say that when Pat Dewey moved on to other parts and Two-Bit Higgins took his place, Two-Bit went on to fame and glory as one of the best peace officers the Border country ever had. And for years afterward, the way Two-Bit looked at his wife, you would have thought he was afraid of losing her. But no one who knew Laura thought that. She loved little Two-Bit Higgins so much that life wouldn't have been worth living if they had been parted.

THE END

THE PREACHMENT OF DEACON BOTTLE



"The voice of the Lord is hammering and clawing to get out," the Deacon boomed, "and there can't anything be done about it. . . ."

By Robert E. Mahaffay

IT WAS rumored that Deacon Bottle had served a term behind the bars of Deer Lodge for brand-blotting; it was half believed that his had been the silver-mounted Colt .45 flourished, on more than one occasion, in the face of the driver who piloted the stage into Latigo; it was whispered that certain bank losses could be laid at his door.

Yet none of these current beliefs could be definitely proved. And until they could be—at which time the Deacon's end would be brisk and conclusive—Latigo accepted him with pleasure and some

pride. He was in the way of being a town character whose renown was far-flung.

It was generally agreed that he was worthless, but also that no nobler-hearted gentleman ever tilted a full, round, quart bottle of Old Pepper to his lips and kept it there until the entire contents had disappeared in great gulps down his throat.

He was not, of course, a deacon. He had been christened with the title because of his habit, on special occasions, of mounting to the bar-top and there, in drunken solemnity, thundering out what accustomed to keep his audience mindful of his words.

He cast what appeared to be a wink and nod toward the doorway and roared powerfully, compellingly, "So you see, friends, damnation is your lot, and hell-fire is waiting to gobble you up.... Well, let's forget about it for the time being and have a drink. Set 'em up for the boys, Rig. They're on me."

He thrust his weapons into their holsters and clambered down into the jostling crowd that elbowed up to the bar. Latigo had grown to enjoy his orations. They

A "Deacon Bottle" Story

Folks, step up and have one on Deacon Bottle, the gent with the Scriptures on his lips and the .45 in his fist. For those are the tools of the Deacon's trade, and if he can't pray you into Heaven—he'll blow you to Hell!

he usually described as "preachments."

Neither, when he first came into the world, was his name Bottle, although it had been declared that he must even then have been clasping one in a chubby fist.

The cowtown of Latigo knew little of the Deacon's past, and it expected nothing of him but prodigies of drinking. Consequently, when there came that moment of panic, filling Latigo with turmoil and the threat of death, he was forgotten.

The Deacon, his smooth and moon-like face sweat-beaded but happy, the skirts of his frock coat flying with the vehemence of his gestures, was concluding a particularly inspired "preachment." He waved belligerently the two silver-mounted six-shooters with which he was were a novelty that was invariably climaxed with an invitation to free drinks. On the rare occasions when the Deacon had money he spent it rapidly.

But this time, instead of joining the crowd as he usually did, Deacon Bottle pushed on through. Outside the door a man was waiting. He was thin, weary looking, but his jaw jutted firmly.

"Come on in, Mel. Have one."

"Can't," said Mel Haycort tersely. "Marvel's coming back in a minute or so. Listen, Deacon—"

"Pitfalls of the Devil yawning under your wandering feet, Mel?"

Haycort nodded. "Jukes is aiming to—" He stopped and his eyes swung in the direction of a tall figure clinking toward them along the walk.

JONATHAN JUKES, owner of the TN connected, granite-like but honest of countenance, halted before he strode

on into the saloon. His eyes fixed belligerently on the Deacon and Haycort.

"Howdy, Deacon." He went on without waiting for a reply. "Haycort, I'm looking for you to pull up stakes. You've nested on my range long enough. I need the land. I'm dealing straight with you, Haycort. Get off or you'll be sorry."

"It's my homestead, legally filed on government land," said Haycort stiffly. "It's according to law, Jukes."

"Not according to range law," declared Jonathan Jukes abruptly. "You've got my last word, Haycort. Get out!"

He swung on his heel and passed through the doors.

Deacon Bottle's round blue eyes gleamed innocently. " 'The Assyrian swept down like a wolf on the fold!' That ain't from the Bible, but the stirrups fit."

Haycort shrugged. "Here comes Marvel, Deacon. Don't let on to her about this."

From the general store across the street came a girl who threw up a hand in greeting as she saw the Deacon. Raven-black curls struggled from beneath her wide hat. She walked almost like a man, little explosions of powdery dust spurting up under her boots.

With her, and a few short paces behind her, for she walked swiftly, was a man. Sheriff Link Artemis, hat in hand, was attempting hurriedly to explain something. His voice rumbled over to the two men.

"You deserve something better, Marvel. A nester's shack is no place for a girl like you. Give me a chance, won't you? The Double Y, now..."

The girl's voice tinkled mischievously in reply. "It's much too grand for me, Mr. Artemis. And it's already established. I'd miss the fun of making a go of our little place."

Then she was across, stretching out a hand to the Deacon. Her eyes were of the same twinkling blue as his, set deliciously in the soft, feminine curves of her face.

"Good-morning, Deacon. I heard the first part of your preachment, but I couldn't wait. You were in fine form."

"Not bad, my dear," said the Deacon solemnly, "not bad. A humble example of righteousness battling with the forces of evil."

"Trying to drown them, I suppose," broke in the sheriff. He was a heavy-set man in his middle forties, almost ape-like. His eyebrows met thickly over the bridge of his nose.

"The oil of zeal," returned Deacon Bottle suavely. "Good for wagon wheels and human woes, my friend. Try it some time."

"You're still drunk," snapped the sheriff. His dark eyes shot contempt at the Deacon and dislike at Haycort. "Come on, Marvel. I'll take you wherever you're going. I can't afford to be seen loitering with a sot and a damned—"

The girl turned on him, her laughing blue eyes suddenly blazing. "A damned nester, you mean, Mr. Artemis? You may as well know now I'm proud to be one. And I'm proud that my father has the nerve it takes."

The sheriff's heavy face knotted in anger. "You'll change your mind! You too, Haycort. Nesters aren't welcome here. You'll find that out."

Mel Haycort's voice came in a cold drawl. "Better start moving, Sheriff. There's nothing more, I reckon."

"There will be," growled Artemis. "For you and for this high-and-mighty daughter of yours."

Haycort was a split-second faster than Deacon Bottle. He whipped two steps ahead and his right fist laced with a snap of bone against the sheriff's jaw.

Artemis went down. He groped to his knees, fumbled at his hip, then saw Haycort standing stolidly with a hand gripping the butt of the .38 he carried, and thought better of it. He got swayingly to his

feet, eyed the stiff figure before him, and clumped savagely into the saloon.

"YOU shouldn't have done it, Dad," said Marvel softly.

"Sorry, Marvel. I—I couldn't help it."

The girl laid her hand gently on his arm. "Forget it, Dad. I've some more shopping to do. I'll meet you in half an hour."

As she swung down the walk past the jail a tall young man came out of the building and joined her. A smile crinkled Deacon Bottle's round, pinkish face.

"That Will Jessup ain't a bad kid, Mel."

"Good as deputy sheriffs get, I reckon."

"Marvel like him?"

"Kinda, I guess."

Pursing his lips in a mild whistle, the Deacon watched Haycort rubbing the bruised knuckles of his right hand.

He sighed. "I'm weak, Mel. Spiritually weak. If you hadn't hit him, I was going to. But it don't help any."

"What does it matter?" The nester's voice was bitter. "Artemis wouldn't have helped me anyhow. He's a big rancher himself."

"And a Philistine," murmured the Deacon regretfully.

Anger flared in the weary-looking nester and flowed out into bitter speech.

"Hell, Deacon, you know what the setup is. The sheriff's Double Y is one of the biggest spreads in the country now, and he's still reaching out for more. He's got notes on most of the others, the TN included, and he's clamping down on 'em. He'd knife his best friend in the back for an acre of range. You can't beat it, Deacon. He'll stand for the big outfit. The little man can go hang."

Something changed in the Deacon's moon-like face. He stared into the floating, cloudless blue of the sky. Then: "I'm wondering about Marvel, Mel."

Marvel Haycort was the only person who ever brought a change to the Deacon.

Haycort's slender frame grew tense. "I know. It's a hell of a thing to ask her to go through."

"You know how a range fight usually ends."

"Sure, Deacon. I'm not kidding myself."

Deacon Bottle went on haltingly, curiously hesitant. "It's not a question of your turning yellow, Mel. A horned devil couldn't throw a scare into you. I know that. But maybe..." His voice trailed off.

"What is it, Deacon?" Haycort jerked. "What are you getting at?"

"For Marvel's sake. Maybe..."

"You mean—clear out?"

"I wouldn't ask you to do it, Mel. After all these years, Marvel is more yours than mine."

MEL HAYCORT shot a swift glance up and down the street. No one was in sight. The weight of the afternoon sun hung heavily on the dusty street and glanced searingly from the unpainted building fronts.

"I couldn't ever be her father," he said.

"You have been for eighteen years."

Haycort's voice came hoarsely. "I was just filling in for you, Deacon. She'll have to know some time. We'll tell her whenever you're ready."

"That will be never, Mel," said Deacon Bottle, a strange huskiness in his voice. "I know what I am. I'll never be any different. I'm no kind of a man to be a father to a girl like Marvel. Drunkard, jailbird—"

"Those five years you did in Deer Lodge were for me," said Haycort fiercely. "You faked a confession for—for me!"

"You'd have died there," the Deacon told him quietly. "Your lungs would have given out. I couldn't let that happen."

The nester was silent. Deacon Bottle went on. "You took Marvel then. You've

been a better father than I ever could have been. If anything happened to you, she'd have only me left, and that wouldn't be enough."

There was a long pause. "I'll go," said Haycort at last. "I'll get Marvel out of this. Only it'll take money, and I haven't got any."

"The Lord will provide," promised the Deacon solemnly, and something almost like a grin passed over his plump features.

On the afternoon of the second day following he went to the bank. Whether he went for the purpose of requesting a loan for his friend or of reconnoitering the place with the idea of making an unofficial withdrawal during the night, will never be known. For he witnessed an incident that altered his plans.

At the cashier's wicket stretched across one end of the room, stood Jonathan Jukes. His big frame was propped with both hands resting outspread on the counter. The cashier was counting over bills to him.

"Five one-hundred-dollar bills, Mr. Jukes," the Deacon heard him say. "Clean money. Fresh from the United States mint."

Jonathan Jukes swept it up without a word in reply, slipped it into his wallet. He nodded briefly to the Deacon and strode out.

The Deacon left too. His pockets were empty, but a thought was flowing through his brain. He cast his eyes piously skyward as he climbed into his saddle. "Providence," he murmured. "Providence never faileth a man with a little gumption!"

JONATHAN JUKES was in no hurry as he headed for the TN. He went at a leisurely trot down a little dip where his horse's hoofs rattled, past a thorny mesquite clump and alongside a towering ragged stretch of rock....

He was almost past the rock when a crisp voice cut out of the warm stillness behind him.

"Hold on, Jukes! Don't turn around, and don't move."

Jukes reined in and sat motionless. "Don't want to be recognized, is that it?"

From a cleft in the rock rode Deacon Bottle, holding close to his side one of the silver-mounted guns. A beam, invisible to Jonathan Jukes who glared angrily straight before him, illuminated his rotund countenance.

"Just shy," he admitted regretfully. "I get self-conscious with people looking at me."

The Deacon edged his horse in behind the TN owner. "I know it's a fault," he confessed as he looped a bandanna swiftly over Jukes' eyes. "I shouldn't be bashful and I'm trying to overcome it. Put your hands behind you." The hands he secured with a short length of rawhide. Rummaging through the other's pockets, he un-

earthed a watch, some small change and a long black wallet.

He whistled in feigned surprise. "I'm lucky, Jukes. Didn't count on this much. I'll make you a present of the watch just to prove I'm not covetous."

Riding safely away, Deacon Bottle again raised his blue eyes skyward. "It has been written," he murmured piously, "to the humble of spirit—the spoils."

Two hours later he was seated in a corner of the Desert Eagle, watching the doorway from under half-dropped lids.

Better not to go directly to Haycort with the money, he had decided. If he were trailed now his tracks would lead back and be lost in the chopped-up dirt of Latigo's main street. It was possible, too, that Jukes had recognized that booming voice of his. That was why the Deacon was waiting with his horse lightly tethered near the back door of the saloon.

He was still there, stretched out in languid vigilance, when a rider leaped from a running horse outside and burst into the room.

He ran to the table where Deputy Sheriff Will Jessup sat in an idle poker game.

"Jukes is shot," he snapped out. "Deader'n hell. Sheriff's bringing him in."

Young Jessup's cards sprayed down on the table. "Who done it?"

Deacon Bottle's feet swung down from the chair with a thump. His large body hunched forward over the table.

"That damned nester, Haycort. Sheriff got him, too. Jukes was killed near Haycort's place—with a .38, and Haycort carries a .38."

Jessup got up suddenly. "Something wrong there," he said. "Haycort's not fool enough to do that." He went out running.

The Deacon remained quiet for a moment. Haycort? But it couldn't have been Haycort. He wouldn't let himself be provoked into a fight—not with Marvel to think of. But who else was there?

The saloon was empty now. Men had collected out in front. Words sifted back inside. "Nesters ain't worth trials. . . . The quicker hung the better!"

THE DEACON went quickly to the door, standing just inside. He heard someone come pattering up to the group on the walk.

"Jukes dead, eh? Was the money stolen?"

The Deacon muttered under his breath. It was the bank cashier.

"Sure," the cashier continued in answer to queries. "Jukes drew out five hundred the early part of this afternoon. Didn't say why, but the bank has the numbers of the bills. They'd just come in. Didn't find 'em on Haycort, did they?"

No one knew that.

"Well, find the money and you've got your man," said the cashier importantly. "Somebody better tell the sheriff."

Sheriff Artemis and his prisoner had not yet appeared. The Deacon went back to his corner and sat down heavily. New bills! He might have known there would be a record of them.

Under cover of the table he drew out the long black wallet. The crisp, clean bills lay in the fold. Beside them was a plain envelope. Curiously, the Deacon drew out the slip of paper it contained. His round eyes widened as he looked at it; he spread it out on the table and read it again:

> Meet me where the trail cuts the northeast corner of Haycort's place, with a $500 payment on your note. I'm cramped for time. Will be in a rush to get through to Winton and settle a debt.
>
> Artemis.

The Deacon whistled softly and hastily slipped the paper into an inner pocket. He sat staring at the ceiling. Where did that note and the sheriff fit into the tangle of affairs?

He felt suddenly that he must see Mel Haycort at once, when a mounting clatter of hoofs outside broke in upon his thoughts.

The Deacon went outside. Down the street was coming a grim cavalcade. In the lead was the weary-looking nester, dust-streaked and expressionless of face. He was handcuffed. Behind him rode the sheriff, scowling. He led a third animal, across the saddle of which lay the great, limp frame of Jonathan Jukes.

Following them was Marvel. With a queer constriction of his heart, the Deacon noted her black hair, stuffed hastily under the big hat, her warm blue eyes, tearless but staring hungrily from side to side. Looking for someone.

The Deacon stepped out of the crowd into the street, and the girl, seeing him, slipped from her horse and ran to him with a little choking cry.

"Deacon, Deacon, you can't let them do it! Father didn't kill Jukes, Deacon. He didn't!"

An unhealthy murmur ran over the crowd. Partly to shield the girl from it and partly because the sight of Marvel had sent a charge of unreasoning panic through him, the Deacon drew her away.

THEY went through the saloon and into a back room. He put an arm roughly around her shoulder.

"There now, take it easy," he tried to say with assurance.

The girl's reserve left her and she clung to him, sobbing. "It was someone else, Deacon. It wasn't dad."

"Sure. I know," he told her awkwardly. Again he was a man lost, as he always was when he talked seriously to Marvel. "The sheriff can't prove anything on your —your dad."

The girl broke away from him, her eyes suddenly free of tears and filled instead with fire.

"Deacon, do you know what he said to me? The sheriff. Her eyes blazed.

He shook his head dumbly. "He wanted me to marry him. He accused dad in one breath and then in the other said that if I'd marry him he'd get dad off."

"Damn him!" said Deacon Bottle. "It's not that bad, Marvel. We'll find a way."

The spurt of energy that had given her strength died out of the girl. She was pitiful again, imploring. "I hate him, Deacon. I hate him, but I'd do it if I thought—"

"That'll be the last thing," said the Deacon. "And the Devil himself wouldn't let it happen. Listen, Marvel. Get back to the ranch and stay there. You can't do anything here. It'll be better—if anything happens."

"What?" the girl asked him.

"I don't know yet," said the Deacon, "but something will. I'm going to see Mel."

When he left the girl he was Deacon Bottle again, portly, jovial, unperturbed. The excitement in the street had died down somewhat, although there were still clusters of men talking in tones that were ominously low. As he walked, the Deacon more than once caught the drift of their conversation. The flame of lynch law was flickering in Latigo.

The space in front of the jail house was deserted. A window fronted on the walk, and as the Deacon approached it he stopped, peering into the interior.

He saw the sheriff, with a gesture that was almost furtive, strip off his coat and hastily unbuckle a holster from his left shoulder. In the holster was a gun, a small gun. Sheriff Artemis opened a drawer of his desk, tucked the gun therein, and after a quick look around went through the door that led to the cells.

As he left, the Deacon slipped in by the outer door. He padded across the room and tugged open the desk drawer. He drew in his breath with a little chuckling noise at what he saw. The gun was a .38

caliber—a .38 that Artemis was carrying concealed in a shoulder holster. And that hideout weapon was unknown to citizens of Latigo!

The Deacon closed the drawer, moved away from the desk. A moment later the sheriff was back. "What the hell's biting *you,* Deacon?" he said.

Deacon Bottle sighed. "I thought if I could talk to Haycort about sin and the fires of Hell maybe he'd confess for the salvation of his soul," he suggested.

Artemis snorted. "You crazy old fool!"

"And it would save the state money," hinted the Deacon.

"He'll hang whether he confesses to you or not. But if you want to go in, hop to it."

The Deacon submitted to a swift search, and was relieved of his two pistols. He went through the door murmuring sadly. "Ah, wickedness, wickedness."

Mel Haycort got up wearily from the narrow cot and came toward the bars at the front of his cell. "Howdy, Deacon. I reckon you know all there is by this time."

"Much evil has come to my ears," nodded the Deacon. "Who done it, Mel?"

"What the hell does it matter?" said Haycort bitterly. "It's framed on me."

"Who'd have a reason, Mel?"

Haycort broke away from the bars and paced angrily the length of his cell and back again.

"There's only one man besides myself who stands to profit by murdering Jukes," he snapped. "But what the hell good does it do to say that? We can't touch him, and you know it."

Deacon Bottle put the tips of his fingers together. "Blessed are they who hang on till the last gasp, my friend. Humble servants of the Lord sometimes get in a lick or two when it ain't expected."

LYNCHING talk began in a subdued whisper in the Desert Eagle that night. Like a vagrant breeze it scuttled from table to table, drifted from one group of men to another, hardening faces, lowering voices, charging the room with a tense, electric atmosphere.

There was a constant surge, fierce and quiet, about the bar. Raw liquor ran in a steady stream from the necks of bottles. Men were drinking, drinking, to assuage the biting nervous tension that ran through them. And partly, too, to kill the shamed murmur that ran with it, for mob murder is never done coolly and reasonably.

Will Jessup, deputy sheriff, caught the murmur, saw what was coming. He lounged stiffly against the wall by the door, sober, waiting.

Sheriff Link Artemis sat at a table with friends, pretending not to read the portents that eddied all about him.

And Deacon Bottle, seemingly unaware as well of the spectre that hovered blackly in the room, drank and joked and beamed.

Someone, drunker than the rest, bawled suddenly, "We'll string him up, the lousy nester! It'll be a lesson."

A Double Y rider lurched to his feet. "Drilled Jukes in the back, did he? The murderin' devil!"

The sheriff got up. "Now, boys, it's not as if the hanging was in our hands, though I wish it was. The law's got to take its course." But his voice did not carry conviction. It was more of a spur than a denial.

"To hell with the law!" the Double Y rider shouted. "There's been murder done, an' we got the swine that did it. Open-an'-shut case, it is."

The raw purpose of the statement raced like a grass fire over the room. Blood madness fastened its talons in the flesh of Latigo.

Deacon Bottle stumbled across to the sheriff. He fell against the lawman and saved himself from a fall only by clasping one arm around his shoulder.

"It's devil's work that's coming, Sheriff," he mumbled. "There'll be wickedness to answer for if you don't stop it."

Artemis pushed him roughly away, so that he tripped and fell on one knee. "Shut up," he snarled. "You're drunk!"

Deacon Bottle stumbled away, merging with the shifting men. As if by magic there was suddenly a rope, coiling and ominous, in the hands of several men.

"Lynch the bushwhacker!" rose a cry. "He's at the jail! Get him at the jail!"

Sheriff Artemis was seized abruptly from behind, his arms pinioned. He struggled half-heartedly for a moment and then stopped. "Remember the law, boys," he said without vigor. "He needs hanging, but the law ought to do it."

"It's one time the law won't be troubled," someone shouted. "Keep quiet, Link, and you won't get hurt."

Like a wave clawing along a shore, that mass of men surged toward the door. In a moment the surge would break into a crashing roar.

But a figure halted it before it could get under way.

IN THE DOORWAY crouched Will Jessup, deputy sheriff. He was white faced and grim—one man, with a single gun, the black muzzle of which swept slowly from side to side, facing almost a hundred men. Will Jessup was making a desperate stand for the father of Marvel.

"Nobody hangs Mel Haycort but the law," he said in a voice loud enough to carry through the sharp hush to every corner of the room. "And the law don't hang him until it proves he done it."

"Get out of the way," the Double Y puncher shrilled. "Get out, Jessup, or there'll be two men killed tonight!"

Somewhere in the room, shattering that electric, hysterical hush, a gun cracked.

The weapon spun out of Will Jessup's hand. A bloody streak splattered along his arm, and red dripped from it to the floor. Jessup looked at his arm dazedly.

A man shrieked, "You asked for it, Jessup. Now get out of the way!"

But for a split second no one in the mob moved. It was the first blood that had been drawn. In a moment that blood would have the effect of whiskey on an empty stomach, but for an instant it held the madness in those men, stopped them.

And before that moment had passed a voice boomed out over their heads, deep, arresting, powerful.

A hundred pairs of eyes, like the eyes of startled children, whipped toward the bar. Deacon Bottle was standing on it, legs spread wide apart, towering over them. Held close against his sides were the two silver-mounted guns, gaping out silently at the crowd.

"Preachment coming on, boys! She's boiling up inside me like water smashing through a dam. Won't be stopped and can't be stopped, boys, so settle your cussed minds to it."

"This ain't no time, Deacon—" a voice began.

"The voice of the Lord is hammering and clawing to get out, and there can't anything be done about it," the Deacon boomed on. "Stop fiddling with your peashooter, Luke Meyer, or by the Almighty I'll be throwing in a funeral oration to boot."

For a moment the spirit of lynch law was held at bay. But it hovered cunningly in the background, like a wounded rattler waiting to strike. The pink was gone from Deacon Bottle's round face. Something of its deadly intent was carried over to the hundred men who watched him.

The Deacon's voice rolled on, strong and compelling as an organ:

"There's a parable that needs telling. Not an old one, but a new one. There's murder in it, not a straight-out killing, but the dirty dry-gulching of a friend who didn't suspect it. There's the threat to

a girl in it, and the chance of a second murder to cover the first. Listen now, damn you, and listen hard!

"There was a man who owned a ranch. He wanted two things—a girl and the land of his friend. When times were hard for an honest cowman he made money, made it by hook or crook, and lent it out again to his friend. That man is standing in this room now—standing with honest men because he thinks he's covered up his dirty coyote tracks. Now listen!

"He loaned money to Jonathan Jukes, and waited for the time when Jukes was hard pressed. He had a chance that was made to order for his deviltry because threats had already passed between Jukes and another man."

THE ROOM was quiet now except for the Deacon's rolling voice. Men were listening. Out of the fervor of panic had come a metallic intentness. Shifting glances flickered to the sheriff and away again.

Link Artemis stood with a sneer on his lips, but sweat was trickling from his forehead.

"He—this murdering dog I'm telling you about," the Deacon's voice cannonaded on, "sent a letter to Jukes, telling him to meet him near the nester's place. When he went to keep that appointment, he carried in a shoulder holster a .38 caliber gun. You know why it was hidden and why it was a .38. The nester had one like it."

The sheriff's tones cut in, raw and hoarse. "We're a pack of fools to stand here listening to a drunken sot. He's got the D.T.'s. I'm going out of here."

He started to stride out of the room, but more than one man blocked his way, not angrily or threateningly, but coldly. They did not touch him, simply did not move out of his path.

Deacon Bottle thundered out at them. "He waited for Jukes, and when Jukes came he shot him in the back. The letter I have here. The gun, the .38 that almost hanged an innocent man, is lying with the holster in his desk!"

"It's a lie," shouted Artemis. "And if it's true, it's no evidence!"

From the corner of his eye the Deacon saw Will Jessup, who had not moved, slip unobserved out into the night.

"He stood to win both ways, did this murderer," the Deacon's voice boomed again. "With Jukes out of the way his note would give him the TN. Then there was the girl. He stood to win her by promising help to her nester father who was accused. He wouldn't have done it, at the showdown, but he might have won the girl. That's the story, plain and simple and cruel as it happened. May the Lord Almighty—"

He stopped, because out of the night's blackness, through the swinging doors of the saloon, had come a figure who carried in his hand a shoulder holster with a .38 revolver jammed into it.

The man was Will Jessup. "In the sheriff's desk," he said.

The Deacon noted with a start of surprise that behind Jessup was another figure—the girl. She was standing just behind him, her coal-black hair framing her frightened face, set with its wide, blue eyes that seemed to sparkle in the darkness. She had not gone back to the ranch; she had been outside, listening.

The sheriff's face blazed with an angry belch of fire. "What of it?" he snarled. "You damned fools, that's no proof. Of course I had the gun. That doesn't prove anything. You can't pin a murder on a man with evidence like that."

The mob of men shuffled uneasily, the fire in them waning.

Sheriff Artemis rushed on triumphantly. "Who does it look like done it? How did your Deacon here get the letter he's talking about? When I found Jukes he'd been killed and robbed. His wallet and

money was gone. Deacon Bottle killed him, boys, for the money he was toting."

Like the knotting of a great fist, men drew in a tighter circle under the Deacon, staring up at him. He did not seem to hear or notice them. The lids had dropped half over his wide blue eyes, and the stiffness of his bulky frame seemed to have left it.

His big lips parted at last and he spoke. "The sheriff's right," he said softly. Then he held up one hand, still gripping the gun, to silence the mutter that rumbled under him.

"The money tells the tale. Five hundred dollars there were, in one-hundred-dollar bills. And there's a record of 'em. Who's got 'em? Well, I'd search and find out. I'm wondering," his voice increased to a roar, "I'm wondering if this man isn't carrying that money with him, instead of hiding it, thinking it would be the last place anyone would look!"

"You're crazy!" snapped the sheriff.

But men were crowding around him. Some held his arms. Others ran through his pockets. A thin, pock-marked man drew out of his coat pocket a black wallet and five crisp one-hundred dollar bills.

A crash of voices shook the room as the bank cashier thrust himself forward. "It's them," he cried in a thin, high voice. "By God, it's them!"

The sheriff shook himself free with a bellow. "I don't know anything about them. It's a frameup." His voice cracked hysterically. "It's a frameup, I tell you!"

The Deacon's organ-like tones rumbled in reply. *"Like you framed Haycort, Sheriff?"*

There would have been another murder done then had not the girl, who had remained by the door watching out of frightened blue eyes, rushed into the center of that boiling maelstrom of men, crying out at the top of her lungs.

She drew the fire out of them somehow, halted them there at the door.

She stood taut as a bowstring against the background of their grim faces, ranged around her in a circle. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! You're going mad again. You almost made one mistake tonight. Don't make another. Let him be tried as any man of you would want to be tried. Oh, don't you see? That's the only way justice can be done."

But there was to be no trial for Sheriff Link Artemis. Panting like a trapped animal, he listened to her with the others. When she had done, he jerked himself free with a furious burst of energy, snatched a gun. There was a single echoing report before anyone could interfere, and he tumbled forward on his face, his heart stopped by his own hand. He had chosen the easiest way out.

HALF AN HOUR later Deacon Bottle was drinking in celebration with Mel Haycort.

"I reckon we can tell Marvel now," said Haycort. "After what's happened, you'll want to tell her, Deacon."

Deacon Bottle looked long and lovingly into his glass. "Well, now, I don't know, Mel. Maybe it's best this way. I'll go on being the same old coot I've always been. And she don't need me now. That young sprout Jessup ain't so bad. He'll take care of her. Maybe—maybe some time, Mel . . ."

Haycort grunted, not without a trace of admiring satisfaction. "I'd hate to see you change, Deacon." He gulped down a shot of red-eye. "There's one thing, Deacon. I been wondering about that money. Do you suppose that somebody could have planted it on him? Stumbled up against him or something and slipped it in his pocket?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Mel," said the Deacon solemnly. "You know me. Trust in the Lord, but keep your powder dry."

Before Sherill could scuttle away, Del and Foghorn had seized him and heaved him ten feet into the oozy muck. . . .

Stampede In Avalanche Pass

By Cliff Farrell

The thunder of stampeding hoofs echoed through Avalanche Pass when Del Halliday, back-to-the-wall rancher, gambled his spread on a hell-for-leather race through a grim gunsmoke gantlet!

FOR the last mile Del Halliday had been paying less and less attention to the incessant flow of conversation of Foghorn Peters, his burly foreman. Also Del was no longer plucking and chewing the tall straws of the foxtail grass that dotted the slant—a habit of Del's when things were going well.

They had been inspecting the winter range on the high benches of Del's Rolling H ranch all morning, and were returning to the valley, well pleased with what they

had seen. This September the thick, brown mountain grama lay cured on the stalk like a carpet; it would soon be needed beyond the fence that had barred the stock from the high range all summer.

But now Del was rising uneasily in his stirrups, to sweep the valley with restless, gray eyes. He could see his spread, nestling along the cottonwood-bordered creek three miles away, and he had a clear view to the rims of the low Lost Creek Hills that enclosed the valley to the east. He shifted about, stared with growing concern southward to where Lost Creek Valley narrowed into a bottleneck notch.

The tiny lines about Del's keen eyes deepened and his mouth was thinned out. Del was flat-shouldered, and taller than he seemed at first glance. He was leathery brown, and had a rugged, fighting chin. What Del had, he had fought for. He had fought to keep the Rolling H, had fought harder to keep it growing each year. He had been a slim, drawling, grinning, gangling young puncher when he began it. He was like a blade of tempered steel now.

"Yuh've got the world by the tail with a downhill pull, Del," Foghorn was booming along in a voice like distant thunder. "I been ridin' for forty years, man an' boy, an' I never seen grass to beat that on the benches. The brand shore will fatten up on *that* winter range. Yuh'll—Say! What's wrong?"

Del had suddenly lifted his horse out of its lazy dogtrot.

"Plenty," Del snapped over his shoulder. "Reef that cayuse, Foghorn, an' save your breath for hard work. I knew things had been runnin' too smooth the last six months. Yuh've been chewin' the fat too hard to notice the scarcity of cattle here, where there ought to be scads of 'em. But look down there at the end of the valley."

Foghorn rose in his stirrups too, shading his eyes to peer ahead. There the valley sloped gently for two miles to the bottleneck, through which the yellowish, dead face of the desert frowned. Deadhorse Sink lay in the notch.

As they hurled their horses on at breakneck speed, Del said, "If they've broke through the sink fence, we're in for some tough work!"

As they came within a mile, Del gave a groan. "There's a break in the fence," he cried bitterly. "A lot of 'em have drifted through already."

"How could they have busted that fence?" Foghorn rumbled. "We built it triple strong, an' I rode it only two days ago."

Del was peering ahead grimly. Cattle were thick in the vicinity of the two-mile barrier of wire that stretched from him to rim of the step-walled bottleneck, although grazing was poor on the valley side of the fence.

"*They* didn't bust it," Del said, his words clipped and tense. "That fence has been cut by some treacherous skunk in half a dozen places. A couple hundred head are in the sink already."

FOGHORN could see the openings in the wire now. More steers were grazing through, lured by the scent of lush, wet marsh grass. But they were being tempted to their doom. It was here that Lost Creek sank into the earth again, and the place of its disappearance was a mile-long marsh that was a death trap.

"Some dawgoned, sheep-walkin' skunk done it," Foghorn bellowed.

"That goes double for me, too," Del said. "We'll haze all the critters out that ain't bogged down. Then we'll splice up the holes. You'll fog back to the ranch and bring Bill an' Gus. We'll need plenty of rope too. Hear 'em bawlin'! There must be a couple score of the poor critters so far out we can't see 'em. They've sunk down below the brush. I'll start draggin' 'em out while you bring the boys...."

As the sun touched the rim of the mighty Bluestones to the west, the job was done. Four exhausted, mud-plastered men dismounted and looked at each other. The crickets and toads in the swamp were starting their dismal death dirge to the steers that had been swallowed beneath the quivering surface.

"Forty at least," Del estimated wearily. "Well, that won't ruin us by a long shot. But if we hadn't discovered it when we did . . ."

They all knew that the Rolling H had narrowly escaped ruin.

"A man that would do a sneakin' thing like that would hide a calf from its maw," Foghorn boomed.

Del collected a spat of mud from his chaps and flicked it away. "It wasn't a lone-handed job," he remarked tersely.

His three riders looked at him in surprise. "You rannies don't think the stock all wandered down here of their own will, do yuh? They were shoved down to this end of the valley. It must have been done last night. It was full moon. One man couldn't have turned the trick. It took a full crew, take it from me, amigos."

"Wal, c'nsarn me for a sandflea," Foghorn bellowed. "What was the grand idea?"

"If I knew what the idea was I'd know who pulled it," Del said, turning to mount. "An' if I knew that I'd try to take somebody apart an see what makes 'im tick."

Then he paused and waited. Distant hoofbeats sounded. Soon, seven riders emerged from the brush of the creek to the north, and came swinging up rapidly.

"Howdy, Halliday," a twanging voice sounded.

Del recognized Spot Sherill, the sharp-chinned owner of the big Double S Circle, which occupied the range beyond the hills to the east. Sherill, middle-aged and turkey-necked, carried a reputation as a hard businessman who never made a mistake. But he had erred when he sold Lost Creek Valley to Del five years previously.

Sherill had believed the valley worthless. Except for a mere trickle in early spring, Lost Creek had never carried enough water to support cattle. It had never occurred to Sherill that it was an underground stream. But Del Halliday's roving gray eyes had guessed that fact, and Del's bronzed hands had placed the few shots of dynamite that had brought the full flow of the stream to the surface at the north end of the valley. It was a perpetual stream now, and it had made the valley the best cattle range in the Bluestone country.

Del, his hands on his hips, eyed Sherill's six companions. They were strangers; garbed as punchers, they did not fit the role. One, who was amazingly broad and squatty of figure, packed a brace of .45's. The others carried rifles and six-shooters.

Foghorn leaned close to Del and with an effort toned his whisper down to a mere murmur. "That hombre who looks like a toad is an old-time gunslinger—Frog Durkin, from the Panhandle. Plenty poisonous."

The seven newcomers dismounted and crowded close about the four Rolling H men. Del became watchful. There was something off color about all this.

"I HEARD you was havin' some grief," Sherill began.

"Is that why yo're grinnin'?" Del asked. "How did you hear about it?"

"I didn't," Sherill said easily. "We seen you boys snakin' 'em out of the sink as we come over the hills. I was aimin' on callin' on yuh, Halliday. I got some business to talk over."

"Yuh brought along a lot of witnesses," Del said pointedly. "Go ahead, spit it out, Sherill."

"Here?" Sherill said, trying to look surprised.

"As good a place as any," Del observed. He was not picking a quarrel, but at the

moment he was not going far to avoid one, either. From the moment he saw Sherill's approach, Del had been sure he knew who had sent his cattle into the sink.

Sherill rubbed his jaw with a bony hand. "It's this way, Halliday. I've decided to buy yuh out."

"That's nice."

"Yeah, I need more range. I only sold yuh this valley because you was a young feller that needed a little help."

"How much?" Del shot back.

Sherill considered. "Oh, I'll give yuh eight thousand for the valley," he offered. "I don't want yore cattle."

"That's just what I paid you for it," Del remarked with a calmness that even surprised himself. He wanted to roar out an angry opinion of such a measly price. The valley was worth triple that sum.

"Land is cheap now," Sherill said smoothly. "An' then I don't reckon yo're ever goin' to make much money raisin' cows in Lost Creek Valley. Do you, Durkin?"

This last was addressed at the bulky gunman. "No, I don't reckon yuh'll ever get very far in this valley, young feller," Durkin said, rousing himself from his heavy silence. "It don't look so healthy here for some folks."

Del drew his tobacco sack from his shirt pocket with steady hands. Foghorn, who had seen Del in action in the past, could detect the little white line along Del's jawbone, a warning that the young rancher was gathering himself for something. But the odds against them were fearfully heavy. Only Del and Foghorn were armed, and they packed only a six-shooter each. Bill Andrews and Gus Little had not delayed their start from the ranch to get their guns.

"I savvy," Del said, extracting a paper and making a spill of it. "If I don't sell out to you there'll be more of my fences cut, an' a lot of other cute little tricks like that. Is that the deal, Sherill?"

"You got my offer," Sherill said. He was sure of himself, and did not even deny the charge. "Take it before I change my mind an' cut the price. What's yore answer, Halliday?"

Del squeezed the half-filled sack absently and shook it to loosen the tobacco. Then with a quick flirt of his arm he sent a shower of the gritty, dry stuff into the faces of Durkin and his five gunmen.

They staggered back with oaths, their hands flashing to their holsters. But the stinging tobacco had worked into their eyes, and in the second or two needed to clear their vision, they were covered by Del and Foghorn.

"There's yore answer," Del gritted. "Jerk yore paws away from that lead chucker, Durkin, or you'll get worse than tobacco."

Sherill and his gunmen were lifting their arms, crestfallen.

"Gus, you an' Bill throw Sherill into the sink," Del said. "He'll feel at home wallerin' in the mud. But first, yuh better take their hardware."

Sherill cursed loud and long as the brawny punchers advanced on him. "Don't yuh—"

But they seized him, tossed him over the fence, caught him again before he could scuttle away, and heaved him ten feet into the oozy muck. He gave a howl of terror and floundered back to firmer footing.

"Now take yore boss an' shuck out of here, Durkin," Del said to the gunman. "If I ever see you in this valley again, one of us will go under."

Spot Sherill came bedraggled and slinking back to his horse. The seven raging men rode away into the gathering darkness.

DEL stood a moment, his gray eyes brooding. There was no triumph in his face, though his riders were whacking

backs. "What'll they try next?" Del muttered.

"They can't do anything," Foghorn declared. "We'll ride fence every day, till Sherill gets tired of payin' his gunslingers."

"Yeah, an' we'll ride fence at night too," Del said. "You're slated for the first trick with me tonight, Foghorn."

Del and Foghorn spent a weary, monotonous night. Del patrolled the lower half of the valley and Foghorn the upper portion. Each rode a thirty-mile circle before midnight, meeting then at the ranch to wolf down a cold meal and change horses. They repeated the circle again, but dawn flushed the sky with clear gold at last, and nothing had happened.

"A lot of sleep lost for nothin'," Foghorn boomed as they rode to the ranch together, hungrily eyeing the smoke from the chuckhouse chimney.

They were swinging down at the corral when Del's head snapped up, and his red-rimmed eyes hardened as they focused westward. Then he gave a wild whoop that brought Gus and Bill out of the bunkhouse.

"*Fire!* They sneaked in after we left the range. Great ghosts! It's the winter range! Get blankets from the bunkhouse, get sacks, anything!"

They raided the bunkhouse, and rigged horses with lightning speed. As they swung into the saddle and thundered away, Del gave a groan of dismay. There were three plumes of smoke now, one faint and distant to the north, and another to the south.

A breeze fanned their faces as they topped a swell, and they could see the situation. It was a hopeless one. They were three miles from the fence line of the winter range on the opposite flank of the valley. A roaring column of fire stretched from the fence up into the benches for a mile. It was picking up speed as the breeze caught it. They could hear its dull roar even at that distance. A similar line of red was sweeping down from the head of the valley. A third touchoff also had been made southward and was wiping out the brush and grass toward the rim of the bottleneck.

"The winter range is gone," Del said grimly. "All we can do is to keep it from spreadin' beyond the fence."

Before the smoke shut off vision across the valley, Del saw a group of riders cross a clearing well up on the flank of the Bluestones. They were riding northward to the divide at the head of the valley. Spot Sherill's ranch lay on the prairie beyond the divide.

The four Rolling H men rode for an hour with wet blankets and held back the fire. But the winter range went up in a roaring burst of flame, and the fire rolled on up the Bluestones, to die among the shale slides and rock falls far up the high mountain.

FOGHORN, for once, was silent as they met again. He looked furtively at Del, misery in his heart, for he could sense the agony of spirit that was wrenching at the tall young rancher.

"The bones of every critter I own can bleach in this valley, but I'll never sell to Spot Sherill," Del swore grimly.

"We ain't licked yet," Foghorn rumbled hoarsely. "Maybe we can find a winter range somewhere. Maybe we—"

Del gave a bitter laugh. "If there's an acre of grass within a month's drive of the Bluestone country that isn't carryin' its full load of beef right now, I never heard of it," he said. "An' we don't dare drive farther than that. Winter would catch us and wipe out the herd."

"Say—by glory!" Bill Andrews gurgled excitedly. "Yes there is, Del. Dawgone, we *have* a chance. There's some government land on the other side o' the rim, down in Avalanche Valley, that's

open. I run into Sam Miller last week in town. He's been runnin' a couple thousand head on a permit over there, but he sold out his brand a month ago, an' went to Texas."

Del whirled. "Sure of it?" he snapped.

Bill nodded, and started to say something, but Del had already reefed his horse and was heading across the valley toward the wagon trail that cut through Lost Creek Hills and joined the main trail to Kearsarge beyond. Kearsarge, the county seat and the center of the Bluestone country, was twenty-five miles away. "Start roundin' up a bunch for a fast drive," he called over his shoulder.

Del topped the Lost Creek Hills, and had a bird's-eye view of the rolling range ahead, with the dot along a river in the distance that was the town of Kearsarge. The main trail was a yellow ribbon, fading into the horizon. Merging with it three miles out from the hills was the trail from Spot Sherill's Double S Circle.

And loping down that trail was a rider on a white horse.

"Sherill!" Del muttered as he hurled his own mount down the winding road out of the hills. "I had a hunch he'd hear about that grazing lease, too. I got to beat him to town."

Del was riding a wiry, long-legged piebald chestnut, hammer-headed, but close coupled, with a long, swinging stride and tremendous endurance.

Sherill had a lead of a mile when the piebald reached the main trail on the flat. Kearsarge was still fifteen miles away, but Sherill had discovered the pursuit and was pushing his horse.

Sherill's white mount had speed. Del, with grim eyes, saw the distance between them widen. When they had covered half of the route, Sherill was only a speck of dust ahead.

"A mile an' a half, an' only seven to go," Del groaned.

But hope began to rise in him again after another grueling mile. His piebald was going like a machine, its long-legged stride never varying. And the white horse was beginning to fail.

The distance between them shrank. Three miles out from town they were separated by less than half a mile.

As the lathered, staggering white horse splashed into the river ford, Del was only one hundred yards behind. Sherill turned and screeched at Del, but the splashing of the horses drowned him out.

The two animals floundered from the ford and into the dusty street of Kearsarge side by side, and side by side they panted to a halt at the rail in front of the building where the Superintendent of Rangers was located.

THEY hurled themselves from their horses, and burst into the ranger's office shoulder to shoulder. The ranger rose from his desk, staring in surprise. Del was grim-eyed, his face lined with fatigue and blackened by smoke. Sherill was pallid and shaking.

"I got here first, Ranger," Sherill panted hoarsely. "I want to take over that winter-grazin' lease in Avalanche Valley."

"I'm applyin' for it, too," Del said sharply.

"First come, first served," Sherill cried.

"Looks to me like both of you busted in at the same time," the ranger commented.

"But I've got to have it," Sherill yelled. "I'll pay you double the grass fee. You've got to give it to me. I'm the biggest taxpayer in this county."

"An' the biggest skunk," Del amended. "I'm applyin' for that grass, Ranger, but I can't pay anything more than the regular fee."

The ranger looked from one to the other in perplexity. This was a problem he had never before faced. Sherill con-

tinued to plead and threaten. Del remained grimly silent.

"Shut up," the ranger finally snapped at Sherrill. "I don't give a whoop if you'll pay ten times the grass fee; that ain't the point. You both got here at the same time. Tell you what I'll do. The first man that gets a herd—say, a thousand head—on the lease, gets the permit. Is that fair?"

"Suits me," Del snapped.

"But not me," Sherill screeched. "I ain't goin' to race a herd over Avalanche Pass. If a stampede ever started up in that country every critter would be wiped out."

Avalanche Pass was a saddleback depression on the rim of the Bluestones. It was visible for a hundred miles, being nine thousand feet above the plains. It offered the only cattle trail over the mountains, but it was a dangerous one.

"Well, it's up to you," the ranger said. "That's the layout. You've got the edge on Halliday, anyway. Your north range is a couple miles nearer the trail to the pass than Lost Creek Valley. You like a sporting chance, don't you?"

"Nope, he doesn't," Del answered for Sherill. "He only likes a sure thing. I'm startin' back to my spread. I'll drive Avalanche Pass tonight, Sherill, in case you're interested."

"Tonight?" Sherill cried aghast. "Yuh don't dast do it. Yuh'll lose your herd if they start runnin'."

"Wait an' see," Del assured him.

Suddenly Sherill's demeanor changed. "Yo're on," he exclaimed. "I'll shove a bunch through the pass tonight too. I can drive any trail you can, Halliday."

"I'll be on the lease with the permit for the first of you that gets there with a thousand head," the Ranger promised.

Del borrowed a fresh horse from a friendly puncher in town and hit the backtrail. Sherill was at his heels, also on a borrowed mount. It was mid-afternoon when Del mounted the rim of Lost Creek Hills and overlooked his own spread again. The far side of the valley was only a black scar now. He could see Gus holding a bunch of cattle down near the creek. Foghorn and Bill were working more out of the creek brush. As he rode up, Del estimated the bunch as six hundred, and they needed a thousand. It would take until dark to reach the required number. He hastily explained the situation as he caught a fresh horse from the remuda and began helping circle the cattle in.

It was dark when the thousand had been gathered.

"All right," Del said relentlessly. "Start 'em movin'. We ought to make Avalanche Valley by daybreak."

"Sherill's outfit couldn't have done as good, even if they do have more riders," Foghorn boasted. "I betcha we got 'em beat, Del. We'll be in the pass an hour ahead of 'em."

"Maybe," Del admitted. He secretly agreed with Foghorn. But still, the Double S Circle might have worked faster than could be expected. One thing was certain. If they lost this race, Del was ruined.

THE HERD was hard to start with darkness coming on, but the four riders finally prodded it into motion. They began pushing it as much as they dared without exciting the cattle. Avalanche Pass was dangerous enough for a trail drive under the best conditions. To take a nervous herd into it at night would be utter suicide.

A five-mile drive along the benches, and over the low, rough ridge at the north end of the valley brought the herd out on the rugged flank of Bluestone Mountain into the moonlight. They were two miles from Avalanche Canyon, up which the trail to the high pass mounted.

Foghorn gave a bellow of triumph from

the point of the drive. "I told yuh so, Del. Take a peek back there at the base of the slant south of us."

Del had already seen it—a faint blob of dust rising into the moonlight.

"Sherill's herd," Foghorn boomed. "We've two miles ahead of 'em. Shucks, we got 'em beat to a whisper."

Del made no comment. Only he of the four saw a rider cross a bench below them and vanish into the shadows of a draw. The rider was traveling fast and heading for Avalanche Canyon.

After an hour, Del's drive reached the entrance to the canyon, but instead of sending them through, Del held up his hand. "Drive 'em in here, boys," he ordered, indicating a side trail that led to a smaller canyon of Avalanche Pass.

Foghorn pounded up angrily. "You gone crazy or somethin'?" he demanded. "This ain't the way through the Pass!"

"Ain't got time to explain," Del told him. "Do like I say."

The thousand head rattled down a short, shaly slant and reached a basin with high walls just big enough to hold them comfortably. The moonlight did not reach them there.

"He's gone loco," Foghorn said despairingly. "This thing has gone to his haid."

But Del seemed sane enough. He grinned thinly as he peerd at their dumbfounded faces. "You come with me, Foghorn," he instructed. "We'll camp alongside the trail. An' don't talk."

They returned, dismounted at the bottom of the shale, and went up on foot. They lay in the shelter of a mesquite clump for twenty minutes while the rattle of the approaching herd grew louder.

Then riders and cattle loomed in the darkness. The Double S Circle drive began to flow by with the punchers hazing them along fiercely. Point, swing and drag, the cattle plodded past like phantoms, except for the clatter of hoofs. They wended into the moonlight beyond and vanished around the peak. Soon they could be heard in the walls of Avalanche Pass above.

"Wal, it's got me hogtied," Foghorn said in a subdued voice. "We had 'em beat, an' you tossed it away, Del. We might as well turn aroun' an' go home. Why did yuh do it, boy?"

"Wait," Del cautioned.

Foghorn heard nothing except the muted sounds of the receding herd above, brought by the light night breeze. Then . . .

The muffled rattle of rifle shots, echoing from the walls of the pass. A heavy jar as though a stick of dynamite had been exploded.

Instantly came a mighty rumble as though thunder was stirring somewhere in these moonlit mountainheads. But it was not thunder. Foghorn had heard that menacing sound too many times to be mistaken.

"Stampede!" he bellowed. "Somebody jumped Sherill's drive. They're runnin'. Dawgone, what a lucky break! Crimony! Sherill might as well kiss that herd goodbye. The other side of the pass is a tangle of ravines that will pile up every critter."

"Let's go back an' start our own bunch through," Del said calmly. "Hustle."

"Sa-ay," Foghorn finally found time to boom as Del's Rolling H steers were once more reluctantly forced into motion, and pouring into the portals of Avalanche Pass. "Who stampeded Sherill's drive? Who done it, hey?"

Dell grinned. "Guess," he said.

But Foghorn was relieved from that task. He and Del were riding point, and the drive was well into Avalanche Pass by now. The pass was in darkness, except for stray bands of silvery light here and there where moonlight peered through notches in the walls.

TWO RIDERS, coming at a furious lope toward them, had crossed one of those bands of moonlight ahead. Del spurred his horse and advanced to meet them. The riders emerged into a second, hundred-yard band of moonlight just as Del reached it. Foghorn breathlessly galloped to the side of his young boss as he recognized the pair ahead.

One was Spot Sherrill, wild-eyed and shaking with fury, spouting curses. The other was the squat, sinister form of Frog Durkin. Durkin pushed his horse ahead of Sherill. His voice was thick with rage but deadly as he spoke. "Yuh think yuh outsmarted us agin, eh, Halliday? Well, this is the last trick you'll ever play!"

Durkin's hands swept to his guns. He was a master of the draw. But Del's hand had flashed down and up, smoothly and surely, and so fast that Foghorn saw the red flash of Del's six-shooter before he could even start for his own weapon.

Durkin's right gun slammed wildly, but he was already falling, and his bullet went up into the moonlight. Del's shot had plucked him from the saddle.

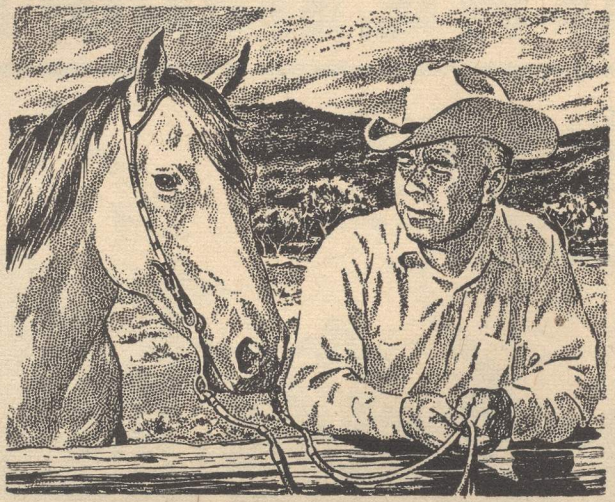
Spot Sherill had snatched his .45 from its holster and was aiming it at Del when Del's gun slammed once more.

Sherill gave a cry, his gun spurting from his hand. He reeled in the saddle, his arm broken by a bullet.

"I needed you to go with us, so as to make sure that your outfit won't try to stampede my herd too," Del said grimly. "Sherill, you want to make *sure* that they don't. Savvy?"

"I knowed it right from the start," Foghorn boasted to Bill and Gus as the Rolling H drive moved on through Avalanche Pass, with dawn beginning to flush the sky. "Durkin an' his gunslingers had spotted themselves up here to stampede us as we come through. They scouted us while we was down the mountain an' saw that we was in the lead. So I says to Del, 'We'll fool them hombres.' So we laid off the trail, an' in the darkness in the pass Durkin stampeded the first herd that showed up. He never guessed we had changed places, until it was too late. Well, it shore was a smart scheme."

"Shore was," Bill agreed. "You tell it so well, I danged near believe you."



★ WALT'S TALLY BOOK

Here, each month, Walt Coburn introduces us to some of the cow-country folks he knew and loved, the hardy breed who left the indelible imprint of their strong and colorful characters upon the West. . . .

I NEVER knew how many of them there were in the family. Somebody asked Gregory Doney one time how many of the Doneys there were, not counting one or two who were on the way.

"By Gar!" The giant half-breed shook his head, his black brows quirking comically. "Me, I'm nevair tak' tam to get de count. Sacre, dere mus' be henough of dem Doneys to mak' de whole damn tribe!" Gregory slapped his thigh and lifted his head and his eyes squinted as he let out a big, hearty laugh.

I may be wrong on this because it's been long, long years ago since I left Montana and the Larb Hills and the badlands along the Missouri River where they lived, but I think the Doneys were mostly French-Canadian-Cree 'breeds. Beginning with Gregory and Lolly and their wives, that is. The later generations could have married into the Assiniboine and Gros Ventres, and I think some of the girls married white men. I hope that white blood never taints the courageous blood of Gregory and Lolly Doney.

All of their sons were stalwart, the girls all good looking. There wasn't a runt among 'em. A fun-loving, sometimes hard-working, happy-go-lucky tribe, they were, good horsemen, and some of the boys good cowhands. All of them were crack shots and great hunters. The older women were good cooks and neat housekeepers, good wives and good mothers, handy with the needle as they made moccasins and shirts out of the deer hides they tanned, working gay-colored beads or gaily stained porcupine quills into patterns on the soft buckskin.

In haying season the Doneys took hay contracts, and after the last of the timothy and bluejoint was stacked, there would be a big dance.

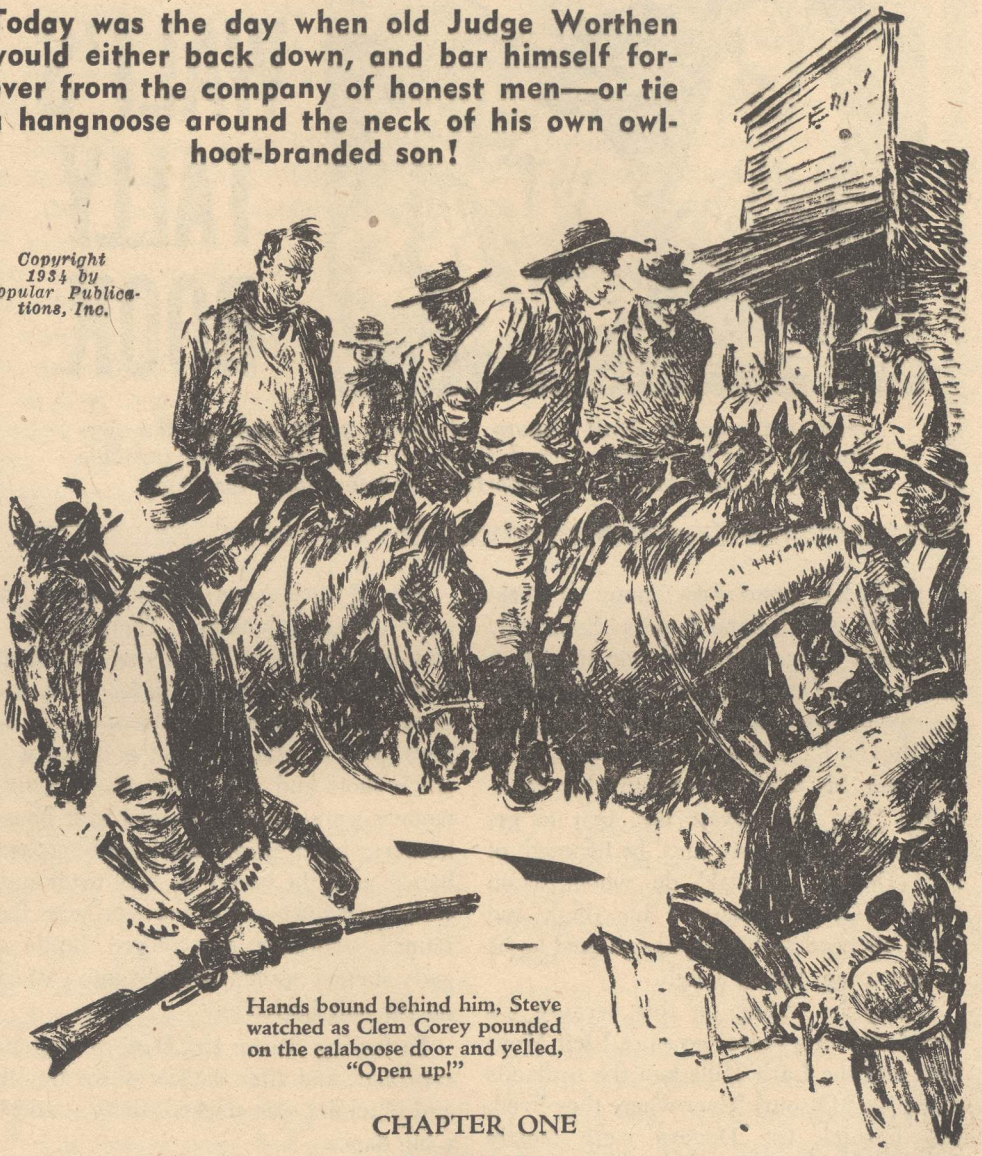
"Mak de dance!" Big Gregory would say.

All it took to make a 'breed dance was a fiddle and a jug of river whiskey and enough floor space. Everybody along the river came and they danced till sunrise. Everybody was welcome. Only those who

(Continued on page 124)

OWLHOOT

Today was the day when old Judge Worthen would either back down, and bar himself forever from the company of honest men—or tie a hangnoose around the neck of his own owlhoot-branded son!



Hands bound behind him, Steve watched as Clem Corey pounded on the calaboose door and yelled, "Open up!"

CHAPTER ONE

Hangman's Bait

LITTLE balls of dust stitched the plain—a pony stepping right along. Judge Worthen moved to the edge of his sagging veranda, his old eyes squinting. "Now who . . ." he began, and paused.

It was Steve he was really hoping for. Always he was hoping Steve would come back.

But as the rider drew near, the old Judge frowned in disappointment. "Roundup, himself!" he muttered irri-

PRODIGAL

By Malcolm Reiss

Stirring Frontier Novelette

tably. "Would be him a-runnin' the rump off a pony."

Through Tornado's withered street, not slowing for anyone or anything, came the rancher. In front of the Tornado Courthouse and Emporium—"J. Worthen,

Prop. and Justice of the Peace"—he flung off and began whipping the dust from shirt and jeans with a flop-brimmed hat. Considering his age, Roundup Scaggs could ride.

"Some on your whiskers, too," the Judge suggested unkindly. He and Roundup, once friends, now were enemies. In spite of that the Judge couldn't help being a little glad to see the old reprobate; his coming helped to dispell the monotony of the dusty little ranch town.

Scaggs stomped up the steps. A queer look was in his eye. "My outfit's trailing in with a few head of rustlers," he announced.

The Judge whistled. "Anyone from around here?"

Hesitating, Roundup decided to say no.

"That's good," said the Judge. He hated to hang anyone he was acquainted with.

Roundup's manner abruptly changed; you could almost see him fighting with himself. But the Judge did not see, for his mind was on other things.

"Listen," said Roundup, "let's go inside. I want to talk to you."

Side by side the two aging men went into the dry darkness of Worthen's Emporium. A bar, shelves of bottles, of calico, canned beans, shells and tobacco. In the corner stood a sway-backed cot. This was where Judge Worthen lived; it was also his place of business. In a big, bright room in the rear, as clean and bare as this was dusty and cluttered, was the courtroom—the Judge's shrine.

"Listen," said Roundup, "you figure on runnin' again for office next year?"

Judge Worthen's face grew harsh. "I sure do, an' it'll take more than you to beat me."

You could see Roundup Scaggs harden. "That's all I wanted to know," he said coldly. Any good intention he might have had was swallowed up, frozen. "That's all I wanted to know. Don't blame me for anything that happens. I warned you."

Judge Worthen did not seem to attach any importance to this warning. He could not even stay angry long. He was thinking of the days when he and Roundup had been friends, before Roundup had gone wild for power. His eyes quieted as he turned to Roundup. "Tell me, you ever play chess any more?"

"Times I do," Roundup replied gruffly. "Nonie plays a fair game. I had a set sent me from 'Frisco, all ivory, and carved by hand. A mighty pretty thing."

"The trouble with you," said the Judge, "is you got so much money you don't know what to do with it no more. I suppose you keep all that loose cash piled up in the house?"

"What if I do?" flared Roundup.

"I told you before—that money is just an invitation to stealin'. You tempt some poor devil and I got to sentence him."

The old enmity had sprung up again strongly.

"You rod yore layout; I'll rod mine!" Scaggs' frowning eyes suddenly shifted to the window. "Hurry up, git into yore duds. Here they come."

FROM beneath the bar Judge Worthen gently pulled out a high, curly wig and a magistrate's black gown lined with scarlet. It was the only costume of its kind west of the Mississippi, and perhaps east of it as well. The Judge was mighty proud of the way he set it off. Somehow this gown and wig were symbols that lifted justice out of the class of everyday things, of blue denim, dirty plates, flies and sweaty leather. Divinity went with it, for in the simple mind of the Judge, justice was close to being divine.

The bunch of Snaggle S riders had pulled up outside the adobe calaboose and dismounted, spitting the dust from their mouths. There were about a dozen of them, young, sun-tanned, happy-go-lucky punchers who stood out in sharp contrast

from the four sullen men with their wrists pigged at their backs—Whity Dinnard, hard-looking albino, and three of his bunch. And in contrast to all these was a pretty girl with blue eyes and a wide red mouth that now wore a hurt, puzzled expression.

Clem Corey, foreman of the Snaggle S, pounded on the calaboose door. "Open the door, will you!" he yelled. "Open up, damn it!"

He kept pounding in his self-important way until Nonie Scaggs called out to him, "Stop that, Clem."

"Sure," said Clem. He came near to adding, "for you," but he figured it wouldn't look so good to push his courting in front of the whole bunch.

Rustily the door squeaked open and Paquito stuck his head out. He explained courteously that he had been having his siesta. Paquito was noted for being an exceptional sleeper. He could sleep all day, all night, and all the following day. Perhaps, even then, he would still be tired.

Suddenly, realization came to him, and his eyes opened wide, "What goes on here?" he asked. Then his good-humored brown face seemed to fall apart. *"Dios mio!"* he breathed. *"Dios mio!"*

One of the outlaws, a young fellow whose restless dark hair grew back from his wide forehead in a leonine sweep, looked up and smiled twistedly.

"Yep, Paquito, they got us," he said. He looked at the girl. "Caught like a fool," he added bitterly.

"But, Señor Steve," the little man cried, "how could you let them. The Judge—"

Steve centered his eyes on a green horsefly on the roan's neck. "I know. But what can I do?"

"Dios mio," said Paquito again.

He was thinking of what would happen to the Judge when he faced his own son, an outlaw, across the courtroom. You would have thought that the young señor would have had the savvy to keep to other ranges. The old man was fond of him, Paquito knew. Very fond. Most likely it would break the old man's heart.

Clem Corey moved to the side of the roan. He was a big, handsome Texan with a slow, sly expression.

"Speed her up, we ain't built to broil in the sun all day, like you," he told Paquito. "Herd these tramps into the pen. Pretty soon they'll hang."

To suit his words he reached up and, taking hold of Steve Worthen's shoulder, gave him a yank. The girl let out a stifled cry. But Paquito moved. His hand whipped to his gun butt.

"Careful, amigo." There was a nasty vibration in his voice that sounded like a thrown Bowie blade singing into wood. "That is Señor Steve you handle so."

"Think I give a damn?" said Corey, but his hand drew back and Steve, half out of the saddle, toppled to the ground without his hands to break the fall. Nonie and Paquito jumped quickly to help him.

One side of Steve's face was skinned and specked with dirt, but he didn't say anything; he merely gave that faint, cynical smile and eyed Corey thoughtfully. Paquito helped him into the jail. After Whitey Dinnard and the other two rustlers were safe behind bars he locked the low, thick door. The only one he had allowed to remain was Nonie Scaggs.

AS SOON as Whity Dinnard and his henchmen entered the cell they moved to a corner and began to whisper. They seemed neither downcast nor nervous. But Steve sat by himself, staring into space. When he heard the whisp of a khaki riding skirt he looked up.

"Why in the world did you turn outlaw, Steve?" There was a tremble in the girl's voice as she looked down at Steve beseechingly.

Coolly his green-gray eyes took her in. "You want to know? Well then, because

I'm a thief. For what other reason?"

"Haven't you any pride? How could you steal from your old friends? Old friends like dad and me."

"You ask?" said Steve, and his voice was suddenly strangely thick. "So innocent!"

She steadied herself. "Don't I mean a thing to you any more, Steve?"

"You?" he said. "You!" and he began to laugh. His laugh went higher and higher, echoing through the low-ceilinged room. Covering her ears, the girl turned and ran, ran as if she were trying to get away from that laugh. Paquito began to jingle his great ring of keys, trying to keep that voice out of his ears. Even Whity Dinnard and the two tough-looking hombres, with him looked over at Steve questioningly.

Whity made a sign with his finger. "Loco. Didn't I tell you? Plumb loco!"

* * *

"Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! The honorable court is now in session," Paquito sang through the courtroom. But today he lacked his usual spirit. He failed to give the words his usual Latin flourish, and his dark eyes were troubled.

Judge Worthen swept in. By rights the wig and gown should have looked ridiculous, here in this sun-warped courtroom lost in the sage, but the strange part was that they didn't. Judge Worthen's court had dignity. Even the sawed-off shotgun he used as gavel failed to look funny.

Whity Dinnard was led in.

"Witnesses."

Roundup nodded to Clem Corey. He stood up.

"Talk," said the Judge. "And make it short."

Clearing his throat, Clem spoke. Seems he had been crossing over Diamond Hitch Ridge when he sighted a bunch of strange riders dismounting on the edge of timber. Working over, he had listened to the raid they were planning.

"So I worked back to my pony and raised the dust for the home ranch. Mr. Scaggs figured the best thing was to catch 'em with their loops out, which we did."

"Further witnesses?" said the Judge.

The Snaggle S outfit rose in a solid block.

"I reckon that's plenty witnesses for you," Scaggs said, He was wearing a victorious smile. Already next year's election was riding up.

Turning to the outlaw, his manner a mixture of sternness and clemency, the Judge asked his question: "If you've got anything to say, go ahead and say it."

But Whity Dinnard had nothing to say. In the strong light of late afternoon his little pale eyes blinked rapidly like dripping water. One thing he knew—if he was to be saved from the rope, it wouldn't be by talk.

Silence held the courtroom; only the sounds of a fly-harassed pony stomping impatiently outdoors and a dry wind shaking the window-panes gently and a thin man shifting on one of the hard benches. Jurors and townspeople were nervous. Each one was thinking of Judge Worthen and his wild son, Steve. Better by far if he had been shot down. Forgotten.

For in their way, all these people were fond of the Judge. Of course, he was a crusty old mosshorn. His liquor was not much account and he was always minding everyone's business as well as his own. But still they were fond of him. You could take your troubles to him and he'd listen to you. Chances were he'd do more for you than just listen. Steve had been a likable enough kid, too. . . .

* * *

The foreman swept the jury box with his eyes. There was no need of adjourn-

ing for this case. "Guilty," he told the Judge.

"Guilty." Judge Worthen drew a deep breath. No matter how much a hombre deserved the rope, it was always a little hard for the Judge to say to him: "You hang."

"Dinnard," he started, "the ducks will come flying south, and later they'll fly north again; the mares will foal, and the ornery old range cows will give birth to their calves. And roundups will come and roundups will go, and everybody'll be happy and sad by turns. But you, Whity Dinnard, have transgressed one of the most ancient laws of man—'Thou shalt not steal.' I reckon you know why you must miss all these things of life?

"Whity Dinnard, I sentence you to hang by the neck until you are dead. An' may God have mercy on your worthless soul!"

The Judge paused and cleared his throat. Then he resumed: "Take the prisoner away, Paquito, and see that he gets a jug of corn likker. Some of the good stuff." He rapped smartly with the stock of the sawed-off scatter-gun. "Hangin' will come off prompt at sunrise."

Contentedly, Roundup Scaggs leaned back. Good! The Judge had set a precedent. All the cases must run the same. That is, he corrected himself, unless the Judge was willing to perjure himself. And why not? After all, with the law so easy to finagle if you knew how to handle it, why not? Any man would do that much for his son.

CHAPTER TWO

Ropes for Rustlers

ONE by one the other members of the rustler outfit were brought in, sentenced, marched out. All but Steve Worthen. And as they waited, the crowd in the courtroom grew restless and began to fret like a bunch of wild rat-tails in a corral. They kept seeing the picture of Steve and the Judge facing each other. It was cruel, the old man not knowing. He might have a stroke. Someone should warn Judge Worthen. But there wasn't a man there who had the nerve to do it.

MacConnel, the jury foreman, spoke to the man next to him behind his palm. "Golly, why did that crazy kid have to raise hell in this neck of the range? Good Lord, didn't he have all Texas on one side and all Arizona on the other?"

Only Roundup Scaggs seemed content and willing to wait. "The next election will be a mite different," he kept saying to himself. "Just a mite."

Nonie Scaggs, sitting beside her father, was quiet, too, but she looked as if she had just been through a stampede.

The restlessness in the courtroom must have gotten to the Judge, for presently he took off his glasses and looked up sternly. "Quiet there. Quiet!" He hefted the shotgun and hammered down with the butt-plate, hard. "No need to go millin', folks. Only one more case, and then you can hit the chuck line." He turned to Paquito. "Bailiff, bring in the last of them."

Paquito hesitated at the door, pale beneath his combined swartness and dirt.

"Well!"

"*Si, si.* Pronto. . . ."

He ducked out as if someone had shied a horseshoe at his head. There was a short, breathless wait; then he returned herding Steve.

"Why—why, Steve!" cried the old man. He looked so glad for a moment. Then the thought of why Steve was there must have struck him. But the smile, empty of all meaning, hung on.

Quickly he looked around, ready to smile if it were a joke, certain it must be a joke. Steve. . . . One more rustler. . . . But the faces he saw about him in the court told him that this was no joke.

"Steve!" he said again, but this time in a very different voice.

Steve merely shrugged, taking his seat on the stand. He bent over and unstrapped his spurs, and the very act seemed an expression of guilt.

* * *

Darkness was spreading into the corners of the courtroom. "Paquito," said the Judge, "pull down the shades and light the lamps. We—we need light to see by." His voice wavered a little.

His voice wavered for just one second more as he fought for a grip on himself. Nervously Roundup clasped and unclasped his hands. The coming election would be won or lost forever depending on what transpired in the next ten minutes.

In all that crowded courtroom there was no one able to plumb the depths of the old Judge's disappointment, his weariness, his utter despair. So long to wait for Steve's return, and then to have it come like this. So little left of the past, the present or the future, for to the Judge, Steve was all three rolled into one.

Watching his father, Steve got a little of what the old man was thinking. It made him wish that Roundup Scaggs had put a bullet through his head. And yet he couldn't help reflecting with a peculiar dry thrill of pride that you could never tell from looking at his father how hard it had hit the old boy. He had quality. He wouldn't look out of place, thought Steve, even on the bench of the Supreme Court itself.

BLUNTLY the machinery of frontier law commenced to turn. There was no quibbling in Judge Worthen's court of law. But it was more than Steve could do to pay attention. What was the use? He knew he was guilty and everybody else would know it. Why waste time thinking about it with the rope so close?

His mind naturally back-trailed toward his youth. He remembered the night of the Frenchman's barn-raising when he and Nonie had talked of love and marriage. She had on a very starched gray dress that night. He had felt the tickle of her hair against his cheek. They had spoken of the feud between their fathers. When Steve was rich and they were married that would be the end of the feud. When he was rich and they were married. . . . That double-crossing little filly!

Steve tried to listen to the trial; it would be better than thinking back, but he couldn't keep his mind on it for long. He kept thinking to himself, "I've been a rustler. I've been caught. There's only one answer."

He recalled how gayly he had ridden from the Frenchman's that night, south toward Mexico where they said there was land and cattle for the strong. The trouble was that the sudden feeling of strength didn't last. When he began to get good and hungry it left him.

Then he had run into the fancy man at the *posada* at Las Quichas. Steve had never seen such a getup on anybody: salmon-pink shirt, red-stitched boots, a bronc buster's belt pounded with silver-wave. But there was a something about the man that wasn't puncher-like. Steve decided that his jeans didn't curve to his legs in the right places.

"I can use a hand like you," he'd said.

Steve had taken the job, but there was a funny taste in his mouth. Something wrong here; just what he couldn't quite figure. Maybe it was the way the man's eyes were forever jumping. . . .

First everything had looked all right; just driving in trail herds from a little, lost pueblo called Jacinto. Then bit by bit the gang had eased him into the wet-cattle end, into all the shady deals of the outfit. It wasn't that Steve didn't have his eyes open; they were open wide enough.

But it was just that he didn't seem to have the energy to buck the whole outfit. He couldn't help wondering now, as he sat unhappily in this hot courtroom, why he hadn't braced his forelegs and backed as hard as he could. Why he hadn't used the very savvy that the good Lord had given him. Why he had waited until such a bad time to tear loose—just to get himself hanged.

Then the order had come to tie into the Snaggle S herds. Not until the moment that Whity Dinnard read the message, jerkily, to the bunch on the rimrock, did Steve realize just how low he had sunk. Rustling cattle from a friend, stealing from the father of the girl he loved. That was just a little too much even for Steve.

"Just cut me out this deal," Steve had said. "And cut yourselves out, too! These people are friends of mine and you're sure not going to run off any of their stock if I can help it."

Whity told him he was crazy. And guns had popped as Steve stampeded for freedom.

FOR two days he had ridden fast, and on the morning of the third day he'd left a note in the Snaggle S letter box, addressed to Nonie. It told her of the approaching raid, told her that he loved her still. He was afraid to go and see her.

After that Steve had turned and headed back for the hills so that he could stop the gang in case the Snaggle S riders didn't make it in time. But the Snaggle S got there and Roundup Scaggs, cursing mightily, had rounded up Steve with the other outlaws. It seemed to Steve a queer way to repay a favor. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that something had gone wrong. Nonie must have told her father what was in the note, but failed to let him know who'd written it.

All this passed through Steve's mind as he sat tensely in the courtroom knowing that the law's noose was slowly tightening around his neck. . . . If he had never dismounted at Las Quichas where he'd met the fancy man, or if he had refused to push those cows across the river. . . . Well, in his case it hadn't been Fate so much as it had been his own fault, his own weakness. And now it was too late to do anything about that.

Part of the foreman's testimony sliced into Steve's reflections. Corey was telling how he'd come to discover the raid. "I heard what Steve Worthen was telling 'em," he announced. "He was saying, 'Hop along, boys, I know how we can work the Snaggle S stock out easy.' I listened a while longer, then I headed back and rode down and warned Mr. Scaggs, here."

Raising his head, Steve frowned across at Corey and snorted contemptuously, "That's all a pack of lies."

"What?"

Hope suddenly gleamed in the Judge's worried eyes and he leaned forward. Never in all his years on the bench had he seen a man so disinterested in his fate as his son appeared to be.

"Just a pack of lies," repeated Steve coolly. "I busted up with the bunch days before they reached the Snaggle S."

"But you admit you was with them before, that you're part of the outfit, that you deserve to be called outlaw?" Corey snapped.

"Sure," Steve replied carelessly. "Nobody's denying that part."

"I reckon that sure cinches you," said Clem Corey. In his voice there was something more than mere impersonal desire to see justice done. There was something mighty personal.

And Steve, eyeing Corey, saw the reason for the double-cross. The fellow wasn't bad looking in a sort of sneaky way. . . . Yeah, it was clear enough that Nonie had gotten together with Clem

Corey, that they'd used the information in the note to make it look as if Corey was pretty foxy and had ferreted out the rustling scheme by himself.

But now old Judge Worthen could hold himself in no longer. He leaned far over toward Steve so that the scarlet lining fell back from his shoulders.

"For heaven's sake, boy, if you've got anything to say for yourself, say it now!"

Steve looked at Corey and then he looked at Nonie. She sat there beside her father and she was pretending to be all busted up. For a moment it made him so sore he almost broke out and proved Corey a liar, just for the fun of it. But then he realized that it wouldn't much hurt the foreman and it would only brand himself as a man who had not even the strength to stay bad, so he said nothing.

Judge Worthen made one last attempt. "Tell us how it happened, Steve," he pleaded. "You've got a chance to clear yourself."

Steve absently regarded a blue-fly buzzing back and forth in front of his nose. He leaned his weight on the arms of his chair and, turning his face away from his father's, looked out at the hushed courtroom. Everybody was waiting for him to speak, to get up and plead that he was no rustler, that they'd do wrong to hang him. Rebellion rose in Steve.

"Come on," he said, lifting his lithe horseman's body. "I'm a rustler, folks, and you don't hear me denyin' it. And rustlers hang where I come from." He slumped down into his chair.

CHAPTER THREE

Throwdown

ALL eyes turned back to the high bench. The Judge sat there fumbling with his glasses, his blue-veined fingers trembling so he couldn't do anything.

Scaggs was grinning tightly under his long mustache. "Now we'll see a little doggin' done by the law," he thought. Nonie was begging Steve with her eyes. The jury wore strangely embarrassed expressions. There weren't twelve men in the country who weren't fond of the Judge.

Quickly, positively, Judge Worthen instructed the jury. "Guilty or not guilty." That was all. They filed out, and the courtroom was heavier than ever with foreboding.

It took the jury less than a minute. MacConnel stood up.

"Guilty!"

Fearfully all eyes turned back to Judge Worthen. No one knew what to expect from the Judge. It seemed to them he could play his cards some way. So thought Roundup Scaggs, leaning forward to catch the exact words. Words that Scaggs hoped would damn the Judge next election.

"Stand up, Steve Worthen." The Judge's face might have been a mask of gray granite.

Steve stood.

"I sentence you to hang." Judge Worthen's voice cracked. He half stood, half crouched, scarlet and black robe swirling around him. "Get out of here, the pack of you! Clear out! Clear the courtroom!" he roared.

"My God!" grunted Roundup.

* * *

Shutters blinded all the jail windows. But Paquito had forgotten the little shutter that closed the peephole in the door. Nonie Scaggs put her face to the bars and looked in. She saw Steve sitting behind the great grill that cut the room squarely in two. His head rested on his spread fingers.

In the far corner Whity and his two brother rustlers were availing themselves of the Judge's invitation to get liquored up. But only moderately. A tenseness,

a watchfulness, betrayed the fact that they were waiting for something. The boss' network stretched far, sometimes even into jails.

As usual, Paquito dozed in his swivel chair, spurs clinging to the edge of the much-scarred desk.

Nonie knocked. The three men in the corner almost jumped to their feet, then caught themselves. They put down their jugs. Only Steve and Paquito did not stir. Nonie knocked again, louder. She spun around at the sound of some real or imagined footstep. And then the three rustlers in the corner, as if by mutual agreement, began to curse and fight among themselves.

It woke Paquito. He shut his mouth, opened his eyes.

"What is it?" he called out. He hoisted himself out of his chair and walked lightly to the door. "Who goes?"

"It's only me, Nonie Scaggs."

"But indeed," said Paquito, and a smile began to well deep back in his eyes. "One moment only, señorita."

Rusty bolts shrilled as the door swung open.

"I brought you this, Paquito," Nonie said kindly. "It'll make you feel a lot better in the morning. Maybe a few drinks will make you sleep better."

She was nervous. Her eyes showed it. Paquito, smiling his inward smile, accepted the bottle courteously. The row in the corner had subsided as quickly as it had commenced. The imprisoned rustlers settled themselves down to wait again. Apparently their time had not come yet.

Nonie went over to Steve and drew a chair close to the grill. "Steve, don't feel so awful," she begged.

Slowly his head came up. "How do you expect me to feel?" he answered bitterly. His gruff manner was new to Nonie. Wrinkles came into her smooth forehead and her hands made a quick peculiar gesture. She leaned over as if she was going to say something; then feeling Paquito's dark, wise gaze upon her she closed her lips.

"You don't mind if I sit here beside you?"

"What do I care where you sit?"

Paquito poured himself a drink, swiveled in the chair and raised his glass to the girl as if wishing her luck. Nonie tried to smile back, couldn't quite make it.

THE BAILIFF did not turn again for a long time, but he raised the glass to his lips often. When he did turn, suddenly, he caught the girl's eyes riveted to the ring of long keys on his desk. He shrugged and swung back comfortably, his boots on the desk.

The liquor must have gotten to him. His head drooped and he commenced to snore. The empty glass lay on the hard-packed earth below the chair. Nonie grasped the grill and rose. She made a quick rush toward the keys on the desk, then, her hands clenched to her breast, she rushed back to the grilled door.

The little Mexican slept on as if conscious of deeds well done. You could never have told from his expression that he had hanged a score of men, would hang half a hundred more. And in the corner Whity and his two men licked their lips, watching.

The keys clicked as Nonie fumbled at the lock. The second key she tried made a noise like a rifle-hammer passing the safety. Quickly she turned to see if Paquito had heard the lock open, and in that instant Whity rushed. He leaped across the cell and hurled his shoulder against the grating. The door swept back, flinging Nonie into the bars.

They were almost at the outer door when Whity pulled up. "Whoa. We'd better help ourselves to some of that hardware. We may be needing it."

He strode to the gun-rack and took down a holstered Colt and a filled shell-

belt. He gave a clipped order: "Fix the Mex."

One of the rustlers held Paquito while Whity slipped the bandanna from about his neck and gagged him. Whipping a riata around arms and legs they made him fast.

But this angle Paquito had not foreseen. He had thought that the rustlers would race for the open range at the first chance, forgetting him. And now, having gone this far, it was only common sense for him to be consistent.

Laying Paquito on the floor, one of the rustlers turned to Whity, jerking his thumb. "How about Worthen?" he asked. "And the girl?"

Whity spun on his heel. Steve had not stirred except to raise his head and stare at the pleading Nonie. "That fool!" sneered Whity. "With his ideas he's bound to get himself plugged by someone around here. Why should we rouse the town? The girl won't want to spread any alarm—not with Worthen there."

THE MEN, with a backward glance, moved off. Nonie Scaggs disregarded them, standing over Steve, imploring him to ride.

"Why should I?" he kept saying. "What for?"

"Name of God," thought Paquito, "the boy is as big a fool as his father."

"Steve, Steve," the girl implored. Her eyes kept flitting to the door. "You must go. You must hurry. For my sake!"

At that Steve threw back his head as if he were going to laugh. "So you can ease your conscience, is that it?"

It took a terrific effort for Nonie to pull her eyes from that door. As yet there had come no pound of hoofs, bearing the rustlers away. "You don't make sense, Steve, talking that way. I never did a thing to hurt you."

"Only the note, eh? It was the note that caught me."

"Oh, talk sense, won't you!" She was in despair. "What are you saying about a note? There was no note."

"You mean," said Steve, suddenly looking alive, "you mean you never got the note? Someone else got it?"

Her patience snapped. "Maybe the whole country got notes. Notes!" She stamped her foot. "Hang, if you want to. I can't do any more."

"Nonie, then it wasn't you? You didn't double-deal me?" Steve perked up like a pony let out to graze. His mouth, losing that cynical look, eased into a smile. "If I quit the out trails forever would there be some hope maybe, Nonie?"

Her fingers jerked his hair. She said gently, "You fool kid, Steve, there'll always be hope till I'm a gray, ugly old hag."

He laughed, lightly this time. Roughly he reached for her. One short sweet moment Nonie forgot about the open door, and even Paquito's impatience eased off. It was about time that Señor Steve woke up!

And then, in that brief instant, as the two stood there lost in each other and the vista that stretched ahead, the door creaked open and Judge Worthen stood there, blinking the light out of his eyes.

Hour after hour the Judge had been sitting in the empty courtroom, slumped in thought, suffering the torments of the damned. Not even Geronimo, with all his resourcefulness, could have invented a neater hell, the hell he had dealt himself in the sweet cause of justice.

Conscience told Judge Worthen that he was doing the right thing, the only thing —but of what use was conscience? Was any law worth the price he was paying? The Judge thought: "I could go away. How would it be to leave the jail door open? I'm an old man and I could go away. And Steve's a young man."

With throbbing hands he had pushed himself stiffly out of his chair. The black-

and-scarlet robe slid from his tired shoulders to the floor. The wig he tossed absent-mindedly to the desk. Still unthinking, he put on his sweat-stained sombrero.

Carefully he opened the courthouse door and carefully he locked it, slipping the key into his trousers pocket. It was all habit. He had no idea what he was doing. He shuffled across to the jail. A sickle moon was out, and the squat adobe structure looked as if it had swelled out of the earth. The Judge paused, hearing the voices inside. "Whatever Steve things right to do, I'll do." And he walked in.

PAQUITO was the first to see him. If he could have cursed, he would have cursed, and if you can curse with a gag in your mouth, then he did curse. The Judge stood there dazed, blinking behind his gold rims. Then the full significance pole-axed him.

"What are you doing?" he muttered.

Wildly Nonie looked around. "I knew it. Oh, Steve—Steve!"

Steve's hand closed reassuringly on her shoulder. "Easy, girl, easy," he said, as if he were quieting a fretful pony. "As you see," he said to his father, "I was figuring on making a run for it."

Judge Worthen's eyes took in the open grilled door, and moved on to Paquito securely trussed, asleep or drunk on the floor. Thirty long years of habit fought to reassert itself. "Lord, if I only hadn't blundered in," thought the Judge. But somehow it seemed as if he never really had any choice. It seemed as if there had always been but a single way to go.

"Get back, Steve," he said. "Go back now," and his voice was that of a man, suddenly grown very old and very tired.

Just a few moments before he would have released Steve instantly with his own hand, if Steve had so much as said the word. But now—well, this was different. He couldn't stand by and see the law tampered with.

Steve said, "Dad, give me a chance. I've been a fool, sure. But I've had my lesson. From now on I go straight. I swear I will."

"Too late, Steve. I don't give convicted criminals—rustlers—second chances."

Between Steve and liberty stood a frail old man. Steve knew he was unarmed, for the only weapon he could see well enough to handle was his sawed-off shotgun. Open range, life, all ahead, beckoned him. Steve jerked his eyes to meet Nonie's imploring ones, but he quickly looked away. No, he had danced, now he must pay the fiddler.

"You're right, Dad, I guess," he said slowly. And he turned and trailed back.

Suddenly Nonie Scaggs grew angry. "Steve, you can't! You've got to think of —of everything! Steve, you—"

Paquito could have warned them, but Paquito had a mouthful of silk bandanna. Paquito saw the door ease inwards, saw the glint of the pearl-handled gun, and a silk-clad arm slashing down. With a noise like an uncorked bottle, the Judge keeled over, folded to the floor. Clem Corey stepped lightly across the body.

CHAPTER FOUR

Outside the Law

"HEY!" said Steve. The look of a man facing a cold wind came over his face. He started across the room for Corey, his hands clenched.

"Hold up, amigo," suggested Corey. He tossed the pearl-handled gun into the air and let the butt slap down in his palm. "Just hold up, right where you are."

Steve stopped. Something in the man's face told him that Corey didn't need much excuse to squeeze the trigger, particularly as Corey turned to Nonie. "Pretty fond of this feller, ain't you, honey?" His face was screwed up, giving away his jealousy.

Nonie Scaggs had been brought up to

think quickly, and now it stood her in good stead. She crossed over to Corey.

"You don't understand at all. Steve and I grew up together. You never knew, but we've been like brother and sister, always."

"That note he wrote you sure didn't sound like any brother-sister business."

Steve broke in hoarsely, "So that's what happened to the note—you grabbed it!"

"No," sneered Corey, "but the fellow who grabbed it showed it to me and a lucky thing he did. You aimed to run a sandy on the bunch, eh?"

Steve didn't answer. The foreman turned his head, but neither his eyes nor his revolver muzzle swerved from Steve's face. "Hey, Whity!"

"Yup?" The albino came to the door. "Say, let's head for the ranch, pardner. Me, I've had plenty of this town."

"Shut up an' come here. Pass a rope around the girl; she's goin' with us."

Steve's eyes grew hot. "You're off your trail, mister. She stays here."

"Yeah?" said Corey. "Will you stay back or d'you want me to jerk this trigger?"

"Leave her alone!" snapped Steve, his voice low and dangerous.

"Stay back," barked Corey. "You got a gunnin' comin' to you, only I'd rather not make the noise. It's up to you, Worthen, if you force my hand. . . ."

It was a long chance, but Steve was desperate. He sprang. His outstretched fingers struck up the gun as he closed in. He could hear Nonie struggling in Whity Dinnard's grasp. If he had not been trying to watch two places at once he might have seen Corey's left hand slide back, strike up. With the deftness of a Mexican knife thrower he struck, and his Bowie came away from Steve's side red. With a grunt Steve doubled over.

"Purty!" praised Whity. "Purty work, Chief."

"Nobody's askin' you. Here, help me get that damn fool girl onto a horse."

For minutes after the last hoof-beat died in the night, Steve fought to retain consciousness there in the jail. Nonie! Nonie! he kept thinking. Bit by bit, through sheer force of will, he pulled himself out of the haze. The painful throbbing in his side helped.

"No time to pass out," he told himself. Whity had said "the ranch" and the only outfit Whity knew in that part of the country was the Snaggle S. So for some reason they figured on stopping there on their way to the Border. That meant, Steve told himself, that he had to catch them before they left the Snaggle S. No one knew better than he how easily Corey and the bunch could lose themselves in the arroyo country to the south.

"And I can't get help!" he muttered. "If I tell them here, they'll figure right away that I cracked down on Dad, an' I'll get the corral again." And somehow he couldn't bear to entrust the saving of Nonie to anyone but himself. Not even to her own father.

Corey was not as good with a knife as he thought. He'd given Steve's rib a nasty slashing but he hadn't gone deep. Steve worked himself to his feet. He staggered over to the corner where Paquito's saddle and bridle hung and he reached off the saddle blanket and folded it around his middle. Then he cut the long leather girth and lashed the blanket securely. The only thing he needed now was a gun and a horse.

But all the guns in the room were gone. Looking around, Steve's eyes fell on his father. It was the first time his fuzzy mind had registered that. He went over, bent down. The Judge was breathing.

Then he remembered—the sawed-off shotgun.

Dredging the keys out of the Judge's pocket he picked his way weakly into the night. All this time he had failed to see

Paquito wriggling around, trying to attract his attention. If he had, he might have avoided riding into the trap for which he was heading.

ROUNDUP SCAGGS had been doing a lot of thinking since court had adjourned. He was a hard, acquisitive, ambitious man, but there were outcroppings of good in him, too.

In his bright-green carpeted room in the Garnet House he sat smoking innumerable black cigars while the ashes bent and dribbled over his vest front. "I never thought he'd do it," he kept repeating. "Not to his own son."

It had never been in Roundup's mind to force justice that far. He'd expected Judge Worthen to get Steve out, some way. Then he would have had a perfect layout with which to gulch the Judge in the coming elections. In fact, it had even occurred to Roundup that this might not be necessary. Bowed with shame at the thought of having a rustler for a son, Judge Worthen might even have decided to up and quit the bench, leaving it to a more worthy successor. So Roundup had reasoned.

But all through his thoughts ran a certain dumb admiration for the man whom once he had called a friend. How could anyone be such an all-fired idiot? How could anyone believe that much in anything? Golly!

After a while Roundup heaved himself out of his rawhide-bottomed chair. He dusted the ashes from his front. There might be a deal in this. He'd go and see the Judge.

Passing Nonie's room, Scaggs noticed that her light was out. Nothing showed under the door. "Smart girl, that Nonie," he reflected.

Through the wagon-plowed dust tramped Roundup to the Worthen Courthouse and Emporium. It was dark. Locked. The cattleman had a bright idea, "Maybe he's over at the calaboose with the kid—the stiff-necked old fool."

A light still showed through the little peephole in the piñon-wood door. Roundup bent his stiff neck to take a look. He saw plenty.

Over next to the desk lay the bailiff, thrown and tied. The cell stood wide open, empty. And below, just within range of vision, stretched two hands, palm downwards. Many a time in the past Roundup had seen those same hands hovering undecided over a queen, a knight or a pawn, too often to ever forget who owned them.

With a grunt like a bull, Roundup set his shoulder to the door, but it failed to give. He jerked out his Colt and leveled it at the stars—the stars in the general direction of the Garnet House. And he pulled the trigger.

"That'll fetch the drunken bums," he said to himself.

Down the street from the hotel poured a throng of tipsy punchers, bawling to each other and howling at the moon. But Roundup soon sobered them. He was good at that sort of thing.

"Bust open the door, you bunch of spraddle-legged, cross-bred fools!" And when they had broken it in, he hunkered down beside Judge Worthen, forcing some of Paquito's whiskey between his lips and complaining about the awful waste of good liquor.

It was Paquito, rubbing himself where the ropes had cut in, who interrupted the rancher. Paquito was obviously loath to say what he had to say, but he was more scared not to tell it.

"Señor," he said, plucking at Roundup's sleeve. "Señor, please."

"Git away. What are you bothering me for? Don't you see I'm working over this man?"

"I know, señor, but . . ."

"But what?"

"It is this, it is the señorita."

"What! You mean Nonie? Well, what in hell are you trying to get at?"

"Does Señor Scaggs know that the señorita has been taken?"

"Hey, what is this?" Roundup jumped to his feet like a loosed steel spring. "What do you mean? She was sleepin' back in the hotel only a few minutes ago. Talk man, talk!"

Paquito shook his head. "No. You are wrong. I see them take her when they go."

"Nonie! The rustlers, you mean? You mean that young devil, Worthen. If he did—"

"No, no, no! Not him. Corey, he took her."

"Now I know you're loco, man," Scaggs said. "Corey is my foreman."

"Maybe so he is," Paquito said. "But I think he work for someone else, also. The rustlers."

"Corey and my daughter, hey? Corey and the rustlers!" The muscles knotted in Roundup's lean cheeks until it looked as if his jaw would crack. "I see now. And I bet I know one stop he'll make before he hits the Border. Just one stop too many!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Nonie Plays Out Her Hand

THE MOON was cutting low as the rustler outfit clattered into the ranchyard at the end of the straight, tree-lined lane. A faint wind was scraping the branches of the eucalyptuses.

Corey turned to Nonie Scaggs mockingly. "You think Roundup would give us a weddin' present?" Since there was no answer, he went on, "Well, just in case he don't, me and these other waddies will help ourselves. Then you an' me'll cut off and head for Mexico and buy a place to raise cattle."

"That would be nice," said Nonie faintly, still trying her best to play her game.

Corey laughed. "All right, boys!" He was halfway out of the saddle, his hand on the mane and his leg crooked, when he heard the sound and froze. Clearly through the night came the steady drum beat of a horse at the lope. "Who the hell's that?" Corey snarled.

"Sounds like one man, Chief," Whity said nervously. "One man can't do much."

They could hear it clearly now, and close—the steady lope of a pony. "Spread out," Corey hissed. He grabbed Nonie by the wrist, roughly. "Hustle the ponies—no, leave 'em stand. He'll think we're in the house. Don't shoot till I yell."

Silently the rustlers lost themselves amongst the piebald trunks of the eucalyptuses. High above them the wind whined amongst the branches. They listened, hearing the lone rider slow his horse into a walk as he hit the lane. They heard the horse blowing. They saw the rider come out of the dark rank of trees into the brighter yard. Just in time Corey got his hand over Nonie's mouth and dragged a gun with the other. It was Steve.

As Steve saw the ponies standing in a bunch there by the veranda he jerked the reins, slid the sawed-off shotgun forward and cocked it.

"Drop that gun and put up yore hands, Worthen," called Corey, from the shadows. "Do it quick if you want to keep on living!"

Deeply, bitterly, Steve cursed under his breath. Whatever he did seemed to work out wrong. But he realized, now that his head was less fuzzy, that he had just made the biggest fool move of all by riding up like this. Even a kid would have had more sense. The scatter-gun clattered to the ground.

Steve's voice was tight in his throat. "Where's Nonie?"

"Here'" said Corey. "And I'm comin' out behind her. If you start any fireworks

it'll be hard on the lady." Corey shoved Nonie out from behind the tree and came out himself, using her as a shield. "Ease yourself out of your kak, but keep the hands high."

He came up to Steve and looked at him. Then he laughed in his face. "This is the end of you," he said. "I'll save your old paw the trouble. Whity, I reckon you've had the most experience makin' loops. Truss him up good and then see what kind of hangman's knot you can do. When we come out again we'll give you a hand at hoisting."

Even in the dark Nonie could see the albino's strangely pale, gleaming eyes, his eager face. She felt as if any minute she might be sick. Corey spoke to her roughly, "Come along, kid. I want you where I can watch you."

INSIDE the empty ranch house was the door of aged, sun-baked walls turned cold. A clock ticked, sounding loud in the silence. Corey scratched a match on the sole of his boot. He found a lamp, lit it.

A desperate recklessness was growing in Nonie, but she knew better than to give way to it. "Let me get some things together, won't you?" she begged Corey.

He laughed. "None of that, kid."

"Don't you want me to look nice?"

For a moment it seemed as if she had gotten hold of his conceit. But he was still distrustful.

"Nothing doing. You stick with me."

It took all of Nonie's self-control to keep from striking Corey, from crying out her hatred of him.

Hurriedly the rustlers made for Roundup's private office. It was an unpapered room with a chair, a desk and a safe. It looked deliberately plain, as if taking a sort of pride in its ugliness, like Roundup himself.

Corey put down the coal-oil lamp and started hunting through the drawers for the combination to the safe. He wasn't long in finding it. With an adeptness that showed he was not new at the game, he knelt and whirled the knob. Within two minutes the door was open. But inside there was a thin steel sheet that had to be opened with a key.

"Help me bust her, boys."

They began to pry and smash at it noisily. All heads were intent on the job. Nonie saw her chance and took it. She slipped into the hall and ran. Only once did she pause before she reached the veranda. That was to pick up a heavy, long-necked cut-glass vase which stood on a little table.

Whity was outside, standing beside Steve. He was having trouble getting the free end of the rope over a limb, for the limbs grew closely together. He kept tossing the end into air, but each time it fell at his feet. He heard nothing until the last moment. Just when it was too late he turned—to take the vase squarely on the side of the head.

Nonie turned to Steve and frantically clawed at the coils of the hangman's knot.

"Don't fuss about that," Steve whispered. "Quick—my hands."

Her fingers moved nervously over the knots, and finally Steve slipped his wrists through.

Out of the dark hollow house came a great *bong,* like a bell striking. The safe was sprung. Silence. Then someone calling, "Hey, Nonie? Nonie!" Then angrily, *"Nonie!"*

Corey had found out she was gone. Quickly the lights went out. Everything grew quiet, unnaturally quiet. The two standing out there in the darkness knew that the manhunt had started.

Here and there a slab of moonlight lanced the cascading eucalyptus leaves. One of these dappled the veranda near the main door. Shadows passed across it.

"Whity?" called Clem Corey.

Without a sound Steve slipped the gun from the unconscious Whitey's holster.

The rope still hung from his neck, the knot sticking out grotesquely behind his ear.

Something moved. The veranda floor squealed. Steve pushed Nonie behind him. His finger tensed on the trigger as if it were delicate as a bowstring, tensed until suddenly the gun spoke. A spray of lead answered. Red spots licked the darkness. Steve felt into the dark with his bullets, always following those faint red blooms.

Somebody moaned, banging his heels on the boards. Lead criss-crossed. Steve crouched low, automatically thumbing shells from Whity's well-laden belt. Now he was repaying—repaying them for what they had done to the Judge, repaying them for Nonie's manhandling, repaying them, too, for making a longrider out of a young fellow called Steve Worthen!

ACRID gunpowder replaced the aromatic smell of eucalyptus leaves. But suddenly the firing ceased. A sound had drifted up the great lane of trees, a sound that drowned out the wind sawing in the high, brittle branches. Ponies on the gallop!

Boot-heels pounded the verandah, and before Steve could snap a shot, the one remaining rustler leapt into saddle and was off, racing. Only Steve and Nonie were left with the dead and dying.

She put her hand on the arm that held the gun. She was with him to the finish now, come what might. The clap and thump of hoofs came closer. And down the long lane dashed the whole town of Tornado, every man in his saddle. At the sight of the two in the shadow they drew up in a wild welter of horseflesh.

"Follow that damn owlhooter, you fools," yelped Roundup. With a snort and a plunge the wild hoofs and manes broke again into motion.

Roundup Scaggs swung down, letting the reins trail through his fingers. In the shifting moonlight beneath the trees he had a hard time making out Steve's expression, but he could see the hangman's knot. And he could see Nonie standing sturdily by Steve's side.

The moon dipped lower and a beam slid across the veranda illuminating the body of Clem Corey. The pearl-handled gun was still clutched in one stiff hand, a fat canvas money sack in the other.

Through the night came another mad sound of hoofs. Roundup grunted. "Now who in hell is this?" The three turned guardedly to face the new comers. Out of the black tunnel of trees spurred Paquito and Judge Worthen. The pair haunched their mounts to a sliding stop. "Where's the boy?" called Worthen. Then he discovered Steve standing a little back in the shadows. "So they corralled you again!" he cried.

"Sure. We caught him 'cause he stopped to shoot it out with Clem Corey and the rest of his bunch," Roundup snorted. "Damn jailbreaker!"

"That's the way it went, eh? So now he's got to go back."

"Back, hell! Didn't you hear me say he saved Nonie?"

"It's like him," said the Judge, "but according to the laws of this state Steve's been sentenced proper. We got to take him back."

"What if I was to admit to bearing false witness? Suppose I told you he sent a note warning us, but I used it to try to toss you," argued Roundup. "How about in that case, you stiff-necked old buzzard?"

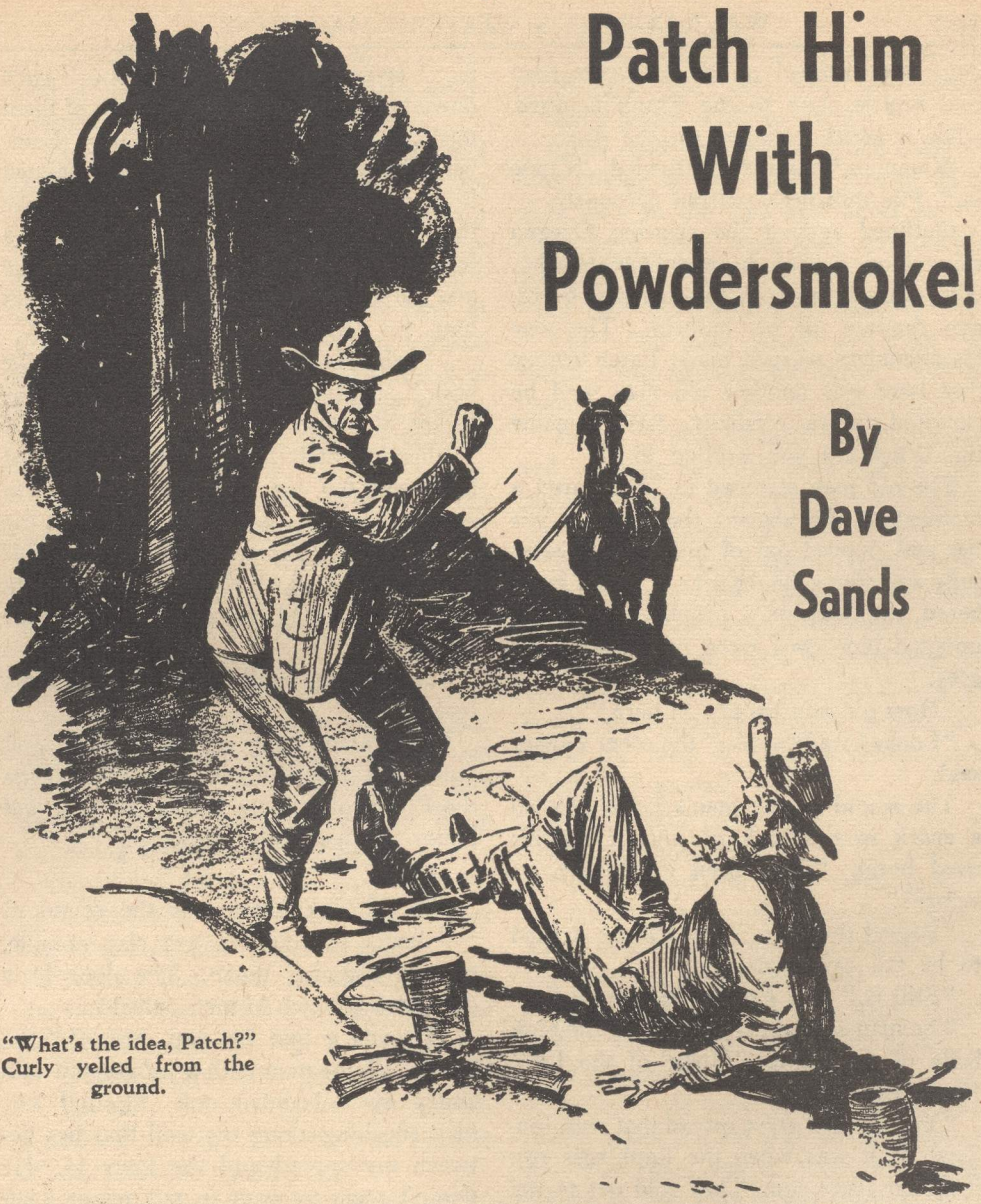
Judicially, the Judge's gaze swept his long-standing enemy.

"Bearing false witness, eh! Paquito," he ordered, "go in an see if you can find that new chess set anywhere around. This hombre's going to be in the calaboose a good long time!"

THE END

Patch Him With Powdersmoke!

By Dave Sands



"What's the idea, Patch?" Curly yelled from the ground.

Memories of the old days on the Lazy H crowded in on worn and tired Sheriff Patch — memories of the days before he swapped his soul and honor for three squares a day. . . . But now, if deadly guns spoke on the Lazy H, what did they expect an old man to do—fight?

NOWADAYS Sheriff Patch spent a good deal of his time sitting in the jail. It was warm, comfortable, and a protection. What it was a protection against, old Patch never would allow himself to say. Against himself, perhaps, for he was old and meek and scared of what the future might show.

He was sitting there this dripping spring

day, feet propped up on an overturned coal scuttle close to the Franklin stove, when a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," the sheriff drawled. "Come in." His thin neck twisted nervously.

Outlined against the slanting Oregon rain stood a man in a rubber poncho. The rain gleamed on his lips and beard, and drained off his hatbrim. The way his shoulders warped made Patch realize that here was another old man, and he repeated, more cordially, "Well, come in. What are you waiting for?"

The old man stamped in. He stared a moment at the sheriff, then pegged his hat and flopped out of his poncho, carefully smoothing his beard. It was a large beard, imposing as a prophet's. But the unfaded blue eyes were not a prophet's eyes.

"How did you happen in here?"

"Looked waterproof," the other oldster said.

The sound of the man's voice kindled a spark in the back of Sheriff Patch's tired brain. "Ever been in these parts before?"

"Passed through. They tell me it used to be tall cattle country."

"Still is," said Patch. "Sit down."

The man spread his legs out to the pink belly of the stove. "Home of the Lazy H, ain't it?"

"Yep. And a great spread that was, too. That is, it was when the Lanktrees run it fifteen years ago. They sold out to the Ten Eycks and went away. And now the Ten Eycks are about through. Only one of them that's left is a girl, Laura. She's game, but you have to be more than game nowadays. You gotta be shrewd, smart."

"Same thing's happened to lots of great old spreads."

Old Sheriff Patch wasn't listening. His face wore a reminiscent look. "We had a top-string bunch of boys when I was working for the H. We rode hard and raised hell hard and nothing ever stopped us. I remember the time the bunch rode down to Klamath. There was one of them medicine shows in town. Curly Lemberg, he was loco as usual. He claimed if the rattlers wouldn't bite a gent like this medicine man, they'd sure lay off a feller like him. So he grabs up the snake and the darned thing lays back and strikes him. So you know what Curly does?"

"Yeah. He hauls off and bites the snake back," supplied the stranger, without the flicker of a lash.

Sheriff Patch leaned forward so that he almost fell out of his chair. His arm shot out and he took a good hold on the man's beard. "You masqueradin' old fool! Where you been all these years? So you figured you could pull a fast one on your old partner."

"Hey, leggo," said Curly. "This beard's real."

Old Patch went to his drawer and pulled out a pint of rye. For a long time those two old-timers sat, while talk and liquor warmed their veins. . . .

ABRUPTLY there was the sound of hoofs sucking the wet clay outside, of men slapping down. The door blew open and a bunch of men pulled in.

"I made a find for you, Sheriff," the leader, a huge man with a jutting jaw and angry eyes, boomed out. "Found this man sneaking along the trail that lies between my spread and the Lazy H. He doesn't seem to want to talk about what he was doing."

In that short space between the sound of the horses and the entry of these men, the sheriff had completely changed. He had become a scared, cringing man.

"I'll lock him up for you, Cornford. Anything you say."

"Lock him up and keep him there until he says what his name is and what he's up to."

Cornford turned his insulting, cocky grin on the young fellow. "Now what

have you got to say for yourself, there, stranger?"

For all the expression on the prisoner's face it might have been Curly's poncho. For the face reminded Sheriff Patch of a poncho—a leather poncho with slits for the eyes and a generous slit for the mouth. He wished he had the nerve to look at Cornford that way, telling him, without need of words, that he could go plumb to hell. He walked the silent young fellow, hardly more than a kid, into the cell and closed the iron gate.

Cornford and his hard-faced crew started out. At the door Cornford turned, "Listen, you," he said to the sheriff, "tomorrow we're running out the Frenchman—foreclosing. See that you're there."

Old Patch shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, sir."

For some moments after the big door had shut, Sheriff Patch avoided his old friend's eyes. Curly said nothing, just looked at Patch, and once or twice made a clicking noise with his tongue.

Old Patch flung out at him, "I know it. I can't help it. Go ahead—say what you've got on your mind to say."

"What's that bird Cornford got on you?" said Curly, his eyes mixing sympathy with contempt.

"Nothing. But he's got this country by the tail. He can throw me out tomorrow if he wants. What would become of me? Where would I go?"

The old puncher filled his pipe, thumbing the tobacco down. He put a match to the stove, letting the heat light it. He said thoughtfully, "I don't see what you got now."

"Not much, I guess," said Patch. His eyes, under curling white eyebrows, were sad and filled with self-disgust.

"What's this business about the Frenchman?" Curly asked.

"Just one of the small outfits that Cornford is squeezing out. Mortgage. Probably stole a few cows to make sure that Frenchie couldn't pay. But I don't know. I don't know want to know."

Curly said quietly, "A while back we was talking of the Lazy H bunch. How they kept to the trail and never let nothing stop 'em. Sam, you was once a Lazy H rider."

"I still am," said old Patch.

The other man shook his head, his beard wagging back and forth. "Oh, no you ain't."

Sheriff Patch twisted around, angry red swelling into his taut cheeks. His voice was low, different, almost a growl. "What are you trying to say, Curly?"

The saddle tramp looked from Patch's tight face to his gun-hand where it swung low. He cocked an eye at Patch.

"That's better. That's something like the fella I used to know. Now let's get down to business. About tomorrow—can't we fling a monkey wrench into Cornford's game?"

The sheriff sat down. "We're all alone, you understand that?" he said.

"How about the other ranchers?"

"All scared as hell. Cornford runs a tough bunch. The most you'd expect from the others is standing neutral."

"I see the way you feel, Sam," Curly said. "It's a tough layout to buck."

"I'll back you gents' play."

Both the old men jumped. They'd forgotten about the kid that had been shoved in. His voice had a drawl that didn't belong to this part of the country, but it had an easy sureness, too.

Sheriff Patch blinked at him. "What's the idea?"

"Jest love for Cornford. I don't like being told who's boss and smacked into jail. That ain't my idea of how things should be run."

Curly said, "You're better off not mixin' in this. We're old and ain't got anything much to lose. But you're young."

"Yeah. Well, I need experience," the boy said.

NEXT morning two old men and an easy-sitting youth loped out of Monongahela. The town lay in a small pocket in the hills and the road ran through it like the base of a loop, each end running off into the timber.

To the south, where they were heading, lay lava lands. You could almost feel the gray against the sky. A twist in the road brought them face to face with a young girl.

"Wait, I want to see you," she called to Patch.

Laura Ten Eyck was not precisely pretty; she was better than that. She had a clean look about her, mixed with a warmth that some people take for beauty, and which perhaps is beauty. She had a pleasant straight way of looking at a person.

Sheriff Patch said apprehensively, "What's the matter—is something up? Oh, I forgot: This is Curly. He used to work on your spread when the Lanktrees owned it. And this young man says his name is Hall. But I don't know."

Laura smiled at all three, unconsciously easing her sidling horse. "I'm sure that's his name if he says it is."

"Thanks, miss," said Hall. "I wouldn't be so sure."

She turned to Patch. "I got word from the bank yesterday. They said they're thinking of foreclosing on me. They can't do that, can they, if I've paid the interest? I let almost all the hands go so I could pay the interest. Now there's something come up about some clause in the mortgage contract."

The sheriff said, "Lord, miss, I wouldn't know. Things around here move altogether too fast. But if anything's wrong, you come to me."

She frowned but she could see the sheriff wanted to go on. She noticed how oddly his two companions were regarding him. She raised her reins. "If anything comes up I'll let you know," she said. She swung her sidling pony around the men and then straightened him and loped off.

The three men rode on in awkward silence.

Before the Frenchman's sod-roofed house, half a dozen ponies stood anchored. Cornford's men stood around, cigarettes drooping from their lips. Frenchie's kids were tossing furniture into the wagon and from within the house came sounds of an argument.

In silence Patch and the two men got down and went in. The cabin was a mess. Cornford stood, rocking back and forth in the center of the dirt floor. A woman was lying on the unmade bunk, sobbing. The Frenchman faced Cornford with a butcher knife.

Cornford said, as if repeating, "Put that down."

The Frenchman growled some words in French.

"Here's the law," said Cornford. "Now will you pull out?" Then his eyes recognized the boy and the room seemed to fill with storm. "I thought I told you to lock that kid up, Patch?"

The sheriff said, "What for? He ain't done anything."

"I thought I told you to lock him up, Patch," Cornford repeated, his voice jabbing at him.

"But— Look out!" Patch yelled.

The Frenchman was coming at Cornford with the knife. The rancher's large, squat body dropped back. They didn't see him move for his gun, but the report smacked their ears. The Frenchman dropped and powder overcame the smell of smoking bacon fat.

The woman—she was no French woman but a Yankee—rushed over, bent down and stuffed her apron against her husband's side. While her hands were working, good round Yankee curses were dropping from her lips.

For the first time Cornford smiled. "I was cut out for this kind of work," he

told the three men, holstering his gun.

"I guess you were," snapped Hall. "Now let's see what you can do with a man who packs a gun."

"I guess I'll kill you," Cornford said matter-of-factly.

Curly said, "I'll watch the door, kid."

Abruptly old Patch stepped between. Habit is strong, and Patch had been in the habit for a long time of being scared, of cringing when Cornford so much as looked at him. And it must be said for Cornford that there was force and fearlessness in the man.

Patch said, his voice pleading, "Please, boys! I don't want to see any killing here. You make a move, Hall, and we'll all be dead. This place is surrounded by Cornford's killers."

"Get out of the way," Hall said. His young face was smooth, but his muscles rippled angrily in his cheek.

Curly swung and clamped his rope-gnarled hand on Patch's arm. "Come on. Nor or never. Try not to forget you was once a man."

His words rowelled something deep in Patch. The old sheriff shook his head like a steer that had busted out of the brush.

Then Cornford laughed. "Shuck their guns, boys," he said as his rainy-faced crew slipped inside.

PATCH and Curly and the kid were shoved into their saddles and turned free. Silent and angry, they trotted back to Monongahela. Sheriff Patch kept his eyes on the point between his horse's ears. He knew what these two were thinking, and he could not stand to look at their faces. He knew also that now he had nothing left—no place to go—for Cornford wouldn't even let him stay on as sheriff.

It was late afternoon when they dropped over the slope that hid the town. Patch wished that it had been night. He wouldn't have had to look at their faces then. They trotted along the road, crossed a bridge over a small stream. Just beyond was another road which cut to the east. Curly pulled up. "I'm leaving you here."

"Where are you going?" Patch asked.

"I don't know," Curly said in a monotone. "I'm going, that's all." He might just as well have said, "I can't stomach a rabbit-hearted skunk like you any more."

He didn't even bother to say good-bye. Patch and the boy turned their horses and rode on into town. As they were approaching the jail the boy said, "I'll be going, too."

Patch couldn't restrain his hurt. "All right. Go on."

"Wait a second. What's that?"

A woman had risen from the steps in front of the jail. It was Laura Ten Eyck. She ran through the lava mud to meet them.

"I've found out. What I told you this morning was true."

Old Patch unpacked his body wearily. "Miss Laura, there's not a damn thing I can do. I tried today. I just ain't got it in me. My stinger's pulled."

The boy bent down. "Is there anything I can do?"

Patch had only heard him speak in anger. Now his voice carried another tone—easy and gentle and untroubled. Old Patch looked at him jealously. He'd give a heap to be the man this kid was going to be. Providing he lived.

"If the sheriff can't do anything," Laura said, "I guess there's nothing you can do." She smiled at him. "But I'll always remember how a stranger offered, because I know you meant it."

"I do," said the boy.

Old Patch did not wait to hear any more. He tied his pony to the rack and clinked into the jail. He lit the kerosene lamp. He threw a match into the stove. Then, unhooking his gunbelt with its empty holster, he slung it over the back

of a chair. What use was a gunbelt to him—he was scared to use it.

That night, for the first time in years, he went to the Shasta bar. He had never believed that a man who was packing a star should hang around places like this. But hell, if he was a sheriff, then the law was a damned poor thing.

He ordered a bottle from the bar and set it down in front of him. He commenced to drink, really drink, as he hadn't done since his puncher days.

At the next table, Durfey, the banker, and a storekeeper were sitting. "Cornford's taking over the Lazy H tomorrow," Durfey said.

"Didn't give the girl much time," the other said.

AFTER a while Patch didn't feel so bad. The liquor warmed him. His self-pity and his troubles fell off into the backwash of his thoughts. He found himself thinking about the Lazy H and the girl. The Lazy H, where he had worked, was going to fall into the hands of Cornford. It made him feel the way he felt when he saw a bunch of old cow ponies being shipped off to the chicken farms.

He stood up and moved to the bar. He weaved a little, trying to carry himself very straight. "How much?" he said.

"Two bucks."

He tossed the money, two silver dollars, on the polished rosewood. He started out, then turned back. "Here. This badge—" he jerked off his star and slid it across—"you can have that, too. Don't mean anythin'."

Outside, Patch mounted his white gelding with the strawberry marks. He put his heels to the horse, lining out of town, taking the road that led east with such spirit that he almost lost the saddle. He had to make a grab at the horn. "Tut, tut," Patch said. He didn't know when he'd been happier.

For perhaps two or three miles he kept along that road, until he saw what he was looking for—the low-burning embers of a campfire in a meadow close to the edge of timber. By this time he was pretty sober. He rode over across the deep spongy grass. Curly looked up at him, said, "What you doing here? Get the hell away from us!"

"Easy," said ex-sheriff Patch. "Easy," as if he were half talking to himself. He flipped lightly out of the saddle. "The Lazy H boys are gathering."

Curly got up on his hind legs. "Listen," he snapped through his beard, "I've had enough of you. Sentiment's all right, but I've had a bellyful of sentiment. I'm old and tired and damned sore right now. And you're old, and so faded that you're a tint of pale yellow. Now leave me alone."

Old Sam Patch had just about enough drink left in him to still be living a little in his imagination. He figured what he'd have done thirty years ago.

Having thought, he swung his arm, put his shoulder behind it, and socked Curly in the jaw—in the beard, rather, but it got through to the jaw.

Curly went down. He got up and said, "What's the idea, Patch?" In spite of his anger there was something in his manner a little more friendly and certainly more respectful.

"Listen," said Patch, hunkering down. "The Lazy H—that is, what's left of it, which is you and me—is gathering tonight because we got a job tomorrow. Cornford is taking over the girl's ranch. If the other boys were here, they wouldn't let a crook like that take over the place, would they? Well, neither will we!"

Curly spat into the fire. He took a good look at Patch's face and he must have seen something there, for he said, "Okay."

ALL that night the two old-timers sat up, talking about long-gone days. They both had the silent conviction that

this would be their last night on earth and that they might as well stay up to enjoy it.

At dawn they saddled and hit the trail south. The mist had hardly cleared from the valley when they came to the home buildings of the Lazy H.

They both pulled up. "Looks like it used to look," Curly said. "We could have been riding home from a spree on a morning like this years and years ago."

"Yeah. I wish we was," said Patch.

They trotted on up to the long white-washed wooden building with the balcony going around the top. Laura Ten Eyck, drawn and tired-eyed, came out.

"A couple of the old Lazy H bunch come to help you," Patch said.

A low stone wall guarded the front of the ranch-house, and Curly and Patch posted themselves there. Samson, the only rider who'd stuck on, found a place in the rear of the building.

They didn't have long to wait. Cornford came loping up the valley with eight riders at his back. He drew up when he spotted Curly and Patch.

"Clear out, you fellows," he hollered. "I'm taking over this ranch."

"Not while the Lazy H can still fight!" Patch called back.

Cornford raised his hand, and the bunch headed for the nearest timber. Pretty soon they came out again, hit cover and commenced shooting at the ranch.

"Hasn't been anything like this since the Klamath uprising," Patch said proudly.

But Curly was busy working out a jammed cartridge shell.

Abruptly there was a burst of firing in back. "Guess Samson can hold his own. Hope so," Curly said.

Five minutes later a mocking voice addressed them from the building at their backs. "Stick 'em up, you old dogs." And Cornford grinned down at them.

Patch tried to swing his gun around when a shot struck him and knocked him on his face. Cornford came down with two of his gunnies. Those that were in the valley came up.

They yanked Sam Patch to his feet. Cornford's lips twisted at him. "Gettin' heroic, eh, Patch?" To his men he said, "Turn 'em loose and let 'em run for it. It'll limber up their old bones, and it'll be good target practice."

"No, you won't," said a voice, young but strong and determined. "You won't do nothing. Raise 'em up."

Cornford and his bunch turned. It was the kid, Hall. Laura Ten Eyck stood beside him, a long octagonal-barreled rifle in her hands.

"What are you doing here? What's this to you?" Cornford said.

"I was waiting for you, Cornford, waiting for you to sneak around. Gents like you always work from the back."

"That so?" Cornford said, and reached.

But the kid's guns spoke ahead of his, and Cornford pitched back into his bunch and went down.

Patch knew even then that he was dead.

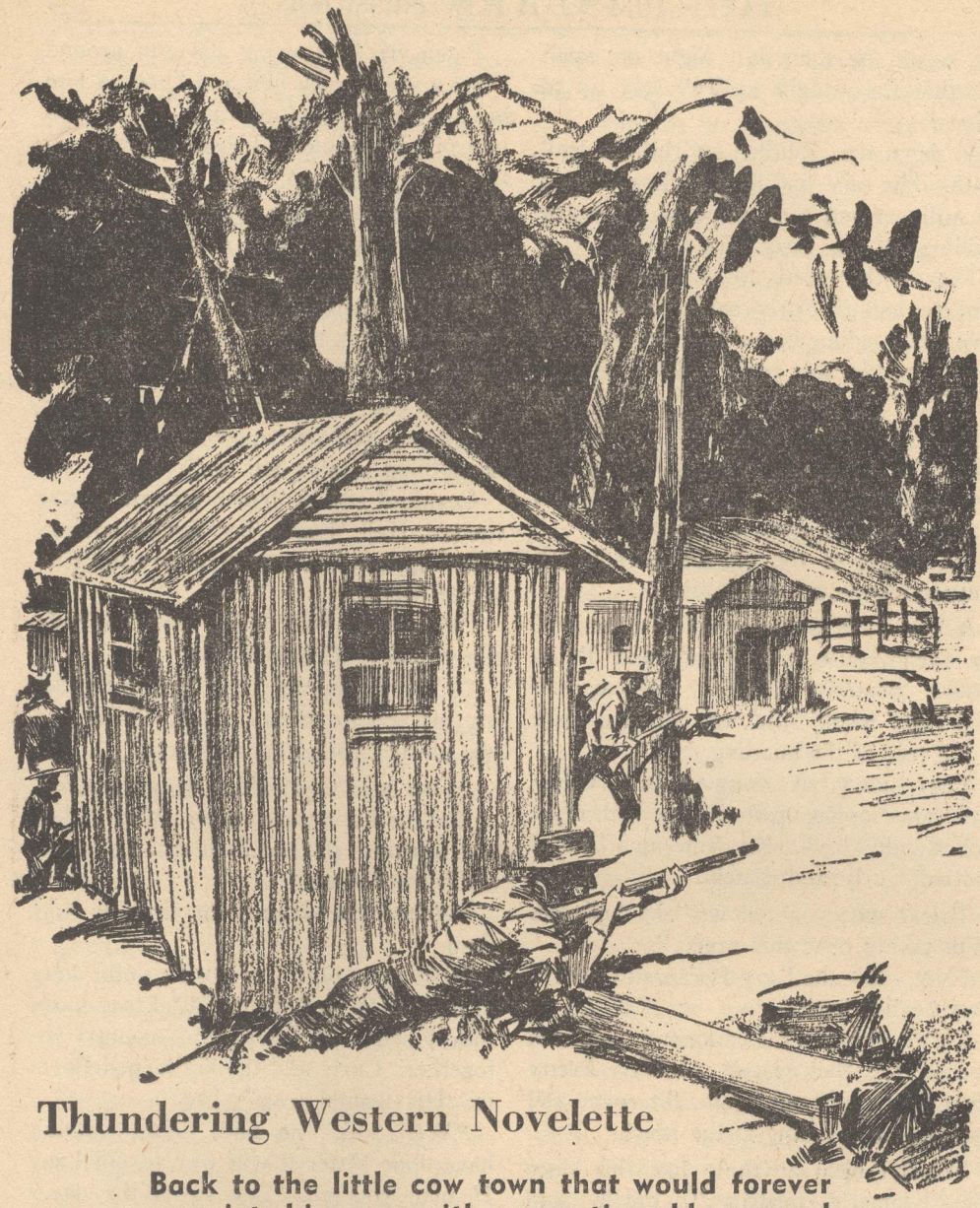
It did not take Cornford's outfit long to scatter. With Cornford dead they knew they'd better be leaving this country altogether. Curly and the kid helped Patch in. His wound wasn't bad.

"Well, kid," he said, "You couldn't have done better if you was an old Lazy H man yourself. You saved the day."

"He was wonderful," Laura said, and there was no doubting she meant it.

For the first time the kid seemed to lose some of his hard poise. "I am an old Lazy H rider, in a way. I was born here, you see." He looked at Laura. "My name's Hall Lanktree. You don't mind?"

"Maybe it's about time there was a Lanktree here again," she said. And then she blushed.



Thundering Western Novelette

Back to the little cow town that would forever associate his name with unquestioned honor and courage, rode that broken range derelict, to make his last grim fight, with borrowed glory!

CHAPTER ONE

Range Derelict

ODDLY enough, the little Arizona station where a brakeman's brogan helped Rann Kennedy over the side of a gondola had been named in honor of Rann's father, Colonel Willard Kennedy. It was the same town into which, many years before, young Willard Kennedy, a shavetail with guts, had brought the bullet-punctured remains of an Apache raiding party caught red-

By Ray Nafziger

Heir to Glory Guns

Rann made it through their line, passing not twenty feet from a cowboy who lay close to the corner of the saddle shed, watching the house. . . .

handed in a wild wagon-train massacre.

For that and similar services, Arizona nicknamed him "Wild Bill" Kennedy, gave him a five-hundred-dollar sword, and named a town after him.

No towns had been named after his son, the gaunt, tall unshaven hobo in filthy clothes who had just been booted off the freight. Although still in his thirties, he was burned out, gray-haired, the shell of a man. He had left that same town twenty years before, headed for a military school, West Point and an Army career like his father's. But instead, his life had been one long, whirling, shameful descent into dishonor, oblivion.

Unaware that he was in his home town, weak from the effects of a quart of Lordsburg rotgut, he shambled down a street and panhandled a bronzed cowboy for something to eat. When the rider promptly handed over four bits, such unusual generosity made Rann Kennedy stare. Within range of his stare behind the cowboy appeared the name of the station. K-E-N-N-E-D-Y.

"What state is this?" he asked sharply.

It was the cowboy's turn to stare. He indicated the plain, sprinkled with dusty mesquite and cactus. "Yuh digs for wood, climbs for water—what c'd it be but Arizony?"

The hobo's mouth opened in a silent laugh. His shaky hand came out to give back the half-dollar. "A man can fall only so far," he remarked. "Then he hits bottom, savvy?"

His hand came up in a salute that he had not made in many years, and he turned to walk uncertainly along the straggling street. With its ageless adobe walls this place did vaguely resemble the town of Kennedy. Here had been brought one day, as a boy, very small but very proud, to see Colonel Kennedy entraining for Cuba. And here the Colonel had returned, one arm gone, to retire from the Army and buy the splendid Los Alamos Ranch near Fort Whitman, to the north.

As he halted in the hot sun, a forlorn, lost figure, he felt sick to the point of retching. It was unbelievable. He was looking at Kennedy, Arizona. Kennedy, on its mesquite plain, with, out toward the Ladrones, the always-present mirage of a great lake bordered by high trees.

What a weary way he had gone since leaving here, weary for all that it had been downhill! He licked dry lips.

Mirages lay in the shimmering valley, and ghosts of dead men stalked this bleak cowtown where loading pens had once held five thousand bellowing cattle marked with his father's saber-shaped brand. Ghosts of sullen Apaches, of stalwart young cowboys and soldiers, miners and freighters, his father, Colonel "Wild Bill." A man as well known in Arizona as Cochise Head. Ghosts or not, all had been men, all except that boy of fifteen who had gone renegade despite his opportunities, his training, his heritage.

WORDS formed soundlessly on his lips. He had to get out of this place! Turning with drooped, shamed head, he slunk back for the yards, cutting across the street toward a rack where a group of small cow horses stood tied. There he stopped, to gaze at a tough-looking little dun pony with a tiny saber-shaped brand on his shoulder. The old brand of the Kennedy Los Alamos Ranch near Fort Whitman.

"I'm damned!" he whispered. "Coyote!" He ducked under the rail to put a hand against the dun's hide. His horse! The fastest, smartest, most promising young cow horse of the Alamos remuda. The top mount in the string a fourteen-year-old boy threw in with the roundup cavvy, still under saddle after twenty years of work.

The saloon door behind him swung open. A man came out, a burly fellow with

a black stubble hiding his face under his steeple-crowned hat.

"What'n hell you doin' with my horse?" he snarled.

"Nothin'," muttered Kennedy as the man lurched across the walk. The old pony, remembering previous abuse, retreated and flung up his head with a rattle of bits, trying to break loose. Promptly the man cursed and with his fist smashed the pony on the nose.

Anger surged into Kennedy. "You don't have to do that, mister," he said thickly. He was as much surprised as the big rancher. Not for years had he stood up for anyone except himself. A down-and-outer travels easier minding his own business. He stepped back now, knowing he was in for trouble.

The rancher advanced menacingly. The piglike, bloodshot eyes in the black, bristly face reminded Rann of a boy, "Dirty" Scriven, who had lived near old Fort Whitman.

Without warning a big fist lashed out. Kennedy tried to dodge, but speed had long ago gone out of nerves and muscles. It was exactly as if the front of his head had been caved in. Then the mate to the first fist landed, and the jolt was like the kick of a powerful horse.

Two more smashes to the face and he went to the ground where a sharp-pointed boot again and again thudded into his ribs. Tiring of that, the rancher lifted him to his feet for another systematic fist-battering. Blood rivuleted down from Kennedy's nose and over his chin, an ear was half torn loose. His eyes were shut.

It was in the heat of the day, and for a while no one saw the inhuman beating. Then someone called out and feet came running down the walk. "Hey, what the hell you doin', Lash?"

"Beatin' a lousy bum," said the hulk, and satisfied, he went back inside the saloon. Kennedy, blinded, in a panic, used the last life left in him. He scrambled to his feet to cross the walk on a staggering trot. Colonel Kennedy's son who was a lousy bum had to escape before he was questioned and identified. He managed to get to the back of a building where he fell among the tall weeds.

Hidden among their thick stalks, he lay half conscious, too numb to feel the waves of pain that went through him. The blood slowly ceased its flow and caked on his face. Flies buzzed over him unnoticed until one came with a peculiar high-pitched hum. In the strange sick fancy of Rann Kennedy the hum was transferred into the faint echo of a distant bugle call. Rann tried to put it out of his head, but the faint notes continued. A bugle—as it had often floated to his father's ranch from Fort Whitman!

As he told the cowboy, he had reached bottom. Calloused, without emotion, he had once heard a Federal judge pronounce sentence, had sneeringly served his time. But now if he had not forgotten how to weep, the fifteen-year-old boy in him would have shed tears. An old town, an old cow pony and a bugle call had pierced below the hard outer shell that coats the souls of renegades, red and white. And those stabbing memories made him as sick in soul as in body.

If only he could wake from all this and find himself back again in an Arizona spring, with the first green tint of new grass and mesquite threaded by a lazy cloud of dust rising from a troop of cavalry going out for maneuvers! Or if he could be holding tight to his mother's hand as his father's regiment paraded—the beat of steel-shod hoofs, moving and halting like one vast machine; the flash of sabers; the flutter of flags and the dip of the colorful guidons.

But what was the use? A trail could never be erased. A man was done for when he had gone down as far as Rann Kennedy. All that was left him was to

take his dishonored self out of Kennedy in the darkness, and leave the ghosts and mirages behind him.

Aching in every bone, with his head as spongy as an over-cooked vegetable, he got to his knees and hands and pulled himself to his feet. Blood and dirt caked his face in a mask.

He staggered to the street and down it toward the tracks. No one noticed him when he went to a horse-watering trough and, holding his head under the tap, washed away the caked blood and dirt.

THE STREET lay in darkness as he headed for the station. Horses in front of lighted windows lifted their heads as he passed. The old horse, Coyote, was still in his place. Rann stopped. The pony seemed to sag under the heavy stock saddle. He had probably been standing unwatered in the hot sun all day. Turned loose, he would wander back to his home range where he would be smart enough to dodge out for a few weeks.

Rann stepped behind a big rangy roan and untied Coyote's cinch strap. The saddle and blanket came off, to be tumbled on the ground. His fingers fumbled at the throat latch, and slipped off the bridle. Coyote backed away, whickered and started a brisk trot down the street.

Someone coming from a saloon happened to see the horse moving away unsaddled and noticed the man at the rack.

"Horse thief!" he bawled. "Pile outa there, fellers. Some one's gittin' at yore horses."

A booming chorus of heavy voices followed this alarm, and a trample of heavy feet. Kennedy lost his head. If he started to run to the station, he would be hunted down along the tracks and soon caught.

He untied the reins of the big roan, slipped them up over the neck and pulled his battered body into the saddle. It had been years since he had ridden, but he settled into the leather as if it had been yesterday. Bronc stompers of the range and McClellan saddle riders of the fort had taught Colonel Kennedy's young son to ride. Brush popping on the high mesas when chasing steers had graduated him long before he was fifteen. Now he swept the horse to the right, between two buildings. A gun was unlimbered behind him. Shots whizzed past his head.

From force of long habit, he headed north toward the Alamos Ranch, clattering over the tracks. In a few seconds a rush of horsemen came after him, sweeping along in a pounding flurry of racing hoofs. Rann sat the saddle easily for half a mile out of town, but he was in no shape for a race, even if the roan could outdistance pursuit.

Those riders behind him were well liquored up. Catching him, they might either shoot or hang him. Which would be no loss and not far from his deserts, he admitted, but no man has ever sunk so low that he welcomes a strangling noose of hard-twist around his neck, or a lead slug through his belly.

Kennedy dropped the roan off into a steep-walled arroyo that swung at right angles from the trail. The pursuit swept past him, taking it for granted he was keeping northeast.

CHAPTER TWO

Sagebrush Renegade

IT WAS a hard, jolting ride under the stars for the half-conscious man. They would run out over the country to watch the main passes, but they would not be watching the Jack Ear, on a little-used trail. He would ride through there, head south for the railroad again and catch a freight.

The pass was clear, but on the other side a fence forced him north by the old deserted C L Ranch. Behind its now roof-

less adobe walls ranchers had once stood off Apaches until Rann's father, then a captain, had ridden over with two troopers to drive them off. That was another reason why, at Colonel Kennedy's death, Arizona had gone en masse to the funeral.

When he finally reached a gate, he knew he was too exhausted to make it back to the railroad. He was not far from his father's old ranch near the abandoned Fort Whitman. And although it was no longer home, he turned toward the ranch instinctively, as a wounded animal might crawl toward the den where he had been whelped. Riding along the long-lanced yuccas, he reached another gate, which led into what had been the Alamos horse pasture.

Inside the gate he stood weakly for long minutes, debating in his head what to do next. There would be strangers up at the old ranch house. A big family of California Mexicans had lived in the cottonwoods down the creek. The Perezes. They were honest, industrious. The older sons had ridden for his father. The younger boys—Miguel, Francisco, Ysidro—had been like brothers to Rann.

He would chance it that some of the Perezes still lived along the creek. A dog barked at him as his horse's hoofs pounded a warning. And with head and chest sunk over the pommel, Kennedy came to a stop.

Light from an open door revealed him as he fell from the saddle. A man emerged, swarthy, black mustached, young, carrying a rifle.

Kennedy had fainted, but he came to when something hot and strong was poured down his throat. He had been carried inside and put in the airless spare room, with its embroidered spread and slips, kept sacred by every good Mexican housewife.

"It is Rann?" the man questioned. "The son of Colonel Kennedy? You remember me, Miguel Perez?"

Rann stared, nodded his head. "Mike, they're after me," he mumbled. "It's a mistake. I took a horse at Kennedy."

Miguel nodded and began drawing on his chaps. "I take care of that. I guess you was drunk, eh, Rann?" he said with a chuckle. "Margharita, she take good care of you." He nodded to his young wife and went to the corrals and saddled one of his own horses.

Then he led the big roan down the bed of the stream to a fence, the strands of which he lowered. He knew the ranch from which the horse had come. Turned loose with his head tied up to keep him from grazing, the roan would travel back home. After that, Miguel returned to sit by the stranger who lay battered, bloody, gaunt, in the bed of Miguel Perezes.

"You come home again, eh?" asked Miguel with a slow smile.

"Home?" mumbled Kennedy. It aroused him. "No one's to know I came back. If you can get me a horse, I'll be getting up and going back to the railroad."

Miguel shook his head. "You are sick," he said. "Better you stay a long time. My house is yours. For long we wonder what become of you. I guess you forget us, eh?"

Kennedy shook his head. "No, Mike. Francisco, Ysidro—where are they?"

"In Globe. Married. Lots of keeds. Lots of work. Not like the old days, since the colonel is gone."

"Who lives on the ranch now?"

"The Nolans. Reno Nolan. I guess you don't know him. He was sergeant for your papa at Fort Reno. He come here long ago to work for your papa. His wife keep the house. A good man, Reno Nolan. They look after your papa when he is sick, and when your papa has bad luck an' lose most of his ranch, they lend him money. Your papa leave them what is left of the ranch to pay his debt. We all lose one good fren'. It is no longer good days,

like when we was keeds. Bad times, now."

"Who owns that Coyote dun?" he asked.

MIGUEL'S face darkened. "Lash Scriven. You 'member him? He now own mos' of the old Alamos Ranch. Soon he will have it all. You give him good licking once—at Fort Whitman. Lash was fool to think he could whip son of Colonel Kennedy. Now you go sleep, eh?"

In the darkness he tossed restlessly, while ghosts rode by in a continual succession of mirages. Soldiers, cowboys, officers—and the Colonel, the man Miguel called his "papa."

He lay in the bed for four days, most of them feverish, half delirious. His body could no longer take punishment.

During a lucid interval one afternoon, he heard a familiar voice snarling close to his window, the voice of the man who had beaten him in Kennedy. It was Coyote's owner, Lash Scriven.

"Mike, you dirty greaser, why ain't yuh showed up for work? Wanted yuh to help track a hombre that stole a horse at Kennedy an' turned loose that Coyote skate of mine. Somehow since I been thinkin' it over he reminded me o' somebody. O' Rann Kennedy. But it couldn't of been him. By God, I wish it was!" He laughed. "Think of it—sendin' up the ol' Colonel's son for horse stealin'."

Kennedy realized as the talk went on that he was hearing what was not intended for his ears. Scriven had been forcing Miguel to rustle for him, from Reno Nolan who now had Alamos. Miguel had been helping butcher Nolan cattle and packing the carcasses across the mountains after cutting out the brands and burying the hides. And now something new was being cooked up. Some more serious threat for the Nolans, against which Miguel raised a loud protest.

"But they are my neighbors. No, Lash. That goes too far. To steal a few cows, all right—but not that!"

"Look who's kickin' over the traces!" sneered Scriven. "Turnin' honest. An' yuh ain't goin 'to do what I tell you. Why, you low-down yeller-belly, I'll bust every bone in yore body. Who's been keepin' yore family from starvin' since the Colonel kicked off? Who kin see that yuh go to the pen for that killin' down at Benson? What yuh say now?"

Miguel had nothing to say. Scriven clumped away, and Miguel came into Rann's room. He realized that his guest had overheard, and shame overcame him. "That a son of the Colonel should hear it said that I am a thief! I killed that man in fair fight, but they would convict me. This Lash Scriven is bad man like he was boy. Like his father was no-good soldier, a coward and a thief. His mother is from Fort Grant hog ranch. What colt can you expect from the bad horse and the poor mare? Not like you—you was fine boy."

"*Was* is right," said Rann bitterly.

"You have only met with bad luck," said Miguel hurriedly. "Is notheeng. But this Lash, he plan to do sometheeng worse than he ever do before. Reno Nolan have pretty young niece. Good girl. Lash wants to get Reno's ranch and mak' that fine girl marry him. She works like a man, ride range with her brothers. And to think I have steal from them. I am what they call a low-life," said Miguel sadly. "Ever since your papa die. Sometimes I think I better kill that Lash an' let them hang me."

"It's every man for himself. What happened to all the Colonel's personal things, Mike?"

"He willed them to the Nolans. He owe them a lot of money and he left everytheeng to them. The uniforms, the swords, the rooms of books, an' that old Indian pottery your papa got from the caves up

north of the Gila. That pottery is worth two-three thousand dollars. But Reno Nolan will not sell it. When he die, it all go to museum."

"Two-three thousand?" repeated Kennedy in sudden interest. That was real money to him. And he hadn't any scruples about selling a lot of old *ollas*. His brain began to turn over a scheme. He, Rann Kennedy, could take that pottery and sell it on the Coast. No one would question his right to it, once he got it away from the Nolan family. All he needed was a pack horse and a saddle horse to get to the railroad, and Miguel would provide them.

TO TEST his strength he got up the next day and wandered outdoors to lie under the trees on the grass. Two or three thousand dollars. That would be real money—until it was spent. And all he needed to get it was a little nerve.

A rider came by him, so close that the horse shied at the man near his feet. In the saddle was a woman, a red-haired girl wearing heavy brush chaps, a man's leather jacket, with a coil of worn rope on her saddle.

"I nearly rode over you," she apologized.

"No harm done," Rann returned. "You're Nora Nolan?"

"Yes. I didn't know Miguel had a visitor." A fine-looking girl with a friendly smile, a wealth of reddish hair, blue eyes that perhaps saw too clearly what you were.

"Used to know Miguel long ago," he explained hastily. "When Colonel Kennedy lived at Alamos."

"You knew the Colonel? Never a day goes by that my Uncle Reno doesn't mention him. The Colonel died poor but honored and happy except for worry about his son."

"What did—the Colonel—say about his son?"

"Only that he had been in Africa for many years on some kind of engineering work."

Rann had one thing to his credit; He had changed his name and had written that he was going to Africa on mining work. That was just before he went to Federal prison.

The girl's radiant face remained with him after she had ridden away. Too bad that Scriven wanted her. But that, of course, did not concern him. What did concern him was getting out of this country with that valuable Indian junk. He drifted in to ask Miguel for two horses that night and Miguel assented without asking questions. Miguel had his own worries.

"It is all fixed," he said.

"Fixed?" echoed Rann. "What do you mean—fixed?"

"Scriven's scheme to frame Nolan. I and one of Scriven's hands hide two hides from fresh-killed Scriven cattle at Nolan's place. Tonight the deputy sheriff—he's Scriven's cousin—finds the hides and arrests Reno Nolan and his two nephews. An' then it is either they mus' go to the penitentiary or give up the ranch to Scriven."

Miguel looked at Kennedy as if he hoped that Kennedy could suggest something. But Rann was thinking that with this trouble coming up, it would be the very night to pull his little theft. He was in luck.

"Such things did not happen in the days when the Colonel was living," Miguel went on sadly. "The Colonel, he look after us all."

"You'll be sure to have those horses ready, will you, Mike?" asked Kennedy. "I'll send you fifty bucks when I get to Los Angeles for what you've done for me."

"I could not take it," said Miguel, vastly hurt. "For what I do for the son of Colonel Kennedy, I do not take any money."

CHAPTER THREE

The Snake Strikes

FOLLOWING supper, Miguel tied the two horses for Rann in the trees beyond the house. Rann shook hands with Miguel and went out to the outfit. There was a riding saddle on one horse, a pack saddle on the other, with two rawhide-covered boxes and enough sacks and straw for packing.

Before Kennedy left, Scriven rode into the clearing with a little group of riders, his deputy sheriff cousin and a half-dozen of his cowboys. His harsh, loud voice carried easily to Kennedy.

The two fresh hides had been hidden in the Nolan vehicle shed. Miguel and another neighbor were to go along with the deputy to be witnesses. Reno Nolan and his nephews would all be taken to the county seat if the Nolans did not agree to turn over what was left of Los Alamos to Scriven. And if the girl did not agree to marry the rancher. Scriven, while the parley went on, would stay out of sight with his cowboys, ready to act if the peppery Nolan made any trouble.

These plans suited Kennedy. He would make use of the confusion to pack up the Indian stuff and quietly head for the nearest town. Miguel had given him a bottle of the cheap Mexican sugar alcohol smuggled into southern Arizona. Taking a few swallows, he mounted and rode along the creek toward old Alamos.

A hundred yards from the house, Rann got down and hid his horses in the brush. Then, carrying the sacks, he headed through a growth of live oak and sycamore until the adobe bulk of Alamos headquarters lay before him in the moonlight. An old friend, that house, with its low adobe walls and flat roofs, the corrals and the big cottonwoods and walnuts beyond. It looked as familiar as if he had left it a week before. Few changes had been made; the long walls were still windowless, dating from old Apache days.

Rann could almost see his father standing outside it, erect, facing Fort Whitman to listen regretfully to the bugles at the fort. More than once, as the faint piping had floated along the foothills, the son had seen tears in the old soldier's eyes.

Squatting, he waited for the deputy's party. During the altercation that would come, he would slip into the house and sack up the pieces.

A light was burning in the kitchen part at one end of a wing. Once he saw the girl crossing a window. Then he pressed back suddenly into the brush. Not far from him a man was running, heading for the old carriage sheds. It was Miguel Perez. The Mexican vanished and reappeared, dragging a couple of sacks from the shed. Must be the hides planted by Scriven's orders.

Kennedy made a quick guess: Mike was trying to save Nolan and his family and was getting rid of the evidence, because the family in the big adobe house represented, somehow, Colonel Kennedy, to whom the Perezes had been retainers in the old days. Miguel must have made some excuse to hurry on ahead of the deputy's party to get rid of those hides.

Rann considered. This was liable to make serious trouble for Mike and the old ranch. Shooting would be seen here tonight. Better for him to get his loot and clear out before the trouble started. The family were all in the kitchen. Without their knowing it, he could get through the patio and into his father's big room where his personal effects were kept. Hastily he crossed the yard.

IT WAS easy to get into the long patio, on three sides of which the rooms were built, with doors opening from it to each room. The one to his father's chamber was unlocked. Inside loomed the

familiar canopy bed given the Colonel by a Mexican army officer.

On broad shelves about the room were racked the pottery pieces, including a ceremonial vessel of chalcedony which was famous as the prettiest archeological piece ever found in the Southwest. Some artist genius, some aboriginal Cellini, had shaped and polished a block of greenish-blue quartz with crude, unknown tools. It was worth at least a thousand dollars. He wrapped that first and picked out the more valuable among the smaller pieces to join it.

The clump of shod hoofs sounded out front. The deputy's party had arrived. Rann worked on swiftly in the moonlight that came through the patio windows. Voices rose, high pitched, angry; one sharp, a little shaky with age—that would be old Reno Nolan's—and then the loud, harsh tones of the deputy.

Scriven and his cowboys would be back in the trees watching, ready to sweeten the pot if the need arose.

"Got a search warrant and I'm combin' the place," repeated the deputy for perhaps the tenth time during the argument.

"It's Scriven himself that's the thief," insisted Nolan. "He's been stealing from us for years, and no damn deputy ever searched his ranch for hides off our cows."

"Never had no cause to. But I been tipped off yuh got two hides here, fresh Lazy X hides off Scriven's steers. If I find 'em, you're cooked."

"Help yourself," said Reno Nolan. "Ye'll find nothin' here. We kept sweet-smellin' spite o' skunk neighbors."

Following the deputy and Miguel and the other neighbor, hobbled old Reno Nolan, with his two nephews, neither boy over sixteen. The girl stayed anxiously in front of the house, watching the bobbing lanterns.

Rann, ready to leave, had to wait. He couldn't get by her unseen. There was only one exit leading from the patio.

The men came back after a long search. They came back empty-handed.

"And now will ye be gettin' out of here with y'r search warrants?" demanded Nolan.

Lash, who had been waiting in the shadow of the trees, now rode out, six cowboys with him. The big rancher was spitting poison.

"What's wrong here?" he bawled. "Mike, damn you, what y' got to say? Where'd yuh go just before we come up?"

The Mexican quailed, but he spoke up bravely enough, and unexpectedly with the truth. "They're aimin' to frame you, Mr. Nolan!" he shouted. "Scriven's been stealing from you, making me help him, an—" He got no further.

Lash Scriven dropped his hand to his gun with an oath. Miguel went for his weapon, but he had no chance against the rancher, partly because he already had counted himself a dead man when he had decided to throw a monkey wrench into the Nolan frameup. Scriven's gun belched fire twice. Miguel Perez folded at the belly as if seized with a powerful cramp, and hit the ground with a queer bounce.

Scriven had to follow this strong medicine with a still stronger dose. "We got the goods on you, Reno!" he yelled. "You can't buck me. There's only one way to settle this. Nora to marry me and you to turn this ranch over to us as a weddin' present. You'll have a good livin' here."

Old Reno Nolan cursed Scriven and the hostile men with him. "I'd see her dead before she was married to the likes of a murderin' cow thief!" he finished.

"Let her speak for herself," Scriven addressed the girl. "It's jail for your relatives unless you give in, Nora. And you'll belong to me in any case, if I got to bring yuh along with a rope, same as a maverick heifer!"

The girl had her answer ready. She grabbed the gun from the deputy and stepped back swinging the barrel.

"Look out for the wildcat!" squawled the deputy, and he fled for the trees. Scriven and his cowboys promptly raced their horses after him.

The Nolans, not being the kind who fired at men's backs, retreated into the patio and closed the gates at its open end. Those gates made of heavy planking were thick enough to turn bullets.

From the trees came Scriven's hoarse bawl. "Shoot 'em up" he ordered. "We'll throw enough lead to knock down them 'dobe walls."

KENNEDY, who had stepped into the patio and had seen the trouble break, retreated to his father's room. He was in for it now. Scriven had seven or eight men, against old Reno Nolan, his niece and two young nephews. It had suddenly become a battle, and it might last all night.

The first shot came from the trees and shattered a pane in a window at the end of a wing. Then a fusillade poured in on the house with about the same effect as an air-gun peppering an elephant. This old house had been built in Arizona's bloody Apache days, made to hold off the coppery warriors who were now herded at the San Carlos reservation. Not a window had been left in the long outside wall, and a two-foot parapet ran around the roof edge, requiring a ladder to scale the wall. Colonel Kennedy had cut in windows only at the end of the two wings; it pleased his military mind to live in a fortress-like house.

Rann Kennedy's plans for a getaway were sidetracked. He could not get out unseen, and, seen, he would be shot as an enemy either by the attackers or defenders. If found in the house during the ruckus, he risked being mowed down as a member of Scriven's snake-blood crew. He had one chance to allay suspicion. He unpacked the Indian pottery and hurriedly put it back on the shelves.

Then: "Nolan!" he called as he walked out into the court.

"Stand put; don't make a move," the old soldier ordered from the plank gates. "I got you covered. Nora, stand back. Someone sneaked into the house. Likely one of Scriven's polecats."

The rancher stepped nearer, keeping close watch on Kennedy. "Who are ye? Who are ye?" he demanded.

"Rann Kennedy," the visitor confessed. "I came back to have a look at the old house and my father's room. I've been staying with Miguel Perez."

The girl had come closer. "It's the stranger I saw at Miguel's," she said swiftly.

"He does look like the old Colonel—the same face, for a fact," said Nolan, vastly amazed. "I do believe it is young Mr. Kennedy come back home." The old man's voice became suddenly joyful. "It is! There's no mistakin' the Colonel in him. Lad, I haven't seen you since you were a baby. You've come at a sad time. That devil Scriven has jist killed Miguel. My name is Nolan, sir."

Kennedy's hand came out. He put on his most gracious manner for the old fellow. "He often spoke of you, Sergeant," he said heartily.

Shots were sifting through the stout gates, to plunk softly against the walls.

" 'Tis a strange thing, your return at this time," marveled Nolan, paying no more attention to the bullets than he would to buzzing flies. "But they can't get at us. We'll be a tough nut to crack, they'll find out, the skulkin' coyotes. But you look sick, Mr. Kennedy. Africa and them heathen tropics will do that for ye. Ye do be lookin' terrible bad, Mr. Kennedy. Ye'll be after laying yourself down on your father's big bed now, while I and the boys take care of these snakes that's

rattlin' out yon. It won't amount to nawthin'. A bushwhackin' lot o' murderers and thieves. Come and lie down."

"In a bed?" Kennedy had the grace to say. "What would the Colonel say—at a man lying in a fight with powder being burnt? No, Sergeant. I'm at your command. A poor excuse for a soldier."

Anything to keep them from suspecting the purpose of his visit! Later, during the fight, he could slip off with those Indian relics and escape. Meanwhile he'd have to fool the old man, and the red-haired girl with the blue eyes.

THEY went back to the kitchen at the end of the house to meet a sudden attack. Those shots were coming fast, tearing through the windows that faced the yard. Kennedy had no more fear of the shots than the old soldier. Too many generations of soldiers were in him for that.

He took a deep drink from the bottle of sugar alcohol and helped the sergeant and his nephews barricade the windows. The big kitchen range was lifted in front of one, and thereafter the regular clink of bullets sounded against its iron flanks.

"The devils mean to wipe us out," puffed Nolan as he hobbled about, handicapped by a paralyzed side. "And they'll have plenty of time to do it. There are no neighbors to hear the firing. That yellow deputy has gone home, no doubt, so as not to hear it. But we'll last out. Sure, it's like having the Colonel himself to have his only son fighting with us. 'Tis too bad ye did not take to the military. Ye have the build of your father. But never the shoulders the Army put on him. To the last, in his dying bed," he said proudly, "ye could see he was a soldier."

The old fellow chattered on, affection for Colonel Kennedy in every syllable of his voice, mingled with joy at the son's return.

Joy at having with them Rann Kennedy, ex-convict, crook, down-and-outer, failure, who had sunk so low as to become a petty thief.

The voice kept on cheerfully between the heavy crashing of the Scriven guns. These people were actually depending on his help. Help from him, Rann Kennedy! His appearance to them at the moment when they were fighting for their very lives had been a miracle. A whole troop of cavalry riding into the yard would have been no more welcome. A scion of the Kennedy fighting stock, son of Willard Kennedy, the revered Colonel Wild Bill.

What a horrible joke. To expect him to be of any help to anybody—he, who had not been able to help himself. To have somebody look up to him, who had slunk like a chained beast in the cages of a Federal prison. He stared about him, uncomprehending, and saw Nora Nolan standing close to a window, holding a rifle ready.

His shoulders came back as he stepped over to the girl.

"Let me have that gun," he said. "When we need women to fight, we'll let you know, Miss Nolan."

CHAPTER FOUR

Dynamite

RANN KENNEDY, with a rifle butt against his shoulder, his nostrils sniffing powder smoke, found himself whistling the favorite air of the regiment his father had commanded at Fort Whitman.

What had happened? He had been accepted by these people as Rann Kennedy might have been accepted by everyone if he had gone straight. These people did not care if he came home broke, sick. He was the son of fighting Will Kennedy. That was all they knew.

Ignorant of the disgrace Rann had brought his father, the old sergeant gladly accepted his help. A high compliment, even if a mistaken one, from the old noncom who had helped win the West, who had fought Indians from desert dust storms to Montana blizzards. Rann knew those frontier troopers and respected them. Handicapped often by greenhorn West Pointers, hamstrung by hostile Congresses, the men of the ranks had ridden, marched, fought, starved, thirsted, died—while superior officers had taken the credit.

The roar of guns in the small room set his ears to ringing, and again there seemed to sound the bugles of old Fort Whitman, thin, clear, floating along the foot of the range.

He had wished, as he had lain in the weeds at Kennedy, that all the past could be wiped out like a dream it seemed to be. But now, here was the past in actuality. The life he had left as a boy was taken up again. For a few minutes he was starting all over again. Even his body was as good as ever here, for with a rifle he could strike as hard as the hulking Scriven with his sledge-hammer fists. He could kill with the pressing of a finger.

For a short time he was a new person; he was the boy again who had fought many play battles in this very house, had resisted a hundred bloody attacks by Apaches, gallantly beaten them off with the help of Francisco, Ysidro and poor Miguel Perez who lay dead in front of the house. Again he was fighting off Geronimo, Cochise, Victorio, singly or reassembled with the united tribes of Warm Springs, Jicarilla, Pinaleno and Chiracahua Apaches.

And as in the old days he began to give orders, to warn the two nephews to save their shots. The old fellow, Reno Nolan, hobbling about with his paralyzed side, was almost helpless in a fight. The boys paid little attention to their uncle. Why should they when a Kennedy was here to command?

Scriven centered his attack on the kitchen end where he had windows and a gate instead of blank walls to shoot against. For a time all he did was to rain in shots in a wild attempt to force a surrender. Scriven knew he was in this fight until the Nolans quit or were burned out. He meant to have the ranch and the girl at all costs, even of a cold-blooded massacre.

He would have his men and the deputy sheriff to back him up in court with lies, to testify that the Nolans had stolen cattle, had resisted arrest. And who, with Miguel dead, would be able to contradict them? There could be no doubt about the result of the battle. Only a question of how long it would take to pierce the armor of the thick-walled adobes.

Heavy dust clouded the rooms. Scriven's men moved to the close range of the sheds.

One of the nephews was hit in the hand. The girl snatched up his rifle to take his place at a window.

"You'll need every gun to hold them," she said to Kennedy, "with an old man, two boys and a girl to help you. Do you think we have a chance, Captain?"

He looked at her, saw her eyes through the floating dust as dark pools in the white blur of her face. "The boys are so young. Uncle so old. Have we a chance, Captain?"

He smiled grimly at the title. She seemed to think that as the son of a high-ranking officer he was entitled to one, as you called a king's son a prince. But the anxiety in her voice for her brothers and her uncle rather for herself helped the anger in him to mount, anger that such swine as Scriven should be a threat to decent people like the Nolans.

He fired twice at a shadow below the vegetable garden wall, grunted as he scored a hit.

"We've got plenty chance," he told her. "This house can't be taken by a few men. Father said so. They'll not dare mix it with us at close quarters; I know that Scriven. Yellow!"

He cursed as a bullet came in to hit a sill and send flying fragments of splinters into the face of one of the boys. Men had often lost eyesight by such shots. He emptied his rifle in a fury.

MINUTES passed and the steady stream of shots continued. Once, just once, Scriven's men tried to make a rush. Three men, slipping from behind the wagon shed, ran, crouched over, toward the blank gates. A barrage from the trees covered them, but Kennedy, exposing himself recklessly, got one man, enough to stop the other two and send them scrambling back to cover.

A shot smashed along his right side, scraping two ribs, tearing muscle and flesh. Blood darkened his shirt in a great splotch. The girl cried out, cut away the shirt, burned the wound with whiskey and tied soft bits of absorbent cloth over it. But it continued to bleed and to gnaw at his side with hot pain.

To keep from groaning at the agony, he talked. "The Apaches used to come crawling up along that south wall, Miss Nolan, when I was a boy. We always kept the ground clear of brush then. . . ."

Her answering smile was nearly as satisfactory as killing one of Scriven's men. She had courage, young Nora Nolan. Her breathing was as steady as an old soldier's.

Again the shots showered in. His wound made him awkward. She noticed it, and crossed to his side to load his rifle for him.

Then the shots stopped for a long time. Scriven was trying something else. Kennedy climbed to the roof but saw no sign of anyone creeping up on the house. Scriven's riders were taking no chances on burning their fingers. The rancher had a better scheme than an open attack.

His men had tied half a dozen lariats together and under cover of the trees dragged the long rope across the yard. Now back of the stable they piled a light wagon high with split cedar, set it afire and tied one end of the rope to the tongue. Then pulling on the other end from the trees, they began drawing the blazing wagon straight for the little frame lean-to off the kitchen. They would leave the wagon jammed against that shed. It would set the shed afire and then the flames would run along the beams and floor of the house. They would all be burned out.

There was only one chance to stop it—to cut the rope that dragged it. Nolan had a shotgun, and calling for it, Kennedy blazed heavy charges of buckshot at it repeatedly, hoping that one of the flying shot would cut the tight strands.

But the wagon rolled along slowly, continuing its approach. He jammed in the last shell, fired. The rope parted. The wagon stopped.

A jeering yell came from the few defenders, while Scriven's curses floated over the house. Both parties watched the wagon burn, to fall in a blazing heap, wheels and all, as many a wagon had been burned by the Apaches. Then Scriven thought up a more serious threat.

"Listen, you!" he shouted. "If you don't give in, we're goin' to blow yuh outa there. Savvy? Goin' to knock them walls down on top of yuh. We can get 'nough dynamite from Bill Powers' mine to blow you all and that house sky high!"

"They'd never dare," the girl said. "The cowards! The beasts! He can't do it, can he, Captain Kennedy?"

Rann did not answer. He knew that it would be entirely possible to blast away this house. From behind the sheds a strong-armed thrower could fling a pack-

age of sticks and attached cap and fuse into the patio. Even landing on the roof it would do enormous damage, blowing this house of earth back to the ground from which it had been molded.

They would have a few hours before the dynamite would arrive. He wandered into his father's room. It was much as it had been years before—the same chairs and odd pieces of furniture, some of which had been freighted in before the railroads had forged their steel manacles on the turbulent Territory of Arizona.

Rann opened one of the chests near the bed. On top lay a uniform, wrapped in tissue paper and smelling of camphor.

"One of your father's," said Nora Nolan as reverently as if it had been an altar cloth.

Kennedy stared at the uniform. It was up to him to get them out of this in some way. They depended on him—a hobo, a scamp, a crook, a thief. And the brain that had once been pretty good at discovering slick ways of bilking people out of money snapped to an answer as he looked at the uniform.

Then his gaze wandered to a sheathed saber on the wall, along with a bugle purchased for him on a birthday, and which he had learned to blow after a fashion. He suddenly grinned.

In the old days there had always been one last chance for a beleaguered house. The U.S. Cavalry had thundered in, their flags and guidons whipping in the wind, behind a moving wall of sabers. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Ghost Guns

HE PICKED up the uniform, shook it free of its tissue paper wrappings. "Please, Miss Nolan, send in one of the boys," he requested the girl. "I'll need help to get into this. I'm going to bring in the cavalry."

Nora hurried out, wondering. Plainly Rann Kennedy must be either joking or mad!

He sat down on the bed and let himself be dressed. He was weak from the exertion of the evening and the loss of blood, on top of the effects of Scriven's beating. He hadn't the physical resistance to stand such terrific punishment, just as this old house hadn't the stamina to withstand an attack with dynamite. And he needed his strength for the U.S. Cavalry, for Kennedy was serious. He meant to introduce the U.S. Cavalry to Dirty Scriven. His gang of whooping boys had doubled for it often, coming to rescues in the nick of time. Rann had been captain and bugler.

After a stirring bugle command to advance, his outfit used to charge at full speed—Miguel, Francisco, Ysidro—a tag-along girl from the neighboring ranch being allowed to bear the flag. Taking one of the campaign hats to complete his outfit, he stepped into the court.

"What are you going to try, Captain Kennedy?" asked the girl. He could see that she had a lot of faith in him, and now, unexpectedly, he had it in himself. The mirror in his father's room had reflected no hobo in the dusky light, but the semblance of an officer. "You have some way?" she continued, eyeing respectfully the trim-looking, military figure.

"That's it—I'm going to try something," he said slowly. "What I have tried before has usually failed, but this time I think I'm going to win. I've got two people fighting for me—the gentleman and officer who once wore this, and a boy who lived a long time ago."

Looking at him almost as if he were a ghost, the girl came a little closer. Reno Nolan had hobbled in from the kitchen where he had been on guard.

"Uncle," she said, "he looks just like the Colonel."

Nolan peered out from the snowdrifts

of eyebrows. "Aye," he said a little shakily. "When the Colonel was young."

The moonlight helped, by blotting out the hard lines and the marks of a dissipated life. But as he stood there he was truly Colonel Willard Kennedy's son. Since his return to Arizona he had been seeing ghosts, and he himself was now a ghost in that uniform, the ghost of the man who might have been.

Taking the bugle and the scabbarded saber, he slipped unseen through the gates and began snaking his way along the wall to the brush. He had done that too as a boy, the game of slipping out to get help. Once a bullet hit close to him, and he flinched, expecting that a second bullet would tear through his flesh, but the shot had been only accidentally close. Waiting for the coming of the dynamite from the Powers mines, Scriven's men were paying little attention to the house.

He made it through their line, passing not twenty feet from a cowboy who lay close to the corner of the saddle shed, watching the house. Kennedy was tempted to hit him over the head with a gun-butt, but that would have spoiled his plan. Scriven must have no hint to help him see through the illusion that Kennedy was to build in the moonlight.

In the distance sounded the stamp of the horses of Scriven's party, out of range of shots. He found his own two horses undisturbed, and mounting, led the pack horse to the creek pasture where the Nolan saddle horses were kept. Kennedy had seen them while riding up the creek that night.

There were nine head and they were easy to corner, being all gentled broomtails. Cutting up the lariat on his saddle and the lash ropes that went with the pack outfit, he made hackamores for them all. Then he lined them up by twos, and on all the pairs except the leaders knotted the lead ropes in the tails of the horses in front.

Then accompanied by his small troop he circled the hill and began a descent from the direction of Fort Bowen where part of a regiment of cavalry was still maintained. Down this hill toward the Alamos house stretched a belt of brush, scrub oak and some live oak, with plenty of dead, dry leaves and branches to crackle and crash when horses loped over them

BY THE TIME he was within a few hundred yards of the ranch, he had his troop on a gallop. The horses made almost enough crashing for a whole squadron. Always he kept to the trees, out of sight of the men about the ranch. What he wanted to convey to Scriven was only sound effect. At the noise of the running horses, the firing, which had died to an occasional shot, ceased altogether.

Calling out a clear, sharp order, he halted his horses not fifty yards from the ranch and still in the brush. Bringing out the bugle, he blew the few notes he had learned in the old days. There were no soldiers in Scriven's outfit of tramp riders to question his weird assortment of notes. The call sounded energetic and businesslike.

With the bugle call as an introduction, Kennedy rode out into a moonlit clear space on the slope.

"This is Captain Fortescue from Fort Bowen!" he called. "This firing must stop. I'm calling on you men to surrender. I am ordering my men to surround this ranch and take the lot of you into custody."

No answer whatever came from Scriven. He and his men were too busy running for their horses. They emphatically did not want to get into trouble with the government. Scriven had influence with the sheriff, but not with the United States Army. It was time to disappear.

Kennedy rode back, put his mounts into motion again and, shouting orders,

crashed along the slope as if in hot pursuit, emptying his rifle and six-shooter rapidly. To Scriven's panic-stricken bunch it must have sounded like the Charge of the Light Brigade.

His riders raced down the creek at top speed, fleeing for the Scriven ranch. Their flight made Kennedy's anger flame higher. So the yellow-bellied cow thief and killer was fleeing! After killing poor Miguel, Lash Scriven had no stomach for a real fight. And when Scriven found out that all this was a bluff, he would be coming back to start trouble against the Nolans again. There would be no peace for them as long as Lash Scriven was alive.

Kennedy dropped the lead rope of his horses and set off at top speed in pursuit, threading his way through the trees of the creek bottom.

Fate was to arrange that he should meet the man he sought. There had sifted into Scriven's dull mind the suspicion that it was extremely strange for cavalry to be riding all the way from Fort Bowen to stop a gun fight between neighbors. Particularly with a sheriff to look after such matters, and considering the touchy disposition of Arizonians at military interference in their affairs.

Lash decided at any rate to ride back alone to investigate. He did not have to ride far. The figure of the uniformed officer coming full tilt settled his doubts. The cavalry really had come. He jerked his horse around as Kennedy, raising a savage yell, charged forward.

For a hundred yards the two raced, and then as the officer gained, Scriven turned in his saddle to fire back. The bullet he sent slashed past Kennedy and slapped into a tree. Another whizzed by and only made him ride the faster, whittling down fast on the rancher's lead. Then a third shot came, a lucky one for Scriven. It hit Kennedy in the right arm.

"Hold on, damn you, Scriven!" Kennedy called hoarsely. He slipped from the saddle and fired for the first time, a hasty shot that hit Scriven's mount and pulled the horse's legs out from under him. Scriven dove to the ground, flung himself behind a rock and hurled back shots. As long as he had gone up against the United States Army, he might as well make a good job of it!

Another shot slammed into Kennedy's leg. With teeth gritted, he braced himself and steadied his gun against his left shoulder. Scriven wasted two wild bullets.

Through the fog of pain that enveloped him, Kennedy fired. His bullet got Scriven in the chest. Life flowed out from the rancher in a red stream that no doctor could have dammed.

KENNEDY'S horse had stayed close. Dropping his rifle, Kennedy hobbled over to the animal and got up into the saddle, lifting his leg over the cantle with his one good arm. When he was settled in the bloody leather, he sat for a minute holding to the horn.

He would have to be riding on. No use going back to Alamos. They would not understand, but he could not return to explain. His work was finished. He had a long ride before him to the railroad. Miguel was dead. Scriven was dead. The night and all that had happened during it was dead.

A long ride to a railway station, and a longer ride after he reached it. Maybe he could get in a hospital somewhere and rest up.

No matter what happened to him now, even if he died, he knew he would gladly go through this night again. It had paid a little of the debt he owed for the long, wasted, vicious years. A drunken hobo had wished that things should seem clean and green again, and they had—for a few pain-racked moments. They couldn't take this night away. He had come home, had for one night lived up to a tradition, to what Arizona expected of a Kennedy. If

only he had never left Arizona, had stayed to ride these hills with Miguel and the rest, had married a girl like Nora Nolan. Arizona could forgive a man a few mistakes. . . .

HE SPOKE to the horse, headed him south toward the railroad. The mount went on slowly while Rann sank lower and lower in the saddle. Even the slight jolting of the horse's motion caused intolerable agony. Minutes dragged like hours; a few steps were as long as a mile. The steady thud of the hoofs became fainter, finally died away altogether. A low building was just ahead, a building somehow familiar.

Someone shouted and ran toward them. Arms eased him gently to the ground and carried him into a house and into a bed, his father's old canopied Mexican bed.

The Nolans had gone out to find him, but his horse, with a slack hand on the rein, had already turned back to the Alamos. When Kennedy came to, hours later, a doctor had just finished his work. They were all in the room looking anxiously at him—Nolan, the niece and the two boys.

"Scriven," he muttered apologetically. "I killed him. There would have been more trouble if I hadn't."

"It was what your father would have done—killed Scriven," said Reno Nolan approvingly. "That's nawthin' to worry over."

"I'll have to move on," Rann Kennedy stated. "I've got to go on through to the Coast."

"You can't go now." It was Nora speaking, with her soothing, soft voice. "You're hurt so badly that it will be a long time before you can go anywhere. And by that time maybe you won't want to go. People here seem to need a Kennedy, Captain. Nothing has been right since your father died."

Rann shook his head. She saw the hurt in his eyes and motioned the three men from the room, leaving the two of them alone.

"They don't need my kind of Kennedy, Nora. I—I wasn't in here just to see the old house," he confessed. "I—I intended to steal this pottery. You don't know what I've been, nor would I want your uncle to guess. In the Army, officers have given a pistol to a brother officer who has dishonered himself. To shoot himself. You understand—I have lost all that goes under the word 'honor.' I lost it long ago, and it's something you can't get back. I disgraced my father, brought only dishonor to the finest man that ever lived."

The girl looked at him with blue eyes that were misty. "You're wrong. Honor is something that can come back to those who are willing to fight to get it. You will stay, to continue to help us? You must. We need you on Alamos Ranch, to build it up again."

Kennedy looked at her unbelievingly. His own eyes were suddenly wet. What was she saying? That old Alamos needed him? Was it possible that the ranch might be made big again, possible that the old Kennedy saber brand might graze these mountains, with Coyote wandering free over the grassy hills?

Perhaps he could help them, as they could help him, these people who believed in him. Miracles could be accomplished by the loyalty and faith of those who held you high, and whom you in turn held too high to betray. By the faith of a woman like Nora Nolan who understood and forgave, who realized that for some weaker mortals one triumph may outweigh many failures. Yes, there was hope for him.

His hand closed over the girl's. "Who knows? With you helping me, Nora," he whispered. "I'll stay."

THE END

(Continued from page 81)

took mean advantage of their open hospitality were barred.

I have been to many dances in my life. Some of them were in expensive ballrooms with the finest dance bands, the women in low-cut gowns that wore famous labels, and their feet shod in French-heeled slippers; the men in white ties and tails or tuxedos. All very formal, and champagne in iced silver buckets and the dance hall scented with expensive imported perfumes. Or university dances that were less formal and more fun.

But I always go back in memory to those 'breed dances along the Missouri River or on the edge of the Fort Belknap Reservation, or in the Larb Hills, or somewhere along the flat country called Sun Prairie. To the fiddle music and the jug outside under a bush.

Inside there was the sweat of strong men and the natural perfume of women's hair freshly washed. Sachet powder. Shirts washed in strong-smelling laundry soap. Men who smelled of horse sweat and tobacco mixed with kinnikinnik berries to blend the smoke. Buckskin moccasins that had been Indian tanned. The pungent odor of river likker. The giggling and chattering of the black-haired girls, shy and backward till they got acquainted. Brown-black eyes that laughed. Squealing when their partners swung them in a square dance. The scraping of resined bow across taut fiddle strings. The laughter and banter of the men who spoke a strangely blended mixture of Cree and French and cow-country American. The booming hearty laughter of Big Gregory who shared honors with the powerful, shorter-statured Lolly as chief of the Doney tribe. Their word was an unwritten law that took in such 'breed families as the Gaudeaus, the Peranteaus, the Azuers, the LaTreys and the La Plaunts,

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and the tribe of the fabulous old John Moran. And many more of the 'breeds sired by pioneers. To me they were the finest people on earth, along with the full bloods.

But the greatest of all these men was Gregory Doney, a rawboned giant of a man with black hair and clean-cut features and a sprinkling of darker freckles showing through his dark skin. First, last and always, he was a hunter. He could pick up tracks where no other man could see them. He knew the habits of every wild animal and game bird. For me Gregory started with a sort of legend:

GREGORY was a boy at the time. He packed an old muzzle-loading rifle. One day he treed a mountain lion, full grown—and they grow big along the Canadian line. He was excited because it was his first lion. His first shot wounded the lion, which sat perched high in a big cottonwood. That first and only shot left his powderhorn dry. So he laid down the gun and climbed the tree, his hunting knife gripped in his teeth.

The boy Gregory climbed the tree to where the wounded lion waited, snarling, tail lashing. He crawled out on the limb and tangled with the lion. They tumbled out of the tree together and fought it out on the ground. Gregory Doney killed the lion with his hunting knife. He carried the deep scars of claws and teeth to his grave. They made an awesome pattern on his great shoulders and along his arms.

He schooled his sons accordingly. My older brother Wallace took me along with Gregory and one of his boys, who was about my age, on a grizzly hunt.

Gregory always claimed that Wallace was the finest big game hunter on earth, which pleased me mightily because my brother Wallace was my idol and I tried

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(Continued from page 126)

to pattern his ways and walk in his moccasin track while on a hunt.

Gregory picked up a fresh lion track that led into a big cave in the badlands. He handed his son Pete his long-barreled heavy .45-70 rifle.

"Go hin and get de lion, Pete!"

Pete wanted to go in a-horseback.

"You want to get de good horse killed?" Gregory's eyes showed his anger. "Get hoff de horse."

Pete was fourteen or fifteen, but raw-boned and hard muscled. Sweat broke out on his hide. You could tell that he was scared to go in the big cave. But Pete was more afraid of big Gregory's scornful wrath than he was of the lion. He went in on foot, his moccasins making no sound at all.

We sat our horses outside. Gregory was afraid for his son Pete. But he wanted to show Wallace that Pete was a chip off the old block. We watched Pete fade into the black shadow of the cave. It seemed as if we waited for hours. I remember how scared I was for my friend Pete. In my mind I had him figured for dead. I could hear his screams as the lion clawed his guts out and the big teeth sank in his throat.

That old .45-70 roared like a cannon and the close echoes of the cave magnified it a hundredfold. The last echoes had barely died away when Pete Doney came out of the cave. He had the tail of the lion across his shoulder and had to lean far forward and dig the toes of his moccasins in to lug the weight of the dead mountain lion. Pete had shot the lion square between the eyes.

"All I could see," Pete said. "Was them two eyes shining in the dark. I went down on one knee to point the gun. I couldn't miss."

In later years Gregory would sit around the campfire.

"Tell my frien' Wallace how you kill de lion, Pete!"

WHEN the fiddler Antoine cleared the floor for the Red River Jig, he always called on Gregory. The Red River Jig is a fast, quick jig tune. I have never heard it played by anybody but a French-Canadian-Cree fiddler at a 'breed dance. Gregory's black hair was sprinkled with white when I left Montana. But he could still leap high and click his moccasin heels together and keep up the fast pace till the sweat rolled down. There in the lamplight, with a gay-colored Hudson's Bay voyageur sash knotted around his middle and the long fringes swinging, bright-colored quills glinting on his moccasins, white teeth bared in laughter, it was something that can never dim in my memory.

I'll never see him again, because Big Gregory died a few years ago. He'll find fat meat in the Shadow Hills and he'll have a jug. And there'll be a fiddler, because old Antoine has joined him Up Yonder. The 'breeds who have gone on ahead to make camp will want me to come. Because they have always known that somewhere inside me I was one of the Doney Tribe.

Mighty Sincerely,
Walt.

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