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INTERESTED....DRAMATIC BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BY
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MEMBER,
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WRITERS OF
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25c

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Year

★ ★ DRAMATIC BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

WHAT THE TEXAN WANTED

by Kenneth L. Sinclair

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Maybe, like some said, Jim Kane had a big bounty on his head. Or maybe being a range king simply wasn't his style. One thing was sure, though—Jim Kane was one very tough boy....

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Maybe, like some said, Jim Kane had a big bounty on his head. Or maybe being a range king simply wasn't his style. One thing was sure, though—Jim Kane was one very tough boy...

Kane struck swiftly throwing a big fist against Withrow's jaw.



THEY WERE waiting for Jim Kane when he swung his borrowed wagon away from the station loading platform and rolled down the narrow aisle between the cattle-shipping pens. There were nine of them, ranged across the aisle to block it completely. They sat their big, fine-looking horses with an air of ominous quiet.

Those were L-Cross horses; Dade Lamont owned that outfit, and he had always made it a point to give his men the finest riding stock on the Carrizo range. The men themselves had that look of well-fed complacency that might be expected of those who rode for the big outfit.

One of them dismounted as the wagon approached, pulling a rifle from his saddle scabbard and moving to one side until his shoulder rested negligently against the plank fence of one of the pens. He was Til Withrow, a quick, tense little hombre with yellow hair. He smiled broadly, and he was the only one of the L-Cross crew who did so.

Hap Quinn, the big and blocky foreman, had halted his horse a yard or two in front of the others. He lifted a black-gloved hand and called, "Pull up, Kane."

Jim tightened his lines, speaking quietly to his team, and reached for the brake lever. He didn't need to be told that this was trouble. The wagon-

box behind him was filled with resinous-smelling new lumber that had come in on yesterday's train, lumber that he intended to use in building his homestead shack up in Saber Valley. Somehow, the L-Cross had found out about that.

L-Cross had never made any use of the range up there. But Saber lay on the eastern half of Carrizo Basin. East of the river; and by the one-man law that Dade Lamont had always en-



Kane had to beat that gun in order to live. He drew and fired!

★ ★ DRAMATIC BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

WHAT THE TEXAN WANTED

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

HE COULD HAVE HAD THE L-CROSS GIRL BOSS. AND RAMRODDED THE BIGGEST SPREAD IN SABER VALLEY. BUT HE WASN'T INTERESTED.....

forced, everything east of the river was L-Cross.

Nothing was said about that now. Jim's hand had dropped to the stock of his sixgun. And in swift answer to that, Til Withrow's grin tightened and his hand jacked a shell into the chamber of his rifle. Breath ran slowly through Jim Kane's nostrils and he lifted his hands to shoulder height.

Two of the L-Cross riders spurred forward, one of them on either side of the wagon, and swung across to its box. One got Jim's gun and jabbed its muzzle against his side, jerking his head in silent command for Kane to get down. As Jim obeyed, with the puncher following him closely, the other rider got into the seat and whipped up the team, his companions reining aside to let him through.

The riders dismounted. Hap Quinn tramped forward, pulling his gloves more firmly onto his big hands, his sun-darkened face devoid of expression. His manner said that he had a job to do here and that he had no particular feeling about it, one way or the other. But it was a thin veneer, Jim Kane thought wryly. Quinn was swelled up with his own importance, trying to act as he thought a big-outfit foreman should.

The wagon had rumbled out of the aisle between the pens and now it halted at the riverbank astraddle of a pile of dry grass that had been gathered there. The driver unhitched the team, whipped the horses away, then crouched under the wagon and touched a match to the grass.

Jim Kane swore and started forward. But two of the L-Cross punchers moved in to seize him, one on either side of him, locking their grips on his arms.

He struggled against them and got nowhere. He was a big, rawboned, rough-looking man of thirty, this Jim Kane, a man who had lived hard and played hard. His nose had been broken long ago and it gave his face a battered look. That face of his was not a pretty one at any time; and now, in anger, it promised harsh and sudden violence.

He saw the dry bed of the wagon catch fire, then saw black smoke roll upward as the flames reached the

pitchy new lumber that it carried. "Damn you, Quinn!" he said thickly.

The L-Cross foreman moved over to him, tilting his hat back on kinky hair that glinted like a raven's wing, and struck him savagely in the belly.

PAIN FLOODED through Jim Kane's whip-hard body. Stung to a rising fury he tried once again to wrench free of those who held him, and failed. From somewhere in the town on the other side of the tracks he heard a shout; people over there had seen the fire.

But they would do nothing about this. This was L-Cross doing, and L-Cross did as it pleased in Carrizo, arrogant and secure in its power.

Quinn was striking methodically now, hammering Jim with those big gloved fists, punishing him. The foreman panted with his exertions and sweat-beads glinted in the sun as they trickled down his broad, hard jaw. His sooty eyes held an expression of vicious satisfaction that didn't line up at all with his earlier attitude of detachment.

Jim writhed, twisted in an effort to evade the hammering force of the blows. But strength was being beaten out of him. A red haze of agony shimmered before his eyes and through it he saw Quinn's head bob endlessly back and forth, back and forth, as the foreman drove in his blows.

It was too much for flesh to stand. The pain retreated, dulled somewhat by a gathering blackness. Jim thought distantly that he could be glad about one thing—Nora Moran was not in town today to see this. Pinned by his captors and cruelly beaten by Quinn, his body sagged down.

He heard a far-off voice grunt, "That'll do him." And then Jim was released, his body falling heavily to the ground.

He sensed that Quinn stood over him for a minute. The foreman was pulling at his black gloves again, first one and then the other, and he said, "After this, you range-grabbin' son, you'll stay off L-Cross graze, savvy?"

Then there was a creak of saddle-leather and a sound of hoofbeats that drained away into the darkness.

Running feet came near. There was a jumble of excited voices. Someone turned Jim Kane over and he looked up at the eyeshaded, wizened face of old Fred Dagget, the station agent.

Dagget was thrust aside, and there was a rustle of silk and a smell of strong perfumes. A couple of the flossy girls from Lou Rountree's saloon helped Jim to his feet and steadied him, guiding him forward as the crowd of townsmen fell back.

He had no awareness of crossing the railroad tracks, nor of crossing the street. But suddenly he was in the saloon, where the coolness of the air, laden as it was with perfumes and whiskey-smell and stale tobacco smoke, revived him somewhat. He sank into a chair. Numbness was beginning to leave his body now, so that he began to feel the raw, throbbing pain of his myriad bruises.

"You look like hell," a man's voice said.

Jim Kane forced his eyes to focus. Lou Rountree was sitting across the table from him, lounging in his chair as he always did, spilling gold eagles back and forth from one hand to the other. Through a painful grin Jim said, "You got me into that, you solemn devil."

Rountree's eyes were large, soft-looking, almost like a woman's. His face was lean and the skin always seemed tightly stretched across his broad forehead. "I did that? How?"

"Your idea, wasn't it, for me to take up a claim in Saber?"

"Oh, that. Well, it's still good range, and as much yours as anybody's. Are you going to let them stop you?"

"No." The word came automatically; it was spoken before Jim Kane thought about it.

But now a sense of futility swept through him. He had been through something like this before, although it had ended differently, down in Texas. A man who tried to carve out something for himself, something that would be his alone, always ran up against the greed of the big, established outfits. Down there they had handled him by resorting to charges of rustling. Jim Kane had gone to prison that time.

Here in Carrizo the L-Cross stomped its own snakes.

Lou Rountree had put his gold coins away. He leaned forward, smiling a little, tilting a watchful glance toward Jim. "What are you going to do about it?" he prodded.

JIM KANE shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "I'll have to buy more lumber, and now I owe Sam Apperson for that wagon they burned. I'll have to go back to work for him and forget Saber for awhile."

A man needed more than the will to fight, he was thinking. He needed something to fight with, and the big outfits always had that. Maybe failure was a thread that wove itself into the fabric of some men's lives and repeated its dark pattern again and again in everything they tried to do.

Lou shook his lean, handsome head, his slicked-back dark hair glinting faintly. "Don't quit now. I helped you before, Jim. Why not let me do it again?"

"How?" Jim asked, remembering that night in the Texas prison when Lou had awakened him to say in a guarded whisper, *Over the wall, bucko!* Somehow Lou had gotten everything greased that time. He had gotten keys and he had arranged for other prisoners to make a disturbance at the other end of the long cell-block. He had even gotten to one of the guards in one way or another; the guard had seen the two escaping prisoners go over the wall but had turned his back on them.

A buggy had been standing outside the wall, left there by someone who was visiting the warden. Rountree and Kane had used it, reaching the railroad just as a freight train stopped for water. They had ridden a hundred miles in that freight and then had changed to another one.

All that was two years in the past now. They had come here to the isolated Carrizo range and Jim had gotten a job riding for old Sam Apperson, whose Lazy J Diamond outfit lay on the west side of the basin. Lou had run a game here in the saloon for awhile; but he was clever, and for the past year he had owned the place.

He tilted his head to the girls now,

saying. "Get some cold water and a cloth, Tessie, and wipe the blood off him. Olga, fetch him a drink." He looked at Jim. "You're an all-right hombre," he said softly. "You're tough and you hit hard. But a man always knows what you'll do—you'll take the direct way every time, and not stop to look around for a better way. Let me do your thinking for you, Jim."

"Maybe you can think a way around L-Cross?" Jim jeered.

Lou Rountree's eyes nearly closed. "They'll be expecting you to do one or the other of two things now. Run, or go up to Saber and try to make a stand there. Don't do either. Never do what a man expects you to. Hit him with something different."

Jim scowled, looking at his hat which one of the girls had brought in and had placed on the table. He picked it up and knocked dust from it. "Hit him with what? I'm just one hombre, and I'm in debt to Sam Apperson now. I haven't even got a gun anymore—they took mine from me."

Lou smiled thinly. "L-Cross is like a fort. Hit it from the outside and you're battering your head against a wall. So get on the inside of it, bucko. Ride out there and get yourself a job. You're a top hand and Sam Apperson knows it. He's told Lamont—the ranchers get together and talk over such things. When they buy a good man for forty a month they crow about it."

JIM LAUGHED and then winced as pain stabbed along his jaw. "Hell, you're joking, Lou. Quinn would throw me off the spread!"

"Bypass him," Lou said patiently. "Don't give him a chance at you. Go directly to the old man himself—once he hires you, Quinn's stuck with you." Lou leaned forward again. "Quinn doesn't stand too well with Dade Lamont. And it's my guess that Lamont doesn't even know about you filing a claim on Saber Valley. He's got bigger worries on his hands. Quinn acted on his own, and hit you a lot harder than a man would say was necessary. Why? Because he knows his job is shaky and he's got his eye on that valley for himself. I've seen him riding around up there alone, a time or two."

Jim stared at Lou Rountree. Lou was an hombre who didn't smile much, always seeming thoughtful and yet relaxed and easy-going on the surface. He ran his saloon in an off-hand manner, finding time to take long rides out into the surrounding country. It had been Lou who had found Saber Valley and told Jim about the rich, unused graze up there. It was government land, open to homestead and well worth the risk of Dade Lamont's displeasure if a man took it."

Jim had expected that displeasure, but not the kind of trouble that Hap Quinn had handed him. And Lou, who was thirty-five and a wise one, might be right about this; a homesteader's ranch in Saber would be only a minor annoyance among all the troubles that faced old Dade Lamont on the L-Cross. Quinn might have gone ahead on his own.

That the foreman might want the high, well-watered range of Saber for himself was a new thought, and one that had solid footing. Things had gone badly on the L-Cross for more than a year now. Its ramrod might well have looked around for a place to jump to in case the final crash came.

"Well?" Lou was asking softly.

Jim shook his head. "Sounds crazy, me going out to L-Cross—"

"That's why Quinn won't be guarding against it. Get the job and you'll be right there on the L-Cross with him. You can put lead in him whenever you choose."

"You're wrong there, Lou. I don't want to kill any man, not even Hap Quinn. And he'd make things tough for me, even if I did manage to get on out there. No, it's not worth it."

"When did you ever dodge a little trouble?" Lou asked. "You're not the kind to take a thing like this lying down. Get him alone sometime when he hasn't got his buckos handy to hold you for him, and pay him back for what he did to you."

Jim felt a stir of dark interest now. The audacity of the move might put him on the L-Cross, all right. But he said, "How does that get me any closer to Saber? Working for Lamont I'd be—"

"You can be watching Quinn, can't

you? You can see that he doesn't get it. And maybe you can make a deal with Lamont, get him to renounce whatever claim he thinks he has to the Saber. You're a roughneck and he likes your kind."

"You seem to know a lot about him."

Lou Rountree drummed his fingers on the table. "I do," he said.

CHAPTER

2

Dade Lamont's Daughter

WHEN JIM KANE left the saloon he crossed the tracks and caught the wagon team. He picked up the trailing tugs and hooked them into the harnesses and then drove the animals to the O. K. Livery, where he told the hostler to take care of them for awhile.

His own saddler was out at the Apperson place, along with his bed-roll and gear. He had intended to unload the lumber up at his claim, which straddled the hilt of Saber Valley and thus would control all of the rich graze up there, and then to drive the empty wagon back to Sam's and pick up his property. But all that was meaningless now. The lumber and the wagon itself were a heap of smoldering ashes. The blaze had started a minor grass fire which the townsmen had stamped out. A couple of kids had been given wet gunnysacks and had been left to guard against a further outbreak of the fire.

Jim had thought first of taking the team directly to Apperson's, but that would have made it necessary for him to explain what had happened. Sooner or later that would have to be done, of course; but Sam Apperson's immediate reaction would be to offer Jim his old job back. And it would be awkward, turning down a kindly offer like that and at the same time explaining that he hoped to go to work for the outfit that had smashed his plans for a start in his own brand.

He rented a saddlehorse. It still seemed either plain crazy or mighty shrewd—he couldn't decide which—to hit the L-Cross for a job. But he would ride out there and try his luck. If the trip proved that Lou Rountree's guess was wrong Jim could always go

back to Apperson and ask to be put back on Lazy J Diamond pay.

At any other time Jim would not have considered Lou's scheme at all. But now he was remembering the way Quinn had had him held for that beating, and if it worked, it offered him if nothing else a way to get back at Hap Quinn...

When the livery horse was ready, Jim stepped into saddle and rode out, passing the little clapboard shack where Nora Moran had her cattle-buying office. Lame old Ben Scott, who helped her, was sunning himself in the doorway of the office, and lifted his grizzled, knowingly grinning head as Jim rode by.

Nora had gone down to Sage City on business, but Scott would be primed with news for her when she got back. The news would be a blow to her, and Jim wished that there was some way in which he could soften it.

Nora was the reason, mainly, for his wanting to get a start on his own. Nora was a slim alert girl of twenty-five, a girl who smiled a lot and was liked by everybody. Generally she'd been surrounded at dances and such by a crowd of eager young bucks and it had taken some genial shoving on Jim's part for him to get near to her. As the months flowed past they had turned to each other more and more; and with a feeling of wonder Jim Kane had realized that he was in love with Nora and she with him.

There was an understanding between them about Saber Valley. When some sort of a house was built up there, and when the range was stocked, they would be married.

Now that day had been shoved over the horizon of the future. But with it, another day had been shoved away. The day on which Jim Kane would have to tell her about Texas and the prison break. He should have told her long ago, he realized. But at first he hadn't been sure that she could be really interested in a tough-looking hombre like himself. And then—well, it had been easy to put the thing off when a man was busy with his work and with his plans.

He put the rented horse to a run, sweeping down the street and across the railroad tracks. Hoofs beat

a brief burst of sound on the bridge that spanned the river; and then Carrizo was behind him and he was on L-Cross range. Without thinking about it he dropped a hand to the gun that Lou Rountree had given him before he left the saloon, and found that it fitted well in his holster.

HE DIDN'T go directly to L-Cross headquarters, didn't follow the road which led up to the towering white-painted gates that Dade Lamont had built a mile or two downslope from his house. Hap Quinn might be watching that road, Jim thought. And so he circled in the foothills and approached the place from the rear.

He was following a cattle trail by which the stock came down from the hill range for water and salt when suddenly he reined up at the top of a rise.

In a grazed-off meadow below him a rider was having trouble with a horse. The animal was bucking savagely, its head down and its hoofs kicking up dust that swirled around the rider. But Jim's eyes caught the glint of sunlight on tawny hair that was longer than any man's. The rider was a woman. Twice, while Jim watched, she was nearly thrown. But each time she managed to recover and went on beating the horse with a quirt.

The bronc swapped ends, bucked again, and threw her. She landed asprawl, throwing her arms up to protect her head as the animal kicked at her and missed.

Jim Kane rode down there, dismounted and knelt beside her. "Hurt, ma'am?"

She lifted herself on one elbow, looking not at Jim but at the horse which now was standing a few yards away. "Darn hammerheaded devil!" she said. Then, seeming to become aware of Jim's presence for the first time, she brushed her hair away from her eyes. "I'm all right, mister. Help me up."

He helped her up. She wore an odd sort of outfit, for riding; a long skirt and a white silk blouse that had come partly unbuttoned in the spill. "Who're you?" she demanded.

"Jim Kane, lately of the Lazy J

Diamond. That horse looks like a rough-string bronc to me, ma'am."

"That's the kind I like. Oh, I should have been a man, I guess—I like a little danger now and then." She laughed silently. "You know who I am, cowboy?"

"I reckon so. You're Helen Lamont."

"Mrs. Helen Bowron," she corrected, with a touch of acid sarcasm in her voice. She gave her head a willful little jerk and smiled at him with full, pouty red lips. "You've heard about me then."

Jim Kane had heard about her all right. Old Dade Lamont's daughter had been discussed in the Lazy J Diamond bunkhouse as well as elsewhere on the Carrizo. She was twenty-four now; and the way the talk ran, she'd been a wild one even before she married Clyde Bowron. Her husband had been an ex-Army officer, looking for a business connection of some kind in the town. When he married Helen old Dade had made him manager of the L-Cross and Dade had spent a year in traveling.

It had taken less than the year for Bowron to bring the big outfit to the edge of ruin. There'd been big parties at the L-Cross house, money spent for useless things, and wasteful management. Bowron had been clipped in horse and cattle deals by his drinking and card-playing companions in the town. Dade Lamont had returned just a month ago and had taken over the ranch again. The talk said he had put Bowron on the run. Certainly the man had left the Carrizo. But his wife hadn't left with him.

"What are you doing up here?" she asked suddenly.

"Looking for a job," Jim told her.

She stood back a little, looking him over boldly, her tawny eyes frankly approving of him in spite of his rough looks. Or perhaps, he thought suddenly, because of them.

"You'll do," she said. "You look capable enough, and you must know the cattle business or Sam Apperson wouldn't have kept you on his payroll for two years."

"You know about me too."

She laughed, lifting her hands to tame her wind-blown hair. "Ranch-

ers talk among themselves about the good hands. And the no-good ones. Go get my horse. You can lead him, and yours too, while we talk down to the house." She rubbed her hip. "I've had enough riding for one day."

JIM KANE had never been in a house like the Lamont place before. The ceilings were high, their beams carved with complicated designs. The furniture and the rugs were rich-looking and there was a big piano that was laid flat instead of standing upright like the others Jim had seen.

Dade Lamont sat in a room that was decorated in another way entirely, with deer antlers on the walls—there were rifles laid across some of them—and rawhide-bottom chairs. A room that smelled of cigar smoke and good whiskey. There was a cluttered roll-top desk in here, and a look of masculine simplicity.

Lamont was a lean, weathered old man with a look of brooding fierceness about him. His eyes were set close together under bushy brows. They were a powdery blue color and they seemed to probe deep into his visitor as Lamont swung around in his swivel chair.

"Here's Jim Kane, Dad," Helen Bowron said. "He wants a job."

"Kane, eh?" Lamont said shortly. "Why see me about it? I've got a foreman who hires the hands."

"I don't reckon Hap Quinn would hire me. We tangled today."

"I see that he marked you. What'd you do to him?"

"Not a thing. He had me held while he did the job."

Lamont's eyes narrowed. "Why'd he do it?"

"Because he found out I was filing on a homestead up in Saber Valley." Jim was thinking, now, that he had made a useless ride out here. For once Lou Rountree had been wrong, totally wrong.

"Saber Valley," Lamont mused. "And why did you want it?"

"Good range up there, well watered. Enough timber so the cows won't winter-kill. There's never been a cow on it, and I figure any man's got a right—"

Lamont's bony hand lifted, stopping

him. "You've got a right to what you can hold. I've held Saber for thirty years."

"You haven't used it," Jim said. "Why hog something you don't need?"

Lamont's shaggy old head lifted in swift, angry reaction to that. But he was unpredictable; a faint smile toyed with his mouth and he glanced to his daughter, saying, "Speaks plain, don't he?" Helen Bowron went over to him and bent down whispering in his ear. He nodded, gave her a tolerant, knowing glance and said something to her in a low voice. Then, to Jim, "If I put you on, will you spend your time working or in trailing that damned fool Quinn, looking for a chance to get even with him?"

"I've always figured to earn my pay on any riding job."

"How'll I know you'll not try to find some way to take Saber?"

"You won't know that. Because I'll still be wanting it. But like I've said, I earn my pay. Keep me busy enough to keep my mind off Saber."

Lamont laughed, and the loud, boisterous sound of it filled the room. "All right, then. I like a man who speaks plain, and it happens I need top hands right now. We've been loaded up with too many of the other kind. I'll tell Quinn. He'll rawhide you from hell to breakfast, Kane, but that's your lookout."

When Jim Kane tramped out of the big house he was thinking that there was an uncanny sort of luck which attached itself to all of Lou Rountree's schemes. Lou had shrewdly figured what Dade Lamont's reaction might be; but it had been Helen's help that had gotten Jim the job.

It put a sour taste in a man, this getting a job largely because of some woman's interest in him. He was taking Helen Bowron's horse down to the rough-string corral when he glanced back to the house and saw that Helen had come out onto the porch and was watching him. She smiled at him in a way which seemed to indicate that there was some secret between the two of them.

He didn't smile back. She was trying to put matters on a personal ba-

sis, and in spite of the fact that she was a pretty woman he didn't want that. He had known a number of women like Helen Bowron at one time or another, but now the only woman he wanted was Nora Moran.

HE RODE the livery horse back to Carrizo, got the Lazy J Diamond draft animals out of the livery and barebacked it on one of them out to the Apperson place. Sam Apperson was away somewhere. Jim was grateful for that; he hadn't looked forward to telling Sam about the wagon, and then telling Sam that he was going to work for the L-Cross.

It was a thing that wouldn't seem to make sense. A wrong move, maybe. It was likely that Jim Kane was stepping into a hornets' nest this time. Cowhands were always quick to take notice of the interest of a boss' daughter in one of their number, and to find ways to make things tough for such a man. And Hap Quinn's virulent hatred was sure to be aroused by the way Jim had been hired over his head.

Quinn's position must be pretty shaky, Jim thought. Lou Rountree had been right about that. Quinn wasn't well fitted to his job; he was one of the hambres Clyde Bowron had hired during his period as ranch manager. And Lamont must have little use for the ramrod, else he would not have hired Jim as he had done.

If Lou Rountree had been right about all that he probably had been right about Quinn wanting Saber Valley for himself. Certainly there had been no other reason for the ramrod to be wandering around up there. In its present condition the L-Cross had no need for additional range.

Everything pointed toward one conclusion. Jim Kane and the ramrod were going to collide. And Jim was not going to dodge that. He would be a long time forgetting the beating that Quinn had given him. Jim was not one to carry a grudge, but when a man had another one held and pounded him as Quinn had done, it was a thing that rankled.

When Jim got back to the L-Cross it was late at night. He found an empty bunk in the long bunkhouse

and put his bedroll on it, and turned in.

The clamor of the cook's gong awakened him. It still lacked an hour of being daylight, and in the chill gloom the grumblng punchers were rolling out of their bunks and dressing, washing hurriedly at the bench outside and then stumbling down to the cookhouse.

Dade Lamont was an early riser too. He sat at the head of the plank table with Hap Quinn at his side. The old man hadn't bothered to put on a shirt, and his suspenders were pulled up over underwear that fitted snugly to his rawboned shoulders. As he ate he tolled off the day's jobs, pointing with his fork toward the men he wanted put on various tasks.

Jim Kane had the feeling that Hap Quinn didn't like the way Lamont was bossing every detail of the running of the ranch, giving his orders directly to the men. It undermined Quinn's standing with his crew, and that was a thing which would make any foreman touchy.

Quinn's massive body seemed to crouch down a little as he listened to Lamont's talk and nodded agreement from time to time. With a sort of rigid stubbornness the ramrod ignored Jim Kane's presence at the table.

After a time, Lamont got around to Kane. "Bettles can take Kane with him and go up to Hidden Creek," the rancher said. "They'll start on that horse job—Ed knows the kind of animals to cut out for the Army buyers. Ought to be twenty or thirty good ones in that bunch up there."

Quinn's broad jaw hardened now. He gave Jim one brief, murky glance and then looked away.

Every man in the room had been alert for that. They eyed Kane with a sharpening, furtive interest. There were no secrets on a ranch like this one, and each man knew that the situation promised violence. Only Til Withrow, who had held a rifle on Jim during the beating in Carrizo, dared to smile about it, though.

A bald, leathery looking little oldster who sat directly across from Jim Kane spoke up, saying, "Them horses are pretty wild by now. Maybe this

hombre don't savvy how to handle that kind"

The remark held a thinly concealed jeer. It said things that weren't in the words that had been used. It said that this Kane must be a ladies' man to get his job the way he had, and that he might be a free-rider who'd trade on his standing with the boss' family and be of little use when it came down to work.

Every man here must know about Helen Bowron, Jim thought. He had been seen with her when he came to the ranch. And that was confirmed when someone snickered and then quickly stifled the sound with an apprehensive glance toward Dade Lamont.

Jim laid down his fork. "I've worked horses," he said flatly.

CHAPTER

3

A Personal Question

WHEN BREAKFAST was over the crew started saddling the day's mounts. The wrangler brought Jim a blocky, half-broke roan that had a mean look about him. Aware of the watchful glances of the crew, Jim accepted the mount without question. He knew that this was only a small part of the raw-hiding that he would get on the L-Cross.

Ed Bettles came limping over to him, leading a saddler and a pack-horse. "Better get your bedroll, hombre," he said shortly. "We'll be up there four-five days."

Jim nodded, thinking that Dade Lamont had tolled him off for this job as a way of keeping him from Quinn for awhile.

But it didn't keep the ramrod away from Jim Kane this morning. When Jim came out of the bunkhouse with his bedroll under one arm he found Quinn waiting for him. The foreman's boots were spread apart and his face was like rock. Jim saw that every man down at the corrals had stopped whatever he was doing to watch and to listen to this.

Quinn glanced down at the gun that Lou Rountree had given Jim, and smiled thinly. Away from Dade Lamont's control the ramrod seemed a

different man, one who aimed to reassert his feeling of power and importance that had been shaken by Lamont's hiring of Jim Kane.

"Watch your step, hombre," Quinn warned. "I savvy how you got yourself hired—" He threw a wary glance toward the big white Lamont house. "If you've got some notion of gettin' even with me you can cut 'er loose right now!"

"Leave off guessing, Quinn."

"I ain't guessin'!" Quinn's black-gloved hand dropped to the stock of his gun. "The cook seen you ride in yesterday, seen who you had with you. You're a slick one all right, but I can handle you any time I want. Why not make it right now?"

Jim shook his head briefly. He couldn't see that a gunfight would prove anything. And in a fight of the other kind Quinn would have too many of his men handy, and they might help him as they had done before.

"It could be that I'm just broke and in need of a job," Jim said. "Any job I can get. It could be that I've learned a lesson."

"You're a damn liar!"

Jim's muscles tightened, but then he forced a shrug. "All right," he said carelessly, "so I'm a liar. Right now I'm just trying to do my job, though. Lamont won't like it much if you get in my way." Stepping past the ramrod, Jim went on down toward the corrals.

He could almost feel Quinn's wrathful glance upon his back as the foreman swung around to stare after him. Then he heard Quinn stamp angrily away.

That hombre was an impatient one. He had tried to force Jim into a showdown right here in the headquarters yard, and he had failed in that. He would try again.

Jim had never seen horses such as those which grazed along Hidden Creek. The place was high in the mountains, a big parklike meadow surrounded by aspens and evergreen trees, with rich grass. There was a blooded stallion with a harem of twenty-odd brood mares and a lot of colts of various ages.

All of them were wild; they'd been up here for years, Ed Bettles said,

with the busy L-Cross crew coming up only once a year to brand and geld the new colts. The stallion and the mares were fancy, blooded stock. Their colts were worth a lot of money, on the open market.

After making camp by the creek the two men set to work. They cut poles and fashioned a temporary corral in a grove of trees, and on the afternoon of the first day they started working the horses.

Bettles was old and stove-up, hardly able to handle the physical hard work of cutting out the wild geldings and hazing the chosen ones into the corral. But he was stubborn and he was shrewd. He tested Jim Kane without seeming to do so. Jim looked at a horse the oldster had put into the corral and shook his head. "Lamont said these were for the Army. That one won't do, Ed."

"Why not?" Bettles made a good show of it, scowling as if in puzzlement as he looked at the straight-backed, perfectly formed young horse.

"He's too tall. Fifteen hands two is the Army's limit, remember? Besides, he throws one front foot a little when he walks. Stiff joint, probably—he got hurt some time or other."

Bettles turned the horse out. And he thawed a little after that. By the time darkness came five sound, barrel-chested, blocky horses were in the corral. But the going would be harder from now on, since the rest of the herd had scattered into the hills and the stallion would move them farther away during the night.

At the campfire, Bettles talked a little. "The ol' man don't like to part with these horses. Always has used 'em to give the L-Cross the best mounts in the country."

"Why's he doing it, then?"

Bettles scowled. "Why does any man sell off somethin' he'd rather keep? Lamont needs money, needs it bad. These horses are a reserve bank account, like. An' now he's dippin' into it. All on account of that blame Bowron!" Taking his battered pipe from his mouth, Bettles spat into the fire.

"What happened to Bowron?" Jim asked.

"The ol' man run 'im off, soon's he

came back an' found out what'd been goin' on. I never seen a big outfit go downhill so fast. Bowron done everything wrong, sold stock he should of kept, kept what he should of sold. Got robbed every time he done business. Strutted around with his shined-up boots an' his ridin' crop, an' didn't know cow business from a shovel handle. Never got up till noon. An' them parties him an' Helen had at the house—" Bettles shook his head. "Everybody drunk, the women too, squealin' an' hollerin'. Devil of a thing, on a workin' ranch."

"Helen Bowron didn't leave when her husband did," Jim said.

Bettles gave him a sharply quizzical glance. "Maybe she was tired of the hombre. Maybe ol' Dade put it up to her plain—she could stay an' inherit the ranch, or leave with that no-good husband of hers an' inherit nothin'. Dade can be a rough one when he gets his back up."

HELLEN Bowron came up to the creek next day, bringing along some grub that wasn't needed. Jim had just put a horse into the corral and was replacing the gate-poles when she rode in. Ed Bettles, tucked by the morning's work, was resting in their camp nearby. But he got up, stamped over to his horse and rode away.

Helen wore a riding skirt and a simple yellow blouse today. She dismounted, untied the cords that held the well-filled flour sack behind her saddle and let it fall to the ground. Brushing back her wind-blown hair she turned to Jim, saying, "There's some grub in that sack. I thought you might be needing a little extra—catching these wild horses is real work, isn't it?"

Jim nodded and thanked her for the food, thinking at the same time that it would be just something more to lug back to headquarters when the job was finished. Bettles had brought plenty of chuck.

Helen gave him a pouty look. "You don't seem very glad to see me, mister. Hap Quinn was plenty mad about having you on the ranch. He threatened to quit, and Dad told him to go right ahead, that he could always hire a better foreman." She laughed a

little. "Hap backed down, but the look on his face was murder. Then Dad gave him hell for the way he beat you up down there in Carrizo."

"No need for him to do that," Jim said tautly. "That's between me and Quinn."

"So? You don't seem worried about it." She put her back to the corral poles and hooked her elbows on the top one, watching Jim Kane through lowered lashes.

Jim was a man; his glance fell to the shapely roundness that strained the thin cloth of her blouse. But he said, "Look, Mrs. Bowron, I've got work to do. Every one of these horses is worth a hundred and fifty dollars to your dad, when he gets them to an Army quartermaster. And I hear he needs the money."

She gave her head a little toss. It was the gesture of a willful, spoiled young woman who thought she was rich enough to dismiss the matter. It said that while the L-Cross might be in trouble now, it still owned the resources to be rich again. She glanced over her shoulder toward the bent figure of old Ed Bettles, just as it disappeared among the white-trunked aspens. "Don't let that old fool worry you, either," she said meaningly.

Jim looked at her. She was a beautiful woman and right now she was a brazen one, with invitation showing in the way she held herself and in the knowing curve of her smile. A woman who'd been married and had had her home broken up might have a different sense of values than the average woman. And Helen Bowron had been spoiled from the beginning. That was old Dade's fault, not hers.

It had always been Jim's way to meet things in a head-on, direct manner. And so he said now, "Mrs. Bowron, I'm just a hired cowhand and I aim to keep my place."

"My name is Helen. And I don't think you're completely a fool." She shoved herself away from the pole, stepped close to him. "I like a man who's got guts— I'm just like Dad that way, I guess. And it took guts for you to come out here for a job after the way Quinn slapped you down. But you must have known that you wouldn't have been hired if I hadn't spoken for you."

"I savvy that."

She drew a deep breath, her mouth tightening and her tawny eyes showing anger. "You'd better remember it, then. Oh, I know you, Kane. You've been pretty thick with that Nora Moran, down in Carrizo. Well, she isn't here on the L-Cross and she's not going to be, in spite of the way Dad keeps her in business."

"Why does he do that?"

She made a gesture of irritation. "Isn't it obvious? He and her father were close friends back in the old days, before the railroad came. Everybody sold cattle to Moran then, and he bunched them up and drove them to market. Now there's no need for a buyer anymore, since the ranchers can ship their own stuff. But Dad still sells through Nora Moran, for old times' sake he says. I call it a charity."

"Your husband didn't sell through her," Jim said.

Helen's eyes veiled. "No, he didn't."

"And he got gypped. Why didn't you go with him when he left here? Most women stick with their men."

"That's a personal question, Kane!" she said angrily.

"All right, it was. Forget that I asked it." Kane stepped into his saddle. "For a minute there I forgot to keep my place. It won't happen again."

She looked up at him with smoldering eyes. "You are a fool! You'd better remember one thing, Kane— I'm spoiled, headstrong, but I can change my mind in a hurry sometimes."

He smiled at her just a little, touched his hat to her and reined away.

As he rode out to overtake old Ed Bettles he was remembering how Helen Bowron had looked, and he wondered if she hadn't been right about him being a fool. Maybe she was more of a danger to him than Hap Quinn was. Quinn would be a hater, but he was more or less helpless now, with his authority taken away from him. And he didn't seem to be the back-shooting kind, though that was something no man could be sure about. Helen Bowron was another matter. She could have Jim fired in a moment, before he could make himself a stake and before he had a

chance to do anything about Saber Valley.

He wondered what had got into him today. Certainly he'd been no saint in the past, hadn't held back when he met other women like Helen. But now there was Nora Moran, and the plans they had made for their future together.

He swore softly as he entered the aspen thicket.

BY THE evening of the fourth day there were thirty-two acceptable horses in the corral. Nearly five thousand dollars, in money; and the Army paid spot cash for its remounts. Ed Bettles sagged down on his blankets, saying, "Jim, I'm beat. You better ride down to headquarters in the mornin' an' tell them we've got to have some help drivin' these wil' devils. They'll have to be shod down there, before they're taken to Fort McNary."

When Jim approached the ranch on the following morning he saw that Hap Quinn was talking with the Lamonts at the ranchouse porch. Jim rode up to them and said "Mornin', folks."

Quinn hauled around to face him with a scowl. "What you doin' down here?"

"We've got better than thirty horses ready. Ed is pretty stove-up, so we'll need help with the drive."

"Got 'em a'ready?" Quinn bit off the last word as if he wished he hadn't spoken like that. "Well, I can send a couple of the boys to help—"

"Send three," Helen Bowron said suddenly. "One to take Kane's place. Dad wants to get that Elk Creek line cabin rebuilt, the one that burned down. There's a shipment of lumber at the Carrizo station and Kane can go get it." She smiled meaningly. "He's hauled lumber before, I think."

Her father looked at her in evident surprise, but nodded. It seemed that she was needling Hap Quinn, but Jim wondered if there was more to it than that. It didn't seem like her to take such a close interest in the routine affairs of the ranch. It would be dark by the time he could get down to Carrizo and back out to the isolated cabin site. This might be her way of arranging a meeting.

If it was, she permitted no hint of it to show on her face.

An hour later, Jim Kane swung a big wagon out of the headquarters yard. Dade Lamont had decided at the last minute to ride along, saying that he had to catch the evening train on a business trip and that he didn't want to leave any L-Cross saddler in the questionable care of the livery.

As they drove along, Lamont talked. "I reckon you know what I'm up against, Kane. That pretty, no-good hombre my daughter picked for a husband damn near ruined me. Cashiered Army officer, he was—if I'd had sense that would have warned me. But I wanted to take it easy, retire, travel some. I always did like to see new country. What I found when I got back here..." He fell silent, chewing on his dead cigar. After a time he relighted it, smiling without humor. "That marriage was no damn good for her, an' I busted it proper. Told her she could go off with the skate an' live on what he could make, or she could stay with me an' some day own the L-Cross." He tilted back his head and made his boisterous laugh. "Didn't take her long to make up her mind!"

Jim glanced at Lamont, thinking that the hombre was like an old wolf, proud of his harsh successes.

After a time Lamont said, "Now I got to buckle down to business more'n I ever did. Quinn ain't much help. He's got no judgment, has to be told what to do about everything or he'll go hog-wild like he done with you."

There was a long stretch of silence, broken only by the heavy rumble of the wagon and the plodding hoofbeats of the team. Lamont broke it with, "I been thinkin' about Saber Valley. There was a time, when I was buildin' L-Cross, when I'd have run off any man that tried to set foot up there. Now I'm old, an' things look different. Even if I get this outfit back to what it was I'll have no use for that valley range. Homestead laws are pretty slack, Kane. You could put up a shack in Saber an' prove up on it while still workin' for me."

"Are you saying I can have the valley?"

Lamont gave him a sidelong look. "What the hell does it sound like?"

You ain't thick in the head like Quinn. What do you aim to do with Saber?"

"I'll throw a claim across the lower end of it. When I get some stock in the valley I figure I can hold all of it."

"Ain't a big place," Lamont warned. "You'll never run more'n a few hundred head up there."

"That's all I want, a decent living. I don't hanker to be big."

"Maybe you're wise, at that. A man can't get to be big without makin' enemies along the way. From then on they're always watchin' him, waitin' for signs of weakness. Give them a chance an' they snap like wolves, each wantin' a chunk off you...."

CHAPTER

4

A Thorough Job

IN CARRIZO, Jim let Dade Lamont off at the saloon and drove to the station platform. Loading the lumber from the platform into the wagon he smiled a little, thinking that he had done this before but that this time there wouldn't be any trouble.

He had finished with the lumber and was placing rolls of tarpaper and a keg of nails on top of the load when Nora Moran came across the street.

She was a slim girl, and not a pretty one exactly—not in the full-blown way that Helen Bowron was pretty. Nora had made her own way in a rough frontier town and she faced a man squarely and with no calculating, pouty look about her. And yet she was vitally alive, frankly eager for marriage with the man of her choice.

Jim jumped down and kissed her. Wondering, as he had done so many times, at the miracle that had led her to choose a rawboned, tough-looking hombre like himself.

His shirt was soaked with sweat and sticking to him in spots; but she didn't seem to mind that. She clung to him for a little and then drew back, smiling up at him. Her hair was black, and braided in a coil that lay around the top of her poised head. Her eyes were dark, and shining now with the excitement of their meeting.

"You're back early," Jim said. "I thought you said it would be a week."

"I was lucky. I found a buyer for

some of the L-Cross cattle. We'll ship next week. The market's down, but I got the best price I could."

"Dade Lamont's in town. Have you seen him?"

"Yes. He's pleased about the deal—he needs that money. Dade's in trouble, Jim."

"Yes, I know."

She scanned his face. "What's this I hear about you having trouble with L-Cross? And then going to work out there!"

He told her what had happened. Then, "I figured that since they'd burned my lumber I might as well get on their payroll so they'd be paying me back." He meant that as a joke, but got no smile from Nora in response. "It was Lou Rountree's idea," he added lamely.

"Jim, I know he's your friend. But I just don't trust him!"

"Oh, come off it, honey. Lou's all right. It's just that you don't like the business he's in."

"No, it isn't that. I've got the strangest feeling about all this. I woke up last night thinking about it, thinking that you were being led into something— Why would L-Cross hire you right after they'd burned your lumber?"

"Hap Quinn was the one that hit me. His own idea, I think. Maybe old Dade felt a little bad about it and hired me to make up for it. Then Quinn had to swallow that or quit. Dade doesn't think much of Quinn as a foreman anyhow—"

"Jim, let's get married right now! Today!"

HE STARED at her. "Honey, we can't. I lost my lumber and I owe Sam Apperson for his wagon. But Lamont says I can have Saber Valley. Maybe I can borrow some money from Lou for stock. In a year or two the increase would—"

"No!" she said fiercely. "We'll not borrow. I've got a little money and Jim, I—I'm tired of waiting. We can go on just like we are. I can live here in town and run the business till—"

"And I'd see you maybe once a month." He shook his head. "Somebody's hired man sneaking off to see his woman. That ain't any kind of

marriage. I'll have a house for you, and some way to support you."

"I've got some pride too! And Jim, I'm scared!"

"Of what? Honey, what's got you so upset?"

"I don't know." She bit her lip, looking up at him reproachfully. "But I—" Suddenly her mood changed, and she said, "Oh, let's not fight about it. When you get that load tied down, come over to the house. I'll fix coffee and something to eat."

She turned away from him and walked toward the little house where she lived. She held her head a little higher than usual, and her shoulders seemed stiffly erect.

Jim watched her go, and wondered if she had been thinking about Helen Bowron. He decided that she had. She had done business with the big outfit all through the years when her father had been ailing, and afterward. She would know Helen Bowron fairly well. And too, the other women in this town would talk about a woman like Helen, and Nora must have heard that talk.

When Jim went into her house Nora moved quietly about in the kitchen, placing coffee and food in front of him. Then she slipped into a chair opposite him.

He looked at her, thinking, *This is how it should be, the two of us together. But not here. It's got to be in a house of my own building and I've got to be making our way so she won't have to worry.*

She talked about everyday things, about the fancy carriage she had seen down in Sage City, about the dance that was going to be held in Carrizo on Saturday night. She talked about the cattle deal she had made. She'd had no business at all during the time Clyde Bowron had managed the L-Cross and now she had something to do again.

When Jim rose to leave he kissed her and patted her shoulder. She looked up at him with a sadness tugging at her lips and she said, "Forget the way I blew up at the depot. I—I was thinking crazy, I guess. I won't throw myself at you again, won't try to rope you into something you don't want."

"Nora, don't talk like that," Jim

said tightly. "You know how bad I want you. Things look pretty black right now but we'll change them. I'll get some stocker cattle on Saber, somehow. And I'll get more lumber." He shook her a little, smiling down at her. "If you can trust me around Helen Bowron for awhile, till I can earn a stake—"

"Helen?" Nora frowned. "I hadn't thought of her. It's Lou Rountree I don't trust! He pushed you into Saber, and now he's pushed you into this, and Hap Quinn may kill you!"

"No, he won't. He'll sulk and stomp but that's as far as it'll go."

When Jim left the house and crossed the street to the wagon his mind was filled with a vague uneasiness that had been prodded into life by Nora's mention of Lou Rountree. And he wondered if his rejection of her offer of immediate marriage hadn't been prompted by something more than he had suspected at the time. Before that marriage could take place he would have to tell her about Texas, about the prison break that Lou had arranged.

He still was putting that off. In Nora Moran he had found something that was precious to him, something he didn't want to lose.

He still might lose her when he told her. That was the reason for his fear. And he had been unfair to her all along, in keeping the secret from her.

The next time he saw her he would tell her. He climbed onto the wagon, a big, rough-looking man with shadowed worry in his face, and whipped up the team.

THE ELK CREEK line cabin had been located in a pretty, wooded spot in a bend of the stream. It was a heap of ashes now, with dark, charred rafters projecting upward into the moonlight. Jim Kane had heard that some puncher had gotten drunk in there and had upset a lamp.

He stopped the wagon under the trees and wound the lines around the brake handle. He untied the load, tossed the tarpaper rolls and the keg of nails to the ground and began unloading the lumber.

He was halfway through the job when a voice said, "Get down off there, Kane."

Hap Quinn was standing at the side of the wagon, his broad face twisted by a half-smile of anticipation. One black-gloved hand rested on the stock of his sixgun. He had been lurking down by the creek-bank somewhere, Jim thought at once, and had come up here very quietly.

Jim straightened, glancing swiftly around. Quinn was alone. "Walk soft, Hap. You haven't got anybody to hold me for you this time."

"Get down."

Jim jumped from the wagon. He had known all along that this would come, and now the smoldering anger within him almost welcomed it.

Quinn struck him at once, with the wicked energy of a powerful, suddenly released spring. Jim's head was flung to one side and he was momentarily dazed by the blow. Quinn shoved in closer as Jim staggered, and the foreman's big fists pounded Jim's body.

Jim struck back and found that there was a rocklike quality about the hombre. Quinn's boots were placed firmly on the ground and his body was massive and solid, absorbing Jim's blows without seeming to be shaken by them at all.

Quinn was no fancy fighter. He didn't need to be. It seemed that nothing could hurt him much. And his blows were shaking up Jim Kane, punishing him.

Jim knew that the foreman aimed to do a thorough job on him this time, maybe even kill him. That was in Quinn's eyes now, and in the fixed grin that bared the clenched teeth between which his strained breathing hissed. Jim knew what had been bothering the man. Quinn had been humbled in front of his crew, had been forced to take on a rider they all knew he didn't want. Probably there was fear in him too; he had expected that Jim would be out to get his revenge and no doubt he had worried about getting a bullet in his back.

There was no point in meeting the hombre on his own terms, though. Quinn had the advantage of twenty pounds of weight and his massive arms were longer than they looked. Jim sidestepped, dodged. Quinn missed with a looping blow and threw

him off balance. Jim struck quickly, dodged away again.

"Damn you!" Quinn panted. "Stan' still!" He lunged, clamped his arms about Jim in a bearlike hug, pounded Jim's back. "You ain't ever gonna get Saber, damn you!" he panted. "That's mine, savvy?"

So that was it, Jim thought distantly. Lou Rountree had been shrewdly correct after all. Quinn planned to take Saber for himself. His telling Jim about that was proof that he meant to kill Jim here.

The blows on Jim's back sent agony writhing through him. But he heard a new sound, the thudding of a horse's hoofs as the animal came in at a fast run and then stopped. A rider was watching the fight now. Someone who wore a white shirt, which was an odd sort of garment for a cowpuncher.

But it wasn't a puncher. The white garment was a silk blouse. The rider who was avidly watching in the moonlight was a woman.

It was Helen Bowron.

JIM WRENCHED free of Quinn's crushing grip. He dodged, struck, dodged again. Quinn strove to follow him, lunging with a violent fury, his breathing making hoarse gasps of sound. The hombre was wearing himself down as he lunged and struck and missed, only to be jarred by Jim's blows. Quinn's age was beginning to tell. His legs were giving out and he staggered a little.

Jim's fists remained cocked, lashing out whenever the chance came, connecting solidly and then snapping back to the cocked position again. Quinn was bleeding now, from a cut over one eye. He shook his head savagely as if to clear his vision and rushed, chopping down at Jim's head with clublike fists.

Evading that, Jim circled, stalking the man coldly. Quinn swung jerkily around like some tortured animal groping for a way to fight off its tormentor. Jim found his opening and closed in, hammering both fists to the foreman's body. Quinn struck back in a frenzy, but his blows had lost their force now.

And still the ramrod wouldn't go down. Jim pounded him, wondering if his energy would last long enough

to beat down that stubborn, massive body.

Quinn's arms fell to his sides. He swayed helplessly, slack-faced, breathing in broken gasps. Jim struck that broad jaw, struck it again. With a sort of heavy finality Quinn twisted around and fell to the ground.

Jim leaned against the tailgate of the wagon, gulping air, trying to control the waves of weakness that ran through him. After a time he pushed himself away from the wagon and looked up at Helen Bowron.

She still sat her horse, her tawny eyes watching him with an unreadable expression. Then suddenly her glance flicked away from him and she screamed.

Jim spun back, knowing that she was looking toward Quinn. And he saw that the foreman had lifted himself with one elbow and was pulling his six gun from its holster.

What happened then was swift, automatic, done without thinking, as it had to be. Quinn's face was contorted with hatred and his gun was clearing leather. Jim Kane had to beat that gun in order to live. He drew and fired.

The bullet struck Quinn an instant before the foreman triggered. Quinn's shot went wild; the ramrod's thick body was slammed back by the impact of Jim's lead. Quinn writhed, rolled over, tried to lift his gun again and failed.

He fixed his eyes not upon Jim Kane but upon Helen. "Damn schemin' hussy!" he said haltingly. "You got Kane hired an' now he's done me." A spasm of agony contorted his face and he fell back, and he didn't speak again.

Jim did what he could for the L-Cross foreman. But ten minutes later Hap Quinn was dead. Jim rose slowly to his feet, shaken by this, thinking that he had been trapped into something that was against his nature. He hadn't wanted to kill any man, not even Quinn, but there had been no other way out. There had been no time to take careful aim at the foreman's gun arm, or anything like that.

Helen Bowron was standing beside Jim now. She turned away, covering her face with her hands. Not knowing

what else to use, Jim broke open one of the rolls of tarpaper and covered Quinn's body with it.

"Get his horse," Helen said without looking at Jim Kane. "It's down there by the creek—I saw it when I rode in. Leave the team here, Kane, and take me home."

It was nearly midnight when he helped her from her saddle at the porch of the L-Cross house. She hadn't spoken during the ride; the sight of death had left her shaken and subdued.

"You'll have to go to the sheriff at once, Kane," she said now.

Jim nodded. It was a thing that had to be done and yet he knew the danger of it. An escaped convict who got himself involved in a killing, no matter how innocently, would thus attract to himself the attention of the law. Texas was far away, yet not too far for an inquiring lawman to obtain information from there.

A naked fear touched Kane's nerves. He should ride out of here—He stifled the thought. To run would mean giving up his hopes for a future, for Nora and himself. Further, it might damn him in the eyes of the law, in spite of the fact that Helen Bowron had witnessed the killing and would testify that it had been done in self-defense.

Or would she? Kane looked at her sharply, wondering what she would do now.

She had stepped onto the porch but she paused there, looking back at him. "One thing more, Kane," she said.

"Yes?"

She drew herself up a little, some of her sulky assurance returning again. "Dad's away, so I'm in charge of L-Cross for the present. You're to be foreman, Kane. Take over in the morning."

He was startled by that. He scowled, thinking that the crew wouldn't much like it if a man went from new hand to foreman at one jump. Especially not right after he had killed Quinn. "I don't know about that—" he began doubtfully.

"Don't be a fool! Dad knows you're the kind of man we need. He talked about it. And we can't just let things come to a stop until he gets back. Not the way things are, we can't."

She was right about that. With the L-Cross ranch in bad shape every day counted.

Jim looked at her with a flicker of admiration. Whatever romantic notions she'd had tonight had been jolted out of her. Now, with Dade Lamont gone, she was taking hold. It revealed that she had some streak of the old man's nature in her after all. Jim nodded slowly, touched his hat, and went back to the horses.

CHAPTER

5

Jim Kane: Foreman

THE SHERIFF of Carrizo County was one of those lawmen who sit in the sun on Saturday mornings, aiming to be seen and to nod smilingly to all the riders who come into town. Soft living had put a belly on him and he had a politician's carefully maintained blandness of look. But his eyes took on a sharpening coldness as he listened to Jim Kane's story.

The sheriff's name was Max Varney. He was around fifty, with a pink face and a white mustache—old enough to be wary, yet still young enough to be vigorous. Jim's hammering on his door had finally awakened him and now he stood in his parlor, pulling his suspenders up over his underwear and calling for his wife to bring him a shirt.

If the foreman of the L-Cross had been killed, Varney was interested all right. He said, "We'll go right out there, before the coyotes get at him. I've got a buckboard out back, and horses in the stable. You could hitch up for me while I get dressed, Mr.—" He paused, watching Jim's face.

"Kane. Jim Kane, like I told you."

"Yeah." The sheriff made his bland smile. "Jim Kane." He seemed to be cementing that name in his mind.

It was dawn when they returned to Carrizo with the body of Hap Quinn lashed to the back of the buckboard. They awakened Doc Treadwell, who was the town's undertaker as well as its physician, and left the body with him. "Look him over careful, Doc," Varney said. "I'll want a report."

In the Varney home the sheriff's gray-haired wife fixed a breakfast for the two men. Varney asked no

questions during the meal. But once it was over he took Jim to his office down the street, and once there he was all business. He laid Hap Quinn's gun on the desk and asked slyly, "Ever have any trouble with Quinn before?"

"You know mighty well I did. It was right here in town."

Varney shrugged. "I was away that day. I heard that Quinn beat you up and burned a wagon and a load of lumber that you had."

"That's right."

"The talk said that it had something to do with a homestead claim that you'd staked out up in Saber Valley."

"It did."

"Why didn't you file charges against him?"

Jim shrugged. "Quinn was L-Cross," he said simply, knowing that the sheriff would know his meaning. The law wouldn't normally bother a big outfit that controlled a lot of votes.

Varney's smile took on a gentle, reproving sarcasm. "You weren't mad, then. In fact you were so friendly with L-Cross, in spite of a good beating, that you went to work out there with Quinn as your boss." He leaned back in his swivel chair. "Don't feed me that, Kane. You went after him and you got him."

Jim pointed to the gun. "You've got Quinn's iron. It's been fired."

"But was it fired first? Or afterward, by you, to make things look right?"

"Ask Mrs. Bowron."

The sheriff sighed and picked up his hat. "All right, you've got a witness. We'll go see what she says."

HELEN BOWRON'S face was pale when the two men tramped into the high-ceilinged hallway of the L-Cross house. She had put on a severely plain dress and had tied her tawny hair back from her face.

"Like to talk to you a minute, Mrs. Bowron," Varney said. "Alone, if I might."

"Wait in the parlor, then." She opened a door. "Mr. Kane is our foreman now and I've got to talk to him for a minute about ranch business."

The sheriff gave Kane a narrow-

eyed, lingering glance. "Stick around close, Kane," he said softly. Then he tramped into the parlor.

Helen Bowron tilted her head commandingly and led Kane down the hall a few steps. "You are foreman, aren't you?" she asked, turning to him.

"I don't reckon I'd better take that job. Right now it would make things look like I'd killed Quinn to—"

"I think you'll take it. I can go in there and tell that potguttied Varney that you disarmed Quinn in the fight and then shot him in cold blood. I can tell any story that suits me. I'm Dade Lamont's daughter and you're just a puncher who drifted in here from somewhere—Varney'll believe me." Her face softened and she stepped close, putting a hand on Jim's arm. "Don't make me do it to you, Kane. The ranch needs you—there's been trouble already."

"What kind of trouble?" he asked thinly.

"Those horses that you and Ed sorted out for the Army contract, Kane. They're gone. The men that Quinn sent up there found the corral open and your camp trampled. Ed Bettles had been struck on the head and all the horses had been driven off. Scattered into the hills, maybe. Or stolen."

Jim's mind worked swiftly. Those horses had represented a lot of money. They were tempting bait for thieves who dared to hit an outfit that was as big as L-Cross. But there weren't too many thieves, he thought, with courage of that sort. "Who did it?" he asked.

She shrugged. "You're the foreman, Kane. You find out."

"How's Bettles? Where is he now?"

"They brought him down to the bunkhouse. He's not too badly off. I've told the crew that Quinn is dead and that you're the foreman now. Put them to work. And find those horses."

She gave him a tiny smile and stepped past him, walking unhurriedly to the door of the parlor where Varney waited.

Jim watched her go. A tightening despair pushed breath out through his nostrils. She hadn't asked again if he would take the foreman's job. She

hadn't thought it necessary. There was a subtle triumph in the way she held herself and it said that she was sure of her power over Jim Kane now.

When he passed the corrals on his way to the bunkhouse he saw that the cowhands were loitering in groups down there, talking among themselves in low voices as they watched him. Inside the bunkhouse he saw that more men were clustered at the far end of the long room, some of them standing and others sitting on the edges of the bunks. They had been smoking and talking in the relaxed manner of men who were taking it easy, but a silence fell as Jim approached.

Ed Bettles lay in his bunk, a bandage on his grizzled head and a wry smile on his face. Jim said, "How you feeling, old-timer?"

"Fuzzy. They hit me right after you left, Jim—they must of been watchin' us all the time, waitin' for us to get the horses sorted out for 'em. Four of 'em rode into the meadow, all masked, an' I got up an' hollered at 'em. But another one had sneaked around behind me an' he gun-whipped me. That's the last I remember till the boys got there."

Jim shoved his hat back and looked at the punchers. "What jobs were you hombres on yesterday?" he demanded. And without waiting for answers he went on, "Same jobs today. If it was something you finished find something else. Tell the others down by the corrals. I want every man out on the range in ten minutes."

THE KNOWING, smirky expressions with which they had regarded him were wiped away. The habit of obedience was a strong one; they trooped out of the building.

They would be doing a lot of thinking, though. Cowhands were an unhurried lot, given to turning things over in their minds, and they had a strong streak of independence. A man could tell them what to do but never what to think. They knew that Helen Bowron was responsible for the job here and undoubtedly they knew that she had gone up to the horse pasture to see him. They'd be envying him and hating him for what they thought was

his good luck. And he had killed Hap Quinn. They would hate him for that too, not so much out of any regard they had for Quinn but on account of their instinctive dislike for a man who was ruthless in his methods of getting ahead.

Jim Kane was going to have to be careful in his handling of that crew.

He stayed with Ed Bettles for awhile, talking to the old man without letting the puncher know that he was trying to determine whether Bettles was hurt badly enough to need the doctor. After a time he decided that Bettles would be all right, and left the corrals. Varney was down there, talking to them. Jim didn't interfere in that, but went to the cookhouse and told the cookie to fix some soup and take it to Bettles and to spend as much time as he could with the old man during the day.

When he tramped out of the cookhouse he found Varney waiting at the stoop. The cowhands were riding out now, not hurrying about getting to their jobs. The sheriff mopped his pink brow and looked up at Jim with-out expression.

"Satisfied?" Jim asked meaningly.

"So far. I'm making some progress, I reckon. I've found out who got you this job in the first place, Mr.—" Varney paused.

"You tried to trip me like that before, remember?" Jim said roughly. "The name's still Kane, like it always was."

"Yeah... Kane. Always surprises me some when a tough-looking jigger like you turns out to be a lady-killer. But a man never can tell which way a lady's preference will swing. I found out who gave you this foreman job so sudden, too. Your witness, Kane, is being mighty nice to you."

"That doesn't change a damn thing, Varney."

"Maybe it don't. In the long run, though, maybe it does. A man plods along, finding out one thing at a time, and eventually they all tie together. Right now I aim to talk with the cook. Any objections to that?"

Jim stepped aside. "Go ahead. But here's something you might want to look into. Some masked hombres stole a bunch of L-Cross horses—"

Varney held up a hand. "I heard about that from the crew. You wasn't there when it happened, and it's *you* I'm interested in right now." The sheriff gave Jim a hard, forbidding look. "Don't try to get me off the track with that other stuff, Kane. I'm a one-thing-at-a-time hombre and that horse business will have to wait. If the Quinn killing was like you claim it was, you've got nothing to worry about. If it wasn't, I'll find that out sooner or later."

The sheriff mounted the cookhouse steps, then seemed to remember something and stopped. "Better ride into town tomorrow morning, Kane. There'll be a hearing at ten. And—" He mopped his brow again. "I wouldn't try to ride out of the valley if I was you."

JIM PUT in a long day riding over the L-Cross, getting the pattern of the outfit and its work fixed in his mind. What he found shocked him. Evidences of the mismanagement of Bowron and Quinn were everywhere on the big spread. Herds were mixed, calf-branding had been let slide, wind-mills were in bad repair.

It was long past supper when he returned to headquarters. He ate in the kitchen of the cookhouse amid the clatter that the cook made at his dish-washing. Finished with the meal, Jim went directly to his bunk.

In the morning Helen Bowron came down from the big house, dressed in a blouse and riding skirt. "I'm to be at the hearing," she told Jim Kane. "Saddle a horse for me."

She spoke but little during the ride to Carrizo. Quinn's death had made her solemn. And responsibility had laid its weight on her, and maybe that was good. It busied her with something other than her own willful plans.

"What have you done about those horses?" she asked as they neared the town.

"Nothing," Jim admitted frankly. "I wanted to see how things were with the ranch, and I found they're plenty bad. I hate to take men off other work and send them chasing through the hills, but I reckon we'll have to."

"See that you do. If somebody robs L-Cross and gets away with it, others will get the same idea."

It still lacked an hour till hearing time when their horses clopped across the bridge at Carrizo. Helen said that she wanted to do some shopping; and so Jim left her at the mercantile while he went on to Lou Rountree's saloon for a drink.

Lou sat at his usual table in one corner of the big, cool, gloomy room. Several men whom Jim did not know were gathered at the far end of the bar. Men with a wary, tough look about them. Jim gave them a slow look as he ordered a beer. Then, with the drink in his hand, he went over to Lou's table and sat down.

Lou smiled, spilling his gold eagles from one hand to the other. His eyes held a strange, fevered glitter today. "I hear you're foreman of the L-Cross now," he said softly.

"News gets around sudden," Jim said. "Did you happen to hear who it was that put on masks and stole some L-Cross horses?"

The tinkle of the coins stopped. Lou leaned forward a little, saying, "Leave those horses be, Jim. Don't go after them."

Jim stared at him, putting down the glass without looking at it. "Why not?"

Lou didn't answer that directly. "It's beautiful," he breathed. "Beautiful. We've got the old wolf cornered. With you running his ranch for him we can—"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Lamont." Lou Rountree shoved his coins into a pocket of his vest and straightened in his chair, an exultant smile playing about his mouth. "We're going to knock him over. Forget about Saber Valley, Jim. In six months you'll own half of L-Cross!"

CHAPTER

6

Wanted in Texas

A NUMBER of things stirred darkly in Jim Kane's mind now. He was remembering the way he and Lou had gone over the wall of the Texas prison. The whole escape had come off smoothly; it was as if they had moved down grooves

that had been greased by Lou Rountree's shrewd forethought.

Since coming here to Carrizo things had gone along well enough for both of them until the recent sudden shifting had put Jim Kane on the edge of trouble. Lou had seemed to coast along with his saloon, finding time to take his long horseback rides into the surrounding country. Jim had been busy with his tasks on Sam Apperson's spread, and with his plans for a future here. The sort of future that every man wanted; a place of his own, the woman he loved, and some day a son or two. A man's preoccupation with that tended to push back all thoughts of the past.

The charges on which Jim had been convicted in Texas hadn't been very serious ones. Simple rustling wasn't regarded as much of a crime anymore. His term had had only a year to run at the time of his escape. And as Lou Rountree had pointed out, Carrizo was far from Texas and it wasn't likely that the authorities down there would go to the expense of searching far.

Neither Jim nor Lou had bothered to change his name. But now, with the killing of Hap Quinn hanging over his head, Jim wished that he had.

Too, he was remembering the things that Nora had pointed out to him. Lou had steered him to Saber Valley. And it had been Lou who had nudged Jim, in the heat of his anger over the beating Quinn had given him, into going out to L-Cross.

Nora had said, *I don't trust him!* Maybe a woman's intuition was wiser in sensing things than a man could be.

"Put your cards on the table, Lou," Jim said softly.

Rountree smiled around the cheroot he was lighting. "We've been pard for quite awhile, Jim. You're a simple sort of cuss—" He lifted a hand as if to block an expected retort. "I don't mean that you're stupid, just that you're *direct* about everything you do, a hard-hitter who decides on what he wants and then goes after it without looking around much. I'm a little different.

"You'll savvy in a minute. We didn't come here just because Carrizo was a good place for us to hole up. We came

because Dade Lamont was here, and I wanted at him."

Jim had a shaken feeling now, one of growing awe. "Get on with it, Lou."

"A man doesn't get to be as big as Lamont is, as fast as he did, without stepping over the line now and then. He needed money, a lot of it, and he got it. He needed cattle and he got them. He was careful about it, all right. Up here he maintained a respectable front. Elsewhere he was a thief, a rustler who got away with things other men didn't dare tackle, and he got away fast and clean. Once he jumped a whole trainload of rustled cattle, switched the cars and shipped them up here, telling it in Carrizo that he'd bought the cattle somewhere. The hombre who'd done the work of getting those cattle never did find out where they went to."

"Lamont was smarter than they were," Jim said.

"He was, but he's old now. I've studied that hombre for years—I had reason to. I was working as a sort of bookkeeper for a new outfit down in Texas, a British syndicate that was starting up a big ranch and aimed to buy a lot of cattle to stock it. They figured to pay in cash because the sellers were uneasy about dealing with foreigners. The night before the delivery of the cattle, some boys broke into the office and emptied the safe."

"You told them the money was there," Jim said.

"All right, I told them. We were to meet well away from the ranch to make the divvy—at the forks of a river it was, under some big trees. Dark as hell in there. Well, a bunch of tough hombres moved in on us, shot our horses so we'd be left afoot and caught by the law, and took the money. Nobody recognized anyone, and we'd never heard of Dade Lamont then. But he got the money. On his way out he told the law where we were. Then he rode off laughing, damn him. We couldn't identify him. Our story wasn't believed, even though the money wasn't found. The law figured that someone who'd been in it with us crossed the rest of us up."

"So you came here to get even with him," Jim said.

The skin on Lou Rountree's broad

forehead seemed more tightly stretched than ever, glinting a little as he nodded. "To get even, yes. Lamont never got a look at me. To him I was one of the boys he'd hoodwinked and it wasn't likely he paid any attention to names even if he'd heard them. But when I got here and saw the L-Cross I figured to get a little better than even. Why not take the outfit? It's the kind of trimming Lamont's had coming to him for a long time. We'll be fixed for life. You can live in style, dress that girl of yours in silks and buy her a carriage to drive around in. Take the L-Cross house for yourself, Jim—I don't want it."

"That'll be legal airtight. Lamont has borrowed a lot of money since he came back here, to meet operating expenses. There're a lot of his notes in the bank. He doesn't know it, but I've bought all that paper. He's in a fix for money, else he wouldn't have tried to sell those horses. We've got that stopped. He's making a deal to market some cattle—as his foreman, you can stop that. Scatter them, see to it that only the no-good stock that Bowron bought gets bunched in the gather, do anything you want. When Lamont can't meet his notes as they come due, we've got him."

JIM KANE stood up. "Count me J out of it, Lou."

"You're forgetting something, bucko," Rountree warned. "You're Jim Kane, remember? Wanted in Texas. And Varney's interested in you, since you gunned Quinn. He was in here first thing this morning, asking questions about you. A word dropped to him would—"

"Walk careful, Lou. You're wanted too."

Rountree shrugged. "I can buy my way out now. You can't afford that expense, can you? And you won't call me on it—you wouldn't want Nora Moran to know about you, eh?"

A jolted, sick feeling washed through Jim Kane. A man's life might be a series of battles that he fought for things that didn't really matter so much—a job, the welfare of the ranch he rode for—but when he found something that really was precious to

him he found it hard to let go of his hopes.

Angrily he dropped a hand to his gun. "Damn you, Lou—"

Rountree tilted his head only slightly, toward the men at the end of the bar. Jim glanced at them and saw that they had spread out and that their guns were in their hands, up-tilted and ready.

He let his breath run out, shaking his head.

"I've got you, bucko," Rountree said. "Make up your mind to that and do as you're told."

Outside in the warm sunlight Jim Kane moved along the walk with a slow unsteady step. All this seemed like a bad dream. He wondered if Lou Rountree wasn't a little crazy, driven first by a desire for vengeance and now by simple greed. A man who was a little bit crazy could be more dangerous than a sane one, though. There was nothing holding him back, no loyalty, no scruples...

The hearing was held in the tiny Carrizo courthouse, and it was a cut-and-dried affair attended only by those directly concerned, by a few idlers, and by Nora Moran. Jim looked at her face searchingly when he walked in; she made a strained little smile and motioned for him to sit beside her. But Sheriff Varney called to him and he went on down the aisle to sit inside the railing with the lawman, Doc Treadwell, and Helen Bowron.

The doctor was a wizened, morose-looking little hombre. His dry voice droned on and on as he read from a paper, telling at which angle the bullet had entered Quinn's body and what damage it had done. Then the sheriff got up and questioned first Jim Kane and then Helen Bowron.

That was about all there was to it. The sheriff picked up all the papers and carefully tied a string around them, saying, "Quinn had folks in Denver, and they're coming for the body. No charges for the present."

Jim got up, saw Nora Moran slip hurriedly from the room, and started up the aisle. The sheriff stopped him at the door. "Like I told you at the ranch, Kane, don't try to leave the valley."

"You're not through with me yet, is that it?"

"Not by a damned sight!"

Jim paused on the porch, building a smoke. Helen Bowron came out of the building and went to her horse at the hitchrack, and stopped there to look back toward him expectantly. But he glanced at Nora's slim figure, moving briskly along the walk toward her house, and he said, "There's something I've got to do before I leave town, Mrs. Bowron. If you'd wait a minute of two—"

"I know the way home." Helen pulled the reins from the rack, stepped into her saddle and looked down at him briefly. Then she wrenched the horse around and rode out of town at a headlong gallop, hoofs drumming only briefly on the bridge.

Jim caught up with Nora at her porch. "It was like I told it," he said. "I had to kill him, Nora."

"I know. All this must be hard on you. But you wouldn't lie about it."

His throat tightened. "Nora, forget about me," he said roughly. "I'm no good. I didn't lie about Quinn but I've lived a lie ever since I came here. I'm no good for you, no good for—"

She looked at him with a strange calm. "Come inside, Jim, and tell me."

SHE SAT in a straight-backed chair, her hands folded and quite motionless in her lap, while she listened to it. He told her all of it, from the very beginning in Texas up until now. "You see," he told her when he finished, "I've cheated you. I should have told you, but—"

"I know. I've known all along that there was something. You kept holding it back— Jim, what are you going to do about Rountree?"

"What can I do?" he asked crookedly. "I'll keep going until Lamont gets back and then I'll warn him. He'll fire me but that's all right. I don't care what he's done in the past, I'm on his pay now and I owe him the warning. Whatever I owed Lou Rountree is done with, wiped out by the way he's schemed to use me."

"He'll have you killed," Nora said in a hushed voice.

"Maybe he will. Forget me, Nora." She looked at him with moisture

glistening in her eyes. "You think it's that easy? What kind of woman do you think I am?" She got up and came to him, looking down into his face. "Jim, tell Varney about Rountree. It's his duty to—"

"No." Jim shook his head savagely. "He's stubborn enough to say I was just trying to divert his attention from me. And he'd throw me in jail on escaped-prisoner charges as a way of holding me. Maybe Lou's got his hooks into Varney too, for all I know—that seems to be the way he works. No, I've got to work the L-Cross till Lamont gets back. There's a lot to be done out there and I can't do it if I'm thrown in jail."

"Jim, watch out for Til Withrow. I've seen him ride into town, nights when I couldn't sleep and sat here at the window. It was always late, long after Rountree's place had closed, but Withrow went there."

That, Jim thought, might be the way in which Lou Rountree had learned so quickly about the happenings out at the L-Cross. "I'll watch him," he promised.

They talked a little more. Nora said that she might, by sending telegrams to several cities, be able to reach Dade Lamont. She said that she would try. She stood on tiptoe and she kissed Jim Kane, begging him to be careful.

As he rode away from the town Jim thought that it might have been easier for them both if Nora had done as he had suggested, and had started right then to forget him. All his worry about losing Nora when she learned about his past had been for nothing. She was sticking by him—and maybe that was worse than losing her. He had the feeling of a man in quicksand all of his struggles drawing him deeper. And if he went down now he would pull Nora with him.

There was one more thing, too. If the L-Cross went down, Nora's cattle-buying business would go with it.

Helen Bowron was waiting by the corrals when Jim rode up to headquarters. She didn't mention Nora. "Kane," she said, "Dad told Quinn to cut out all the shipping beef he could find and bunch it for a drive to the

loading pens. He figured that we should have better than a thousand head. On the way back from town I swung out through the range and found that Quinn hadn't made much of a start at it. See that it gets done."

Jim whistled silently. A thousand cattle—thirty thousand dollars at present beef prices—should pull the L-Cross out of its hole. But he said, "How about those horses? You wanted me to—"

"Better let them go," she said, interrupting him impatiently. "We've got to make a choice, I guess, and the cattle are more important than the horses. As you said, you'd have to send men chasing through the hills after the horses, and that would weaken the crew."

"When's Dade coming back?" Jim asked.

"I don't know. A week or two—Why do you want to know?"

He didn't tell her why. Her attitude toward him had changed and now she was imperious, putting him in his place as a hired man who'd take orders. Perhaps she had become sufficiently worried about the ranch to forget other matters. Jim preferred it that way.

As he cut out a fresh mount for himself he wondered if old Dade Lamont, in his extremity, had gone out to rob someone. The wry humor of that notion pleased him, somehow. He thought that he understood both of the Lamonts somewhat better than he had before.

THE NEXT few days were filled with dusty, sweating, pounding work. Jim lost count of them as they passed. The L-Cross cattle were scattered over a vast range, with the Carizo River as one boundary and the mountains as the other. There was no mixing with the brands from the other side of the river but within themselves the herds were a hodge-podge of stocker cows, slick-ear calves, scrub stock and steers of various ages. Jim drove his crew from dawn until dark, cutting out the salable beef stock and holding it on a low mesa from which all angles of approach could be covered by rifle fire.

He appointed nighthawks to guard

the gather after dark, something that hadn't been considered necessary on the L-Cross before. The men grumbled, talked darkly among themselves and fell abruptly silent when Jim was around.

They hated him, all right. But they began to show signs of a grudging respect for him too, since he worked himself as hard as he did them. And he drove them constantly, so that they had little time to sulk.

The fact that he couldn't spare the men to search for the horses bothered him somewhat but there was no help for that. He was glad that Helen had realized that going after the horses would have slowed up the other, more important work. Going after them would have been an open defiance of Lou Rountree's orders too, but that didn't matter. Sooner or later, as the cattle were gathered, Lou would see that he wasn't having his way.

Jim Kane was going to buck Rountree to the finish.

Helen Bowron rode out on the range almost every day, watching what was being done, asking questions that revealed more cattle-savvy than Jim had suspected of her. And Max Varney came out to the ranch twice, making his bland smiles, sitting in a rocking-chair on the headquarters porch in the evenings, drifting down to the corrals to talk with the hands. Varney didn't speak to Jim Kane at all. He merely nodded, and watched.

On the evening of the day on which the last of the thousand head of cattle had been gathered, Dade Lamont drove into the headquarters yard in a livery buggy drawn by lathered horses. He got out of the rig and came striding to the corral where Jim was sending out some extra night-hawks.

"I see Nora's messages reached you, Dade," Jim said.

"They did. I saw her in town but she wouldn't tell me what's busted loose here. Said she was leaving that for you."

Jim looked at Lamont, thinking that he probably had been a heller in his younger days but that he looked like a harrassed old wolf now. "Can we go up to your office?" Jim asked quietly.

CHAPTER

7

A Stubborn One

THEY WERE in the office for a long time. The day had been a warm one and the windows were open, the thin curtains bellying in and out with the shifting of the evening breeze. Helen Bowron came in while Jim talked, and she stood silently as she listened.

"So you're wanted in Texas," Lamont said when Jim finished. "Well, a lot of cowhands go on the drift because they're wanted one place or another. I never inquired into a man's back-trail. But you haven't told me who's pulling this off, nor why."

Jim glanced toward Helen. "I'm not a squealer, Dade. I've warned you and that's as far as it goes. You can fire me now, and—"

"Fire you, hell!" Lamont clamped his gnarled hands on the arms of his chair. "You've got more work done in a week than that blundering Quinn got started in months. Bowron picked that fancy-dressin' no-good as foreman an' I kept him on because I didn't have anybody else for the job. Helen says you killed him in self-defense an' that's that. Long as you do a job for me, Kane, that's all I'm interested in. If you're needing any help in handling the hombre that's put the screws to you, I'll throw the whole L-Cross outfit in back of you. I've got influence with Varney, too. Together, you an' me can make a stand. Why hold back, then? Name the hombre!"

Jim stared at the floor. "A knife cuts two ways, Dade."

"What'n blazes do you mean by that?"

Jim glanced once again toward Helen Bowron. "You said you wanted to know why he was after you. If I tell you that, Dade, it's going to pull some things out in the open."

Lamont was silent for a long time. His face seemed suddenly haggard, more tired than before. He gave Helen a wan smile and then he straightened in his chair. "It's time she knows, anyway. Cut it loose, Kane!"

"All right. The man Lou Rountree."

"Rountree? That greased-haired, sickly lookin' whelp?" Mirth shook

Lamont's rawboned frame but then he scowled suddenly and bent a thoughtful look toward his daughter. "Bowron lost a lot of money in Rountree's place. But why's Rountree after me?"

"He wants the L-Cross, for one thing. He's bought up your paper at the bank, that's why he doesn't want it paid off. For another thing, he's settling an old score. He worked for a British syndicate down in Texas. He got sent to prison when—"

Lamont's sudden outburst of laughter stopped Jim Kane. "He got caught in that one, eh?" His leathery, furrowed face took on a kind of gleeful radiance as he laughed again. "Helen, you got enough devil in you to enjoy hearin' this. Your old man's a thief. But not the kind that gets caught savvy? After your mother died I didn't give a damn about anything except buildin' this ranch as big as I could, for you. You've got to know how things was in the old days. It was dog eat dog in those times, an' the dog that was quickest an' meanest was the one that got fat. It was easy to pick up quick money, if a man savvyed how to go at it. All you had to do was watch for the big deals, a herd changing hands for cash or something like that. Every time, there was hard-case hombres gathered around, figurin' ways to get that money for themselves. Pick one of 'em, buy him off an' get him to tell you what was planned, then move in on it at the right time an' take over."

"Why, you old devil," Helen Bowron said, smiling fondly at her father.

He grinned at her, then looked at Jim with a solemn expression coming to his face. "I got something out of it besides money. I got the feelin' that I was a little smarter than the other fellow. But the days when a man could swing that sort of thing are passed—I've outlived my time, I reckon. Jim, what are we going to do about Rountree?"

The question startled Jim Kane. It made him realize that Lamont no longer was the man he once had been. Dade had lived hard, and the rough years had taken their toll of him. Now he was old and tired, groping for help. That was why he had turned the L-Cross over to Clyde Bowron. And

now his faded eyes pleaded for Jim's help.

"We'll trap him," Jim said. "We've got the herd ready for a drive tomorrow and Lou knows all about it, likely. My guess is that he's had men watching us pretty close. By now he knows I'm bucking him, and he'll have to hit us to stop the drive. We'll be ready for him when he does, Dade. We'll string the crew all around that mesa where the cattle are, fort them up behind rocks. Lou hasn't got enough men to handle this outfit. When he hits us he'll run into bad trouble."

Lamont lifted his hands two inches from the arms of his chair, then let them down tiredly. "Go ahead, Jim. Stomp that snake any way you choose. But stomp him."

Jim nodded and tramped out of the office.

HELEN BOWRON followed Jim into the hallway, closing the door of the office behind her. "Why are you doing this for us?" she asked.

"Part of my job."

"Is it? A sixty-a-month foreman doesn't take the risks you're running just for his job. Not unless he's a fool."

"All right, I'm a fool. You mentioned that before."

Her lashes veiled her eyes. "That was something else. You could ride out of here, you know, and probably get away."

"Varney's waiting for me to do that. He'd get up a posse and make a big show of going after me. He'd say that my running was proof that you and I had lied about how Quinn was killed, and he'd charge me with murder and fire wanted notices all over the country. No, I've had enough of running."

"It's that Moran girl," Helen said suddenly. "You think that if you make a stand and kill Rountree you'll have a chance of hushing up everything about yourself."

"She knows about it. And when this is over I'm going back to Texas. I'll get about a year extra for breaking prison. I'll serve it and be done with it."

Helen Bowron stepped close to

him, her lips parted. "You don't have to do that, Kane. Dad and I can help you. We can handle Varney. If Dad says the word Varney will never be re-elected and Max knows it. Kane, stick with us. You don't need to be a hired man all your life. I'll get Dad to make you ranch manager, with a share of the profits. Kane, you need a real woman, not that prissy little—"

The expression that came to his face stopped Helen Bowron then. She looked at him searchingly, a wan smile tugging at her mouth. And then she surprised him by stepping back and thrusting out her hand, man-fashion, to grip his. "If that's the way it really is, thanks for helping. We'll do what we can with Varney anyway, when the time comes."

As Kane turned away from her he was thinking that the Lamonts were built of contradictory streaks, both of them. And Helen was more like her father than she knew.

Her voice stopped him again just as he reached the front door. "One thing more, Kane." He turned and saw that her eyes were watching him with a strangely pleading expression. "It would have been different, wouldn't it, if it hadn't been for Nora Moran?"

He looked at her, frankly appraising her in a way that brought lights of pleasure to her eyes. She wore a summery dress this evening, one that was tightly fitted to the womanly roundness of her body. She had warmth and fire, all right. She was all woman, this Helen Bowron. "It would have been different," he told her, and saw the response of gratitude in her face.

Jim went directly to the bunkhouse and rooted out the crew. "Saddle up, boys," he told them. "Take rifles and plenty of shells, and get down to the herd. There's likely to be some trouble tonight."

"A fight, you mean?" someone asked. "I ain't so sure I—"

"The chances are there'll be trouble, yes," Jim said. "Any man that wants out of it can draw his time now."

There was a shifty exchange of glances, and some low-voiced grumbling. Jim looked around for Til Withrow, but the hombre wasn't here. Then Ed Bettles spoke up, say-

ing in his dry voice, "If Jim Kane says we're needed out there, that's good enough for me. Let's get movin', boys." He tramped out, and the men followed him.

On the mesa, Jim distributed the men around the rim, telling them to find what cover they could and to start shooting the minute any strange riders came toward the bunched cattle. But he didn't like this much; these were working cowhands, not gunhawks who'd hired on at fighters' pay. He was asking too much of them. They would fight for the outfit that employed them and he had no doubt that they would do their best, yet in reality this was his fight, not theirs. It wasn't right for them to die, as some very likely would, on his account.

In a sour mood, he made a final round of the mesa and then reined up to look across the night-shadowed range toward the distant lights of Carrizo.

A low voice, close behind him, said, "Don't try anything, Kane. Just hold real still, an' listen. Rountree wants to see you. Right now."

It was Til Withrow, sitting his horse close behind Kane's, his rifle held languidly in his hands with the faint starlight striking its barrel. He had come up very quietly in the dark, choosing a time when Jim Kane was several hundred yards away from the nearest L-Cross cowhand.

Jim had tried to watch Withrow during the past week, but he had been too busy to do much of a job of it, and too tired at night to keep track of Withrow's comings and goings. He thought now that he should have braced the man and had it out with him long ago.

"Put that saddlegun away, Til," Jim ordered roughly, "before I tell the boys to cut you down."

"You can holler," Withrow said. "But you won't live to see them get to me. Lou's waitin' for you, bucko. Move out."

"Hell with Rountree," Jim said swiftly. "Tell him he can go—" He stopped, thinking suddenly that it might be best to see Rountree, have it out with him and warn him that L-Cross was ready for him. That

might avert bloodshed.... "All right," Jim said. "I'll go see him."

Withrow followed closely as Jim Kane spurred down the steep slope of the mesa's edge.

LOU ROUNTREE sat in his saloon, with the red-shaded lamps casting a glow that glinted on his forehead and on the comb-tracks of his hair. The place was almost empty of customers. Two of the girls were sitting idly at a table, watching another one, a redhead, play solitaire. A lookout man sat on the stairway with a sawed-off shotgun across his knees.

"Lou, you ought to get out of this place more," Jim said as he slipped into a chair opposite Rountree. "You've been inside too much and it's making you look pasty."

Rountree ignored that. He flicked a glance to Withrow, who sidled into a position against the wall with his rifle held in the crook of his arm. Then he said, "I hear you're bunching cattle for a drive. Til tells me—"

"That's right. They'll be in the shipping pens tomorrow, right here in Carrizo where Varney can watch them for us."

"Don't do it, Jim," Lou said softly. "You've left those horses alone. Now get rid of the cattle. Have a stampede or something. Scatter them."

Jim only shook his head.

"I got you out of prison, bucko," Lous Rountree persisted. "Have you forgotten that?"

"You got me out. And you've used it as a club to hit me with. It's no go, Lou. I've told Nora. You go tell Varney. I'm going back to Texas and take my medicine, so you don't scare me anymore. That leaves you without a hole card, doesn't it?"

"You're a roughneck, Jim, a stubborn one. But I can still handle you."

"Don't try it," Jim warned. "We're ready for you out at the L-Cross. It'll take ten times the crew you've got to get near those cattle—"

Rountree lifted a hand. "There's no market for that beef, Jim. No place to ship it to. The Moran girl was handling that for Lamont, and she's not in business anymore."

Jim's big body was very still. "How's that?"

Rountree smiled. "She's not at her

place. She's somewhere else. That makes her my hole card, eh?"

"Damn you, Lou! There's nothing too low for you to stoop to, is there?"

"Scatter those cattle, bucko. Til, go back out there with him. Take his gun, and stick with him from now on. See that the herd gets broken up."

Withrow moved in quickly, holding his rifle in one hand while he pulled Jim's sixgun from its holster. Jim glanced at him, saying thickly, "I'll break his scrawny neck!"

"You wouldn't want that same thing done to Nora?" Lou Rountree asked.

There was a silence, during which Jim reared up to his feet. He felt dizzy, trapped. Rountree's eyes were watching him, glinting with triumph. "Lou, you're crazy!" Jim said.

Rountree shrugged that off. "Take him out of here, Til."

On the porch Jim stopped, feeling the touch of the night air upon his face. Varney's home was just down the street. Jim could spin around and perhaps take Withrow by surprise, beat that rifle which was an awkward weapon at close range and put the man down. He could run for the law, but what good would that do?

Varney was stubborn and wouldn't believe Jim's story, wouldn't know what to do about it even if he could be convinced. Varney was just one man, with a mind that clung to one notion at a time. And the idea he had was to find some excuse to jail Jim Kane. After that the lawman might or might not look into any charges Jim made against Lou Rountree. If he looked into them at all he would muddle along, asking his questions here and there, thus giving Rountree ample warning of his danger. And that would mean danger for Nora. There was no telling what Rountree would do if he were scared.

"Get going," Withrow prodded.

They mounted and rode out of the town, Withrow following a few yards behind Jim's horse. Jim glanced toward Nora Moran's house and saw that it was dark. Rountree wasn't bluffing, then. A futile rage rose up within Jim Kane as he wondered where Nora was. Then the hoofs of the horses drummed on the planking

of the river bridge. When they struck ground again they were out on the L-Cross range once more.

Withrow followed Jim more closely now. "Head over to the mesa, bucko," he ordered. "Lou said to scatter that herd."

Jim swung his horse to the right, as if in obedience. But then, suddenly, he pulled the animal completely around in a rearing spin, and dug wickedly with the spurs. The horse plunged against Withrow's mount.

They had been riding fairly fast, and the momentum of Withrow's horse carried him against Jim's before the rider could fully realize what was happening. Withrow grabbed for his rifle, tried to pull it from the scabbard. But Jim crowded his horse in, pinning the scabbard between the two mounts. Withrow let go of the rifle and reached for his sixgun; but Jim struck swiftly, throwing a big fist against Withrow's jaw with explosive force.

The lighter man toppled from his saddle, one boot catching in the stirrup. Jumping down quickly, Jim grabbed the bridle of the snorting horse to quiet him, then freed Withrow's foot.

The little gunman was unconscious. Jim took his sixgun, putting the weapon into his own holster. He boosted Withrow across his saddle and tied him there. Then, leading Withrow's horse, he set out for L-Cross headquarters at a lope.

CHAPTER

8

Something New

THE BIG white house was brightly lighted when Jim rode up to it. The front door stood open and so he entered without bothering to knock, going directly to the office room.

Dade Lamont and his daughter were in there, poring over account books that were spread out on the desk. They looked up as Jim entered the room. Probably they read the despair that was in his face; at any rate they asked no questions as he sank wearily into a chair. They merely waited, watching him.

"Rountree had Til Withrow working for him," Jim said. "I saw Lou

tonight and he sent Withrow back out here with me, to watch me. I jumped the hombre on the way and he's in the bunkhouse now, tied up."

"What did Rountree have to say?" Lamont asked.

"He's got Nora, damn him! They're holding her somewhere. He threatens harm to her if I don't scatter your herd, Dade."

Lamont swore. "That'd be his style of doin', all right, grabbin' a woman. You sure he ain't bluffing?"

"There wasn't any light in her house. I couldn't go there to make sure, though—that blame Withrow was on my back. But I know Lou Rountree. He'll hit me with any club he can find and this is a good one for him."

"It changes things, don't it?" Lamont asked. "What do you aim to do?"

Jim only spread his hands.

Helen Bowron straightened, running her hands nervously up and down her arms. "He's got you scared, Kane," she said.

"He's got me scared," Jim admitted irritably, thinking that he had never known this feeling of cold, helpless fear before.

Helen's mouth twisted with scorn. "He's got both of you scared. You men—just because you think a woman's in danger you wilt. Can't you see that Rountree's bluffing? Everybody in Carrizo knows Nora Moran, everybody likes her. How long will Rountree last if they find out he's hurt her? He'd be run out of town, or hanged!"

Jim shook his head, saying, "Lou ain't like ordinary people. He's clever, takes what seem like crazy chances and always gets away with it. He figures things ahead so that no harm comes to him."

Dade Lamont was muttering to himself. Now he stirred tiredly in his chair, saying, "A man wants to be big, an' works like the devil to get that way. Then he finds out that what he's bought himself is just a bigger slice of trouble. It's my hide that Rountree wants, my hide an' this ranch. He wants it bad, to do what he's done." Lamont shook his shaggy, white-maned head. "Just usin' Nora like he's done puts him in bad. In

the old days he'd have been killed for that, even though he didn't harm her at all. In them days—"

"That's it!" Helen said in a hushed voice. "He can't turn her loose now. She'd tell everyone what he is."

Jim's head lifted and he gave Helen a stricken look. Her face was strained and unsteady—she too was scared now.

"Jim, I'm sorry," she told him. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It's true," Jim said harshly. "I hadn't thought that far ahead. Dade, this is bad."

"Don't just sit there, then!" Helen burst out fiercely. "Do you think that any woman who's worth a hang would want you to hold back now? I wouldn't, if I was in her place. Nora Moran doesn't, not if I know her."

"They might be holding her anywhere," Jim said dully. "Some shack down the river, or up in the hills. We'd be a week finding the place. And likely she's guarded by some gun-slick who's got orders to shoot her if anyone comes near."

Helen shook her head angrily. "That's the kind of thinking he wants you to do! Break away from it, Kane! Hit him with something new, from some direction in which he doesn't expect trouble. He's sitting there in Carrizo where he thinks he's safe. Go after him there. Hit Lou Rountree himself, and make him tell you where Nora is!"

JIM SMILED tightly, thinking that Helen had used Lou Rountree's own way of thinking. And she was right about it. Before Jim could speak, though, old Dade Lamont got to his feet and took down a rifle from the antlers on the wall.

It was as if the old man had thrown off some of his years and some of his tiredness now. "How many men has Rountree got in that place of his tonight?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Jim said. "All I saw was the lookout. He's got some others I've seen, tough-looking strangers, but I'd guess that they're on L-Cross range tonight, watching that herd to see if I scatter it like I was told to."

"We'll have the boys move around the herd some, just enough to keep

them snakes watchin'. We'll take a couple of the old hands, ones we can trust, an' ride into Carrizo."

Helen Bowron reached for one of the rifles. "I'm going with you," she said.

Old Dade swung on her. "You'll stay here like a woman should."

She shook her head, smilingly defiant. "You never did really know me at all, Dad. I'm not much interested in what a woman should or shouldn't do, and I'm not going to cower here and wonder what's happening to you in Carrizo. Either I ride along with you or I follow right behind you."

Lamont's furrowed face took on a harshly angry look. But then a wry smile tugged at his mouth. "Maybe you're right, Helen. I keep thinkin' of you as a child, rememberin' the way you used to devil me every time I tried to show you some affection. But then all of a sudden you was a woman, an' it seemed like I'd lost touch with you altogether. If we had it all to live over again... Hell, I'm old. Let's ride."

It was midnight when a single rider swung down the East Valley road and clopped across the bridge at Carrizo. The town was dark, silent; since this was a weekday night even the saloon was closed, although a light burned in one of its upstairs windows.

The rider headed toward the saloon. He was small in build and he held himself in an oddly crouched position as he rode, as if he were afraid of something. Without moving his head he glanced up and down the moonlit street. He winced when his eyes caught the faint glint of a rifle barrel that rested across the top of a haybale in front of the livery. The rifle swung slowly, following him...

The rider was Til Withrow. He dismounted in front of the saloon and picked up a pebble which he tossed over the porch roof so that it struck the lighted window.

It made a tinkle of sound. After a moment the light went out and the window was opened. A man's sleek head appeared in the opening. "Who's there?" he called softly.

"Withrow." Fear pulled the rider's head around and he glanced openly toward the rifle that covered him from the front of the livery. "I—I got

to see you, Lou. Somethin's happened."

"Well, go around to the back, you fool."

"No!" Withrow said tensely. "You come out here. There ain't time to—"

Rountree swore in an annoyed way and pulled his head from view. After a time one of the red lamps downstairs glowed brightly, casting a fan-shaped splash of light across the porch and illuminating Withrow's face. A man peered out through a window, looking up and down the street. The latch of the heavy front door clicked and the door swung partly open.

Withrow darted forward, squalling in a sudden outburst of pent-up words, "For Gawd's sake let me in there! They took my gun away from me an' they're out here with—"

He was part way across the porch when the rifle at the front of the livery made its crashing sound. Withrow's slight body jerked and spun, one hand making a despairing gesture toward his empty holster, and then he fell.

AT THE sound of that shot Jim Kane hurled his weight against the saloon's rear door. It had been Dade Lamont's idea to make use of Withrow, who could logically have something to report to Rountree and might be able to draw those inside the saloon to the front of the building. Thus the back of the place would be left temporarily unprotected and Jim could enter.

It was the sort of scheme that Lamont might have used in his younger days when he left this valley to do his raiding elsewhere. It had worked fairly well, thus far. Withrow had been told to get Rountree and the others out into the street but he had balked when he got the chance, in spite of the fact that Dade Lamont was staked out at the livery and Bettles and another hand were across the river with Helen Bowron. That balk had been more or less expected, though.

The thing was rolling now, and it couldn't be stopped. Jim Kane found the rear door solid, swiftly drew his sixgun and fired into the latch mechanism.

His next lunge against the door carried it fully open. His momentum carried him along a short hallway that was lined with stacked beer barrels. The hall ended at an archway under the landing of the stairs; Jim halted there, breathing hard as he peered out into the main room.

One of the lamps was burning. Two men were at the front windows, their bodies flattened against the wall while guns crashed outside and splintered glass erupted in red-glinting cascades into the room. One of them moved swiftly now, firing through a shattered window, and drew back with a grunt of satisfaction. "Got him. Now those others across the creek—"

Jim fired. The man's words ended in a startled cry as his body was slammed back against the wall. Glass grated under his boots as he fought to hold himself erect, swinging slowly around to face Jim. But then his gun spilled from his hand as he went down.

The other man had fired at Jim with a venomous quickness, but his bullet struck the stair landing above Jim's head. Jim fired again, tramping forward as he did so, and saw that the man was not Lou Rountree. The shot hadn't missed; the man was bent double by its impact, and he didn't straighten again.

Jim swung tensely around. Lou still was here, somewhere...

A low laugh reached Jim's ears from some point above and behind him. "Still the sucker, eh?" Rountree's unhurried voice said.

He was on the stairway. He had waited upstairs in a place of safety through all of this and now he had come part way down the carpeted steps and was leaning against the rail with a derringer in his hand. Holding the weapon centered on Jim's back, Rountree made an easy smile.

"Don't turn, Jim," he warned. "Let go of that gun. You keep forgetting the way I've helped you, bucko."

"Used me, you mean," letting his gun fall to the floor—it would have been suicide to whirl around and try to beat that derringer.

"Yeah, I used you," Rountree said. "And I don't need you any more. Dade Lamont is dead. One of the

boys here got him—I watched it through a window upstairs. What was Lamont trying to pull off?"

Jim didn't answer that. "Where's Nora Moran?"

"You won't need to know that. Like I said before, I don't need you any more, Jim." Rountree's smile had become fixed in place. His finger tightened on the trigger of the derringer.

Jim Kane flung himself down to one side, knowing as the blast of the derringer beat against his eardrums that he had been too slow, too late. He had been a fool here, to let himself be lulled by a feeling that Rountree wouldn't shoot an unarmed man.

The jolt of the bullet ran through him. Distantly, he heard a shouting in the street. The town was aroused by the shooting. But it was too late for those outside to help Jim Kane.

One of his groping hands closed upon the hard metal of his gun. A-sprawl on the floor, knowing that Rountree would fire again, Jim lifted the sixgun toward Rountree's figure and pressed the trigger.

The shot seemed to blend with the second blast of the derringer. Rountree lurched back, clutched at the stair railing and then slid down it with his face twisted by surprise and by agony. His hands lost their grip on the rail and he pitched downward, his body bumping loosely down the steps.

Jim Kane tried to get up, and couldn't. Men were trooping in from the street and he strained toward them, wanting to shout Nora's name and to tell them to find her. But then suddenly the saloon seemed filled with a blinding light that was too strong to bear, until it vanished into darkness and silence....

IT WAS Doc Treadwell's wizened face that floated into Jim's range of vision at last. Kane lay on a table in the doctor's house, in the white-painted room that Treadwell used for an office. The room was crowded with silent people.

Treadwell straightened, wiping blood from his hands and arms with a towel. "The bullet's out. Done him some damage, but it missed lungs an' arteries. He'll make out."

A hand touched Jim's face. Nora

Moran's hand. He looked at her with a strained, puzzled intentness, unable to understand her presence here. "Jim," she said softly. "Jim, my dear..."

Helen Bowron was beside Nora. There was a sadness in her eyes now; but she said, "Take it easy, Kane. Lou Rountree won't bother you, or anybody else, again. They had Nora tied up in a back room and I found her there when the shooting was over."

Jim looked up at her. "Dade?"

She bit her lip and turned away for an instant. Then she said, "He's gone, Kane. Don't quit the L-Cross now, please. The ranch has got to have a foreman who's got push and savvy. Take Saber Valley if you want it, start a brand of your own up there. But don't leave L-Cross." She looked at Nora with a rueful little smile. "I've learned a certain lesson, Nora. You don't need to be afraid of me anymore."

Nora straightened proudly, one hand resting on Jim's shoulder. "I never was," she said.

Jim rolled his head to one side and saw that Sheriff Varney was standing in a corner of the crowded room. It was a good dream, Jim thought. Saber, and a good job, and Nora. Now he had to blow all that sky-high. "I can't keep the job," he said. "I'll be leaving for Texas as soon as I can travel. I'm wanted down there—hear that, Max?"

"No, you ain't," Varney said. "Miss Nora came to see me about that, wanting to know if there wasn't some way it could be straightened out since you'd gone straight here. I sent some telegrams. The answer I got was that the ranchers who'd framed you had got to fighting among themselves, an' one of them had talked. Charges against you, includin' jailbreak, was scratched a year ago. Rountree was another matter. He still was wanted, an' I aimed to take him as soon as the papers came in the mail."

Jim closed his eyes, feeling Nora's lips touch his cheek. A contentment new to Jim Kane washed through him. It would be a good life here in Carrizo—a man could put down roots. The promise of the future was good indeed.

THE LONG CHANCE

by D. AYDELOTTE

STAMPEDES, INDIANS, wolves, plain and fancy cattle-rustling—Oliver Loving, an old hand at trail-driving, knew its risks and dangers, but always stood ready regardless to take another long chance. When he and his partner, Colonel Charles Goodnight, set out for Fort Sumner with what was to be their last longhorn herd, Loving rebelled at the slow pace of the fateful drive.

"We'll never make it to the fort on time," he demurred. "I'll take Bill Wilson and we'll take a short cut with some of the herd. You can follow later."

"Mebbe it's slower this way," admitted Goodnight, "but it's safe, and Comanches are as thick over that way as fleas on a hound's back. You'll just get your skin full of arrows."

After two days of bitter argument, the colonel final-

"Comanches," he said, pointing to a swiftly moving dust cloud, "and that spells trouble."

"I've met Comanches more than once and bested 'em," answered Loving. "We'll leave the herd and run for it." With the band riding hard after them, they raced for the river. Dismounting, they took cover in a sand-pit near a clump of polecat bushes. Back of them rose a sandy bluff. The sluggish Pecos River flowed nearby. Whooping wildly, the Comanches caught the men's horses, while some raced after the fleeing herd.

As a lone brave crept out on the bluff above them, Loving dropped him with one shot. After losing several young warriors, the Indians sullenly gave ground. It was nearly sunset when Wilson called to them in Spanish, asking



Through mountain passes, over sun-scorched plains and high mesas, went the strangest funeral procession the Old West was ever to know...

ly yielded, on Loving's promise to stay hidden by day, travel only by night, and keep on the lookout for Indians. With Bill Wilson, who was a deadlier shot with one hand than some men with two, Loving took to the trail. But after two days and nights with no signs of lurking Indians, he grew restless.

"We'll make better time riding by day," he argued. "Let's take a chance." Unknowingly, he signed his death warrant with those words.

On the afternoon of the third day out, Wilson suddenly drew rein.

that he be allowed to go unharmed.

"Put down your arms," answered a Spanish-speaking brave, "and you can leave safely."

Wise in Indian trickery, the beleaguered men knew better than to try it. Suddenly a shot rang out from the thicket of polecat bushes. "They've got me," gasped Loving. A hand-hammered slug had gone through his wrist and penetrated his left side. He bled profusely, and Wilson tried to pad the wound with strips torn from his own shirt.

"Water," whispered the wounded

man. Sheltered by tall weeds, Wilson crawled silently to the river bank, filled one of his shoes with water, and gave it to his boss. Then the cow-puncher turned on his armless side, and with a six-shooter gripped in his right hand, waited for the night and whatever the night might bring.

At an ominous rustling in the polecat bushes behind them, Wilson's hand tightened on his gun. Slowly, cautiously, he and Oliver Loving turned their heads. In the waning light they saw not the painted visage of a warrior, but a huge diamond-back rattlesnake. In dazed horror they watched as the rattler slithered into the sand-pit where they lay, its coiled body and deadly, swaying head only a few feet from Bill Wilson's knee.

Bathed in cold perspiration, the two men lay rigid. If they flinched or moved a muscle, a yard and a half of grisly death would strike. To venture out meant slow torture and death. At last the diamond-back uncoiled, dragged its scaly body across one of Wilson's boots, and glided away. The men gave a low gasp of relief.

"I'm done for," whispered Loving, stifling his moans of pain. "You swim down river and try to find the herd. Then go and get the Colonel. If I'm not here when you get back, well—just tell my folks about it."

"I ain't leaving you," said one-armed Bill, "for them devils to finish off."

"They won't get a chance," assured Loving. "I'll shoot myself first. You've got to go, Bill, it's our only chance."

Finally, after seeing that Loving's weapons were loaded and close at hand, and taking his own six-shooter, Wilson slipped down to the river. Stripping to his long underwear, he paddled downstream unseen and unheard. After landing, he found no trace of the herd. The Indians had driven them off.

After roaming the barren mesa for three days, Wilson became hopelessly lost. Thorny undergrowth tore his bare feet. Wolves trailed his bloody footprints. Once, waking from sleep, he found the pack snarling and snapping all around him. Beating them off with the broken end of a tipi pole, he struggled on. Finding a cave, he

crawled inside and lay there, too exhausted to move. After two days of agonizing thirst, he looked out to see a lone horseman riding up the trail. With a supreme effort, he got to his feet and tottered outside. At sight of this gaunt human scarecrow in tattered underwear, Colonel Goodnight advanced warily, one hand on his gun holster. Half-delirious from thirst, his swollen tongue hanging from his mouth, Bill Wilson could only mumble and mumble. But after rest and careful feeding, he gasped out his story...

BACK IN the sand-hole, Oliver Loving listened all night to suspicious rustlings, thought he saw dim figures moving around. By daylight he saw that the wily redskins had dug a trench leading to his hiding place. As he looked, a scalplock lifted cautiously. Grasping the rifle with his good hand, Loving fired. The brave toppled over, dead. After a few others met the same fate, the Indians withdrew.

Tortured by thirst and in constant agony from the wound in his side, Loving endured through the day. At dusk, a torrential rainstorm fell, soaking him to the skin and appeasing his desperate thirst. By sunrise next morning, all was quiet. Feeling sure the Indians had been driven off by the storm, he inched painfully to the river. There, he tied a strip of his shirt to a stick, dipped it in the water, and feebly sucked the cloth. Then the world reeled into blackness around him...

GATHERING a group of armed men, Colonel Goodnight rode hard and fast to rescue Loving. They found the sand-pit near the Pecos as Wilson had described it—but empty. Finally giving up the search, they rejoined the herd and forged on toward Fort Sumner. They were seventy-five miles away when a rider galloped up with news. Three men, traveling up the Pecos, had found Loving lying on the bank, barely conscious and half-starved, and taken him on to Fort Sumner in their ox-drawn wagon. Saddling a fresh horse, the colonel made the ride in eighteen hours, ar-

(please turn to page 82)

BLACK NIGHT

It was quite a ruckus. But it's funny, the shooting and the killing won't be what the town will remember at all

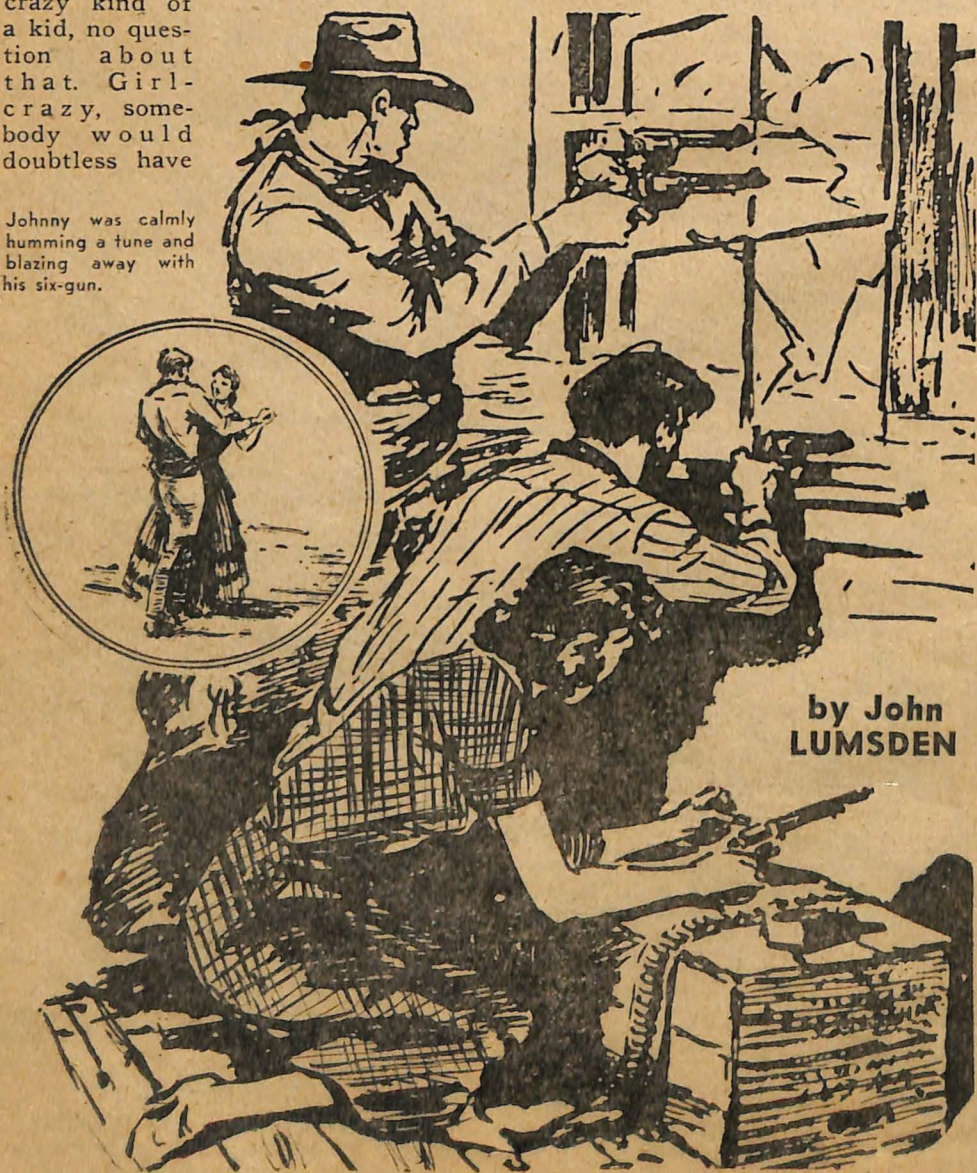
I KIND OF liked Johnny Lake. I guess I was the only one at the 3-BAR that did though.

He was a crazy kind of a kid, no question about that. Girl-crazy, somebody would doubtless have

Johnny was calmly humming a tune and blazing away with his six-gun.

immediately supplied if I'd said that in front of any of the 3-BAR crew.

And doubtless too one of the boys would sooner or later have slammed



the kid if Conch Masters hadn't come along. For most of them, Johnny Lake was the rotten apple that's sure to turn up in a barrel of sound ones; he reminded me rather of the occasional critter you'll find in a herd that all the other animals seem to have it in for, because they sense he's "different" or some kind of a weakling, because he's at the very bottom of the "pecking order" that inevitably becomes established in any group of any kind of creatures.

But when Conch Masters showed, all the 3-BAR hands laid off the kid with very significant point: they figured that Conch would take care of Johnny for them.

Because Conch, it was quickly clear, liked the ladies himself, and the boys knew that sure as sin, sooner or later, Conch Masters and Johnny Lake were going to make a pass at the same filly. At one of the Saturday night dances, probably, at the Big Barn.

Their both having an eye for calico, though, was certainly the only similarity to be discovered in the two. I don't know exactly what Johnny's interest in females was; it was sort of crazy, as I said. He just sort of seemed to like to kid around with them, that way.

Whereas Conch Masters was in every respect the type that you're put in mind of at mention of the term "ladies man." He had the sideburns and the height and the curly dark hair and the eye. Especially, you might say, the eye. A pretty girl would come into a room, you automatically looked at Conch Masters' eyes, because you knew they'd already be on the little lady, laid on her like glue, following her every motion like a tick on a yearling.

Conch also had big fists that he didn't look to me like he'd mind using, especially where easy success was assured; and a sixgun that he wore cross-draw (I swear he carried it cross-draw just because it had a fancier look that way, though some claim you can reach over to your left side faster than you can back to a right-hand holster).

Johnny Lake wore a gun too, but not at all showy like Masters: Johnny's sixshooter hung forgotten far back on his hip in limp, worn leather.

You got the impression that he didn't know it was there, much less how to use it. His old beat-up stetson had that careless look too, again contrasting sharply with Conch Masters' natty flat-crowned black headpiece.

I remember the day the Carstairs girl came over to borrow some flour or something for her mother. The Carstairs spread was the next one south; big enough, but not half the size of the 3-BAR. Conch Masters had been on the 3-BAR payroll, oh, maybe a month at that time. Johnny of course had been hired-on the same time I had, couple years back, when 3-BAR had tripled its holdings and doubled its crew.

EVERYBODY had been waiting for such a spark as this to set the thing off. The boys had been counting on "The Wild One" to do the trick—that's what they called the big fall round-up dance—but here it could be ahead of schedule. Because Susan Carstairs was a dish to turn the head of even a confirmed bachelor like me, much less skirt-chasers like Masters and Johnny Lake.

Let's see if I can describe her. Well, the closest I could come to it I guess would be to say she was just right. For any man. Shiny, raven-black hair that had just the right curls in just the right place. Big, wide, clear blue eyes in a face that was square in a nice sort of way, you know, with high cheekbones and a small chin and a soft red mouth. She was like that all over, you might say—that kind of square look but at the same time a soft look too. She was the kind of girl, in other words, that most of the boys got embarrassed as all get-out around—I never saw a one, for example, who didn't turn red as a beet when he got to dance with her.

Except, of course, Johnny Lake. If he was at the bottom of the pecking order around men, he was right at the top with the ladies. It was funny. He could even dance with Susan Carstairs without it bothering him. Talk away, dancing with her, like it was nothing; and she'd smile into his shoulder as though she was enjoying his jabber.

So she came over to the 3-BAR this day, and Conch Masters sees her for

the first time. It was right after noon chow, Conch had been standing out in front of the eatshack going over his molars with a fancy silver-handled quill. Well, Conch stopped this operation like he'd seen a ghost. Or, more exactly, not a ghost but the real thing.

You could see Masters thinking fast. It didn't look for a minute, though, as if even fast-thinking would give him an excuse to speak to her. Susan had come out of the house and down the veranda steps in a fast "tripping" way she had of moving, and she'd slipped the bag of flour into her saddlebag and was swinging aboard almost in a single motion. (That was no doubt a big part of her attractiveness to men, that hard-to-catch-up-with, vivacious manner she had, so that a fellow got knocked off-balance simply from succeeding in slowing her down long enough to get her to turn those big blue orbs full on him.

Her pony, in that moment though, chose to turn cranky. He suddenly switched his rump around, an instant before she could put boot to stirrup. And that gave Conch Masters what he wanted. A big man, he yet covered the ground swiftly, and while Susan's animal was still out of hand he was reaching for its bridle.

But what none of us had noticed was Johnny Lake. He'd evidently gone around behind the house, when he saw Susan go in, and come up on the other side of the veranda just as she came bouncing down the steps. So it brought all of us up when we heard Johnny's voice, pretty near as much as it did Conch Masters.

"I'll get him, Susan," we heard Johnny suddenly say clear and sharp and there he was on the other side of the dancing horse, also reaching for its leather.

Well, that was when it happened, and you'd never see a thing like that again in six lifetimes. If ever. We'd all materialized like rats out of a burning building at first sign of Masters making his play for Susan Carstairs, from out of the eatshack, from the corral, from the bunkhouse, from the chuckwagon a couple of us had been cleaning up to take out on round-up. So we all saw it.

Masters swings at Johnny Lake. Chops his long-armed left fist out across Johnny's mouth while he clamps his right onto the horse's bridle.

"Oh," Susan says.

"They all act up now and then," Masters smiled at Susan, laying the charm on thick.

And before she could so much as glance once at the fallen Johnny, Masters had yanked the head of the horse around and was leading it toward the road.

"Well thank you very much," we heard Susan say in kind of a daze, as Conch finally released the horse at bottom of the yard. And before she rode on out, she glanced back once at Johnny, as though to be sure she'd seen right, because she probably by that time was sure she must have imagined that this calm, gracious gentleman could have a moment before he clubbed another man to the ground.

But what would happen when Masters came back was what we were waiting for now, and that proved no less surprising.

Because it was Masters that approached Johnny rather than the other way around, as you'd have expected.

"You want to make anything of it, fella?" Conch said in the voice of a man taking care of various routine matters and this was simply the next item on his schedule.

Johnny Lake had got to his feet, after lying on the ground a while in what looked to be more puzzlement than hurt, and he was rubbing his jaw. Rubbing it and working it slowly back and forth, as though to see if it was still functioning. And looking at Conch.

Johnny Lake said finally, "What the devil was the idea?"

Masters was standing lightly squared off. With his thick left eyebrow raised.

"Don't butt into my business, fella. Let that be a warning to you."

Johnny screwed his face up in new bafflement.

"Who 'buted in' to your business? I don't get it—"

"Well you better get it fast fella because the next time I won't fool."

SO WE WOULD have been *really* looking forward to The Wild One this year if hadn't been for the word that came down the trail that following week. Because Johnny Lake was sure to ask Susan Carstairs for a dance at the big shindig, the way the boys figured it—Johnny didn't have sense enough to take Conch Masters' warning seriously, they argued; especially where such a big dance was concerned, with every pretty girl in the section on hand.

Like I said before, though, I didn't rate Johnny Lake so low as the other boys did. Maybe they were right that he was just a spineless young skirt chaser, but, I don't know, I felt something more than that to him. There are all kinds of people, you know—that's a thing we're too often apt to forget. We're too quick to run with the mob—a man should be like this, we say, a woman like that. And we measure everybody right off by those iron-clad patterns.

But that's all on the deep-thinking side, a bent I guess I'm prone to, my daddy having been an itinerant sky-pilot (up until a stray Apache arrow took him between the shoulders) who always carried a load of books around with us in the back of the buckboard—that, like I say, is on the speculative side, when hard fact for all of us at 3-BAR right then was the news of Rufus Ballo and his outlaw army being headed our way to attend The Wild One.

That was a thing Rufus was notorious for—just plain cain-raising for its own sake. Train-robbing, stage hold-ups, bank-busting—they were his serious business. The cain-raising was his relaxation (and of course, it added an extra luster to his already awesome reputation). He'd hear of a town having a festival or a rodeo or the like, he'd look in on the affair just for the hell of it. Which meant leaving the town literally in ruins, and up to half its menfolk dead or wounded.

Because there weren't many communities would take it. Now and then one would stand by grim-faced and watch Ballo and his bunch shoot up the place and insult the women and maybe set fire to a building or two

before they rode out again, but more often they'd fight finally, at the much greater cost they knew was inevitable.

That's what we decided to do. Fight.

"The dirty sons," the boys kept growling shoving the barricades into place at both ends of the town the Saturday afternoon before The Wild One.

CONCH MASTERS was in charge of the detail deploying the barrels around the Big Barn, where plans for the dance were going doggedly ahead. Masters looked kind of funny, somehow wielding a shovel right along with the other three 3-Bar boys. He'd toss a few spadefuls of dirt into a barrel and then he'd pluck the half-inch of quirley butt from his lips that were sucked in thin with inhaling and stand there letting the inhale out, his eyes roving restlessly but without seeming to settle anywhere. Like he was way off, in his mind, someplace. He wasn't a man, it never did look to me, Conch Masters, who you figured would be a cowhand long.

Whereas, well, say a kid like Johnny Lake, you could never imagine him being anything else. Which made it all the queerer, Conch Masters and Johnny Lake tangling over the same girl. You know what I mean? Usually Masters' kind of man, I mean, fastens onto one kind of gal, Johnny Lake's onto another.

But that, like I said, was the special thing about Susan Carstairs. She drew 'em all; I reckon you couldn't think of a man wouldn't have wanted her...

Well, anyway, be all that as it may, the first sign we had of Rufus Ballo having arrived was the bullet that tore through Conch Masters' sleeve. All the rest of us had rolled up our sleeves, pitching in at the barricade-building, but not Masters, and that first slug gave a pull at the cuff of his left one, where he had his arm up taking the quirley quarter-inch out of his mouth again—as though the shooter had been trying to shoot the cigarette from Masters' fingers.

Masters shoved his spade handle

away and cross-drew his sixshooter and scanned the buildings opposite for a possible telltale puff of smoke. The other boys dumped their shovels too and got out guns. The sheriff, who'd been in the barber shop, came out onto the boardwalk bedecked up one side of his face with lather, pulling off the bib as he came and also palming his gun. "All right, boys," he announced loudly, "I reckon this is it."

"It wasn't 'it,' though. What it was, I figured, was a perfect Ballo touch. To start the town jittering. Because there wasn't another peep out of whoever threw that bullet, and we took the town apart trying to find the sinner but turned up neither hide nor hair of him.

Which was what started Conch Masters figuring it another way. At about the time it became pretty clear that we weren't going to uncover the mysterious bushwhacker, Masters' eye happened to light on Johnny Lake. And it stuck there after it lit, while you could see the idea growing in Masters' mind.

And Conch didn't weigh it back and forth very long after it hit him. He was suddenly moving down the street in Johnny Lake's direction, and he didn't hesitate either to act on his idea before he was sure it was right, because he had Johnny by the arm and had swung him violently around like an irate father would a disobedient youngster, before he'd even uttered his accusing words.

"Where were you, fella, when that bullet clipped me?"

Johnny Lake reached down to pick up his hat, which had been flipped off, before he made any effort to free himself from the grip of iron clamp on his right upper-arm. And he didn't look any more disturbed by Masters' unexpected violence this time than he had the other. That was the way Johnny was, it was funny, that kind of too-placid way or something—which to all the boys of course was simply proof the kid was just plain yellow, without the guts to even get mad at anybody.

"I'm talkin' to you, fella!"

"Where was I? I was down back

of the livery, probably, toting hay bales—"

"The hell you were."

And where this might have gone I'm not able to speculate, because it was at that moment, a half hour before dark, that two events took place sufficiently notable to break up even Conch Masters' concentrated fury: Susan Carstairs rode into town with her daddy in the Carstairs' spick-and-span buckboard, and she was all decked out in silk and satin and as pretty a picture as you'd ever want to see; and, from the other end of the street, the lookout we'd posted came helling in shouting that he had sighted Ballo's bunch....

IT WAS QUITE a scrap. And it knocked the town for a loop, and the undertaker had six pine boxes to make up afterwards (the Ballo casualties we dug one big grave for smack in the middle of our local boothill, and topped the big mound with a single wooden marker). But it's funny, what I guess I'll remember the event for was none of this, but for the performances of Johnny Lake and Conch Masters. And Susan Carstairs, I'll remember about her.

Well, take for example at the peak of the thing: the Ballo crowd had shoved their way into good protected spots all up and down the street and they were giving us merry hell. They'd ridden within a quarter-mile of town and then instead of their usual, which was to ride in quiet and respectable and gradually build up a good mess of trouble, they dismounted and crept in on foot under cover of the blackest night I ever saw, like a tribe of Apaches attacking a new trailtown. Evidently they'd scouted our barricades, for the way they came in, all our preparation was of no use at all. Their idea probably was to teach a lesson, that get cute and play rough with Ballo and he could play rough too.

But here they were, twenty to thirty of them, lacing the town with hot lead, and Johnny Lake was calmly humming a tune and blazing away with his sixshooter every time he saw a gunflash somewhere, and then hunkering down from his saloon-window post and calmly reloading. He'd be

"calling" a dance, more often than not, while he reloaded:

"One foot up and the other foot down,

Take your honey in your arms,
And turn her around.

Promenade, boys, promenade..."

—As though his thoughts were wholly on The Wild One, which, but for the Ballo visit, would have at that very moment been in full swing....

And Susan Carstairs. I'd always sized her as a frivolous little thing, you know, being the only daughter of a big rancher and all; and that lacy, rustly party dress and the ribbon in her hair made her seem even more so tonight. But here she was, helping out the men like any doughty pioneer woman, washing and bandaging wounds, jamming cartridges into guns, dashing in and out of the buildings where the townsmen had forted up (despite her daddy's shouted protests) like it was all just a big lively game.

And, finally, Conch Masters. He surprised me more, if possible, than the other two. I never saw a man sweat so. I swear he was so busy sweating he didn't even take time to smoke a quirley. Masters was a self-centered sort any time, but this night he didn't look to right or left, never exchanged a word with anybody. A half-dozen of us had taken these small front windows of the saloon, and Masters was hunkered at the one next to me, Johnny Lake at the farthest one down.

What was Masters, just plain scared stiff? I reckon he was. He must have been. Ordinarily, a man like Carstairs could manage himself and others so that he looked good, so that he came out top-dog. But this thing this night, this Ballo thing, wasn't like most of the time. It had a hellish quality about it, just shooting into the black night and being shot at, until you did or didn't get hit, maybe killed. It was a

kind of crucible, you might say, where you were tossed in it didn't matter who you were or how you acted or what you looked like, and either you tested one way or you tested another way, there wasn't anything you could do about it....

SO THAT was how it was, and it didn't surprise me for a minute when Conch Masters lit out shortly afterwards without so much as an *adios* to anybody. Because, like I said, I was squatted right beside him all during the Ballo ruckus.

Everybody else was surprised, though, and that was the really funny angle. The real irony of the whole thing. Because I doubt if anybody except me noticed a thing during the shooting. I'm dead sure neither Johnny Lake nor Susan Carstairs did. But for Conch Masters, Johnny Lake had put it on him, and he'd have never been able to rawhide Johnny after that, you see?

Which isn't to say that this left the field wide open for Johnny with Susan. Who leads her to the altar is still to be seen (maybe when they hold The Wild One next Saturday night some light will be shed on this). Me, I doubt very much if it will be Johnny; I doubt if he's a big enough boy to nab her because I doubt, as I said before, if he'll ever amount to much (more likely it'll be some big-shot type like Conch Masters!).

But one last thing I do want to say though is, if the 3-BAR crew didn't notice how Conch Masters sat there white-faced pouring sweat all during the Ballo fight, what they did notice was Johnny Lake—I guess because they made a point of watching Johnny, probably expecting him to start bawling or something, or to duck under a table. Johnny Lake isn't at the bottom of the pecking order at the 3-BAR any more, that's for sure....

●END



A LITTLE HORSEPLAY

They'd be back at sundown, the two hardcases said. And the sheriff had warned Tom to make no trouble...

The two men started to wreck the store when suddenly he smashed his fist into Grissom's jaw.



TOM CANTWELL was opening a case of canned tomatoes when he heard them ride up on the road outside the store and dismount. He came around from behind the counter and watched the two stop at the rope across the open door and read the sign hanging there. They glanced at one another, and then the taller man drew a knife and slashed through the rope. Both men stepped inside the log shack and advanced

along the makeshift counter toward Tom.

He recognized them from this morning, when he'd first driven his wagon down the main street of Bluestone. Rangy, stubble-bearded men in levis and flannel shirts, each wearing a low-hung pistol on his hip, they'd been lounging on a bench in front of

by WILLIAM RICHARDS

Carter's General Store. They'd stared at him sharply as he drove by, and with a stab of apprehension Tom had told himself he'd be seeing them again, and here they were.

"Can't you read?" Tom asked as they came up to him. "I don't open till tomorrow."

The tall man shook his head. "You don't open tomorrow. You don't open anytime."

"What do you mean?" Tom asked. "You don't hear so good, do you?" the man said. He turned to a pile of levis lying on the counter nearby, swept them off onto the dirt floor with his arm and ground them under his heel.

Sudden anger flared in Tom and he moved toward the other with clenched fists. The second man drew his pistol and eared back the hammer with an audible click. Tom stopped and glared at the two.

"Do you hear me now?" the tall man said. "You don't open here at all, tomorrow or any time."

"I hear you," Tom said.

"Good. Then suppose you pack up all this gear and hit the trail for somewhere else."

"And suppose I don't?" Tom asked. "Suppose you don't?" the other repeated softly. "Suppose you don't?" He grabbed up a pick leaning against the counter and drove it through the bottoms of a stack of up-ended pails. Then he walked back to the front door, brushing everything off the counter onto the floor as he went. At the door he paused and looked back. "We'll be back at sundown. You'd better be gone. Come on, Jack."

The second man, his pistol still leveled at Tom, backed to the door. There he holstered the sixgun and both men left the cabin, mounted their horses and rode off.

Tom went to the door and stared after them as they rode the hundred yards back to the edge of town. The fears that had assailed him when he'd ridden past the general store this morning were being realized. This same thing had happened before on the long drive out from the States, and it was happening again. Established merchants didn't want any competition from newcomers; and

here, evidently not even from one setting up shop in an abandoned log cabin beyond the edge of town.

TOM LOOKED behind him into the old cabin. He'd put in a good day's work since mid-morning, stretching the tarpaulin across the top of the cabin to replace the fallen-in roof, setting up the counter along one side of the store and hammering up rows of shelves behind it. He hated the thought of giving it all up now and moving on to some other town.

Actually, there weren't many more towns he could move on to, even if he wanted to go. His money was running out, and, more important, so was time. It was three months now since he'd left home back in Ohio, and with the pressure they could exert on her in his absence, Ruth's folks would soon be forcing her to give him up and turn to someone else.

He couldn't allow that, especially now that success seemed so near. He'd passed up other towns for one reason or another, but Bluestone had taken his fancy the moment he'd driven in. It lay at the head of a rich valley and looked like a good town to settle in and raise a family. No pair of local hardcases and a selfish merchant were going to drive him out, he decided grimly, not when his own and Ruth's future was at stake.

Tom picked up his hat from a box near the door and clapped it on his head, tied the sign rope across the door again and set out along the road to town. It was after business hours now, and the main street was quiet. As he walked along the boardwalk, Tom carefully eyed the few riders in the street and the townsmen passing him homeward bound on the boardwalk. If the two gunmen were around, he wanted to see them first. At the door to the sheriff's office he took a last look around and stepped inside.

A low railing divided the office in two, with a half-dozen chairs scattered along the front wall and a roll-top desk and a table in the rear. At the desk a rawboned, middle-aged man with a badge on his shirt sat sleeping, his feet tucked out of sight under the roll top.

"Hello," Tom said. He moved up to the low railing and rapped on it with his fist. "Hello. Hello."

The sheriff raised his head and drew his feet out of the desk and stared at Tom with bloodshot eyes. He yawned, stretched and painfully placed them on the floor. He rubbed his hands over his face and yawned again.

Tom watched him impatiently. "I sure hate to pester you in the middle of the night like this," he said.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "Never mind that," he said. "What do you want?"

"I want protection," Tom said. "I took over the old Murchison cabin down near the creek and I'm putting a store in there." He went on to tell what had happened.

THE SHERIFF nodded. "That sounds like Jack Weaver and Fred Grissom. Don't let them two worry you none. You're new here and they was just indulgin' in a little horseplay."

"Horseplay! Ruining six of my pails and getting my merchandise all dirty—you call that horseplay? It's your job to see that a man can carry on his business without a pair of toughs coming around and wrecking his store."

"Don't tell me what my job is," the sheriff said. "I got a lot more important things on my mind than a little horseplay." He waved toward the side wall where dozens of reward dodgers were pinned. "Hold-ups, horse thieves, bank robbers, rustlers, and now a stage-coach robbery and a gold shipment stole. I been riding myself dizzy trying to cut sign on some of these jaspers, and I ain't going to throw that over just to tell a couple of tough boys to stop playing games with a spooky pilgrim. It likely won't happen again, anyway."

"You bet it won't," Tom said. "If it does, there'll be some real excitement around here."

"Now calm down," the sheriff said. "Those boys are pretty rough. If you go getting them riled up, they could be right troublesome."

"So could I," Tom said. "They aren't the only ones who can carry guns."

The sheriff frowned and came over to Tom at the rail. "I don't want to hear any more of that talk," he said quietly. "This is a quiet town and I aim to keep it that way. I won't allow no gunplay. You understand?"

"Sure, I understand," Tom said. "But do they understand?"

The sheriff shook his head wearily. "Forget about them, I tell you. They never hurt nobody who didn't bother them first."

"Bother them first? This is all my fault, is that it?"

"It will be," the sheriff said, "if you go around with a chip on your shoulder." He leveled a finger at Tom. "I'm warning you, pilgrim, stay in line. I don't want any trouble out of you—not a look, not a word, not a move—or, so help me, I'll throw you in the cooler until your groceries rot away. Do you understand me?"

Tom glared at the lawman. "You bet I do," he said, and stamped out of the office. He stood outside on the boardwalk a few moments, fighting down the anger that boiled within him. *Horseplay!* The sheriff was either stupid or loco. There was no help here. There was more trouble, in fact, for if he obeyed the sheriff's order, he would be defenseless. But the man couldn't really expect him to stand idly by while Weaver and Grissom destroyed his property.

The safest thing to do, perhaps, was to leave town. But with time wasting away and his money fast dwindling, that was impossible. He might not find a place like Bluestone again for weeks or maybe even months. Even if he could hold out that long, Ruth, with her family nagging her, might not be able to. She had to come out to him soon if she was to come at all.

When they'd first begun seeing each other, her mother and father had objected strenuously. They'd scorned the thought of their daughter marrying a mere grocer. It had been a difficult time for Ruth, with him pulling her one way and her family tugging another, but they'd finally compromised. Ruth's folks would loan him money to come out West and open a store, but the marriage would be postponed until he had established

himself. He knew, of course, that her family had secretly hoped he'd fail and that, hundreds of miles away, he would drop out of Ruth's life. But this, he swore, he would never do, not even if it meant taking on all the hardcases in town and the sheriff besides.

TOM STARTED back toward his cabin. He was half tempted to look up the proprietor of Carter's General Store and have it out with the men, but dusk was falling and he wanted to get back to his own place before dark. He wanted to be there waiting, so if Weaver and Grissom returned looking for trouble, they'd be sure to find it.

Tom left the boardwalk at the edge of town and walked along the road toward the cabin. The broad valley began to narrow here and the hills loomed dusky blue in the distance. It was quiet and cool and the shadows of evening lay dark along the creek. Far overhead the sun's last rays glowed red and yellow on cloud shreds riding high. Tom turned off the road at his store and started into the cabin. At the door he stopped short. Sitting on the counter in the darkened store were Weaver and Grissom and they were gun hung.

"You're still here, I see," Grissom said.

"I aim to stay," Tom said.

Grissom shrugged. "Suit yourself." He jumped off the counter. "Watch him, Jack."

Weaver drew his pistol and came up to the front of the store near Tom. Grissom heaved at the counter and pulled it over with a crash. Then he picked up an axe leaning against the wall and went to work on the shelves. Under his heavy blows, they splintered and crashed to the dirt floor, carrying canned goods and yard goods with them. Grissom heaved everything on top of the mounds of unpacked merchandise in the center of the cabin and climbed up on the pile of wreckage, ripped down the tarpaulin over the top of the cabin and wadded it into the goods at his feet. Then he rolled two kegs of kerosene to the top of the heap and broached them, spilling kerosene down through the heap of Tom's merchandise.

Tom stood watching the destruction of his store and his dreams. He felt his anger rising molten within him as the pile of his hard-bought goods grew under Grissom's ravaging hand. He clenched his fists and his jaw tightened when Grissom jumped down from the mound and swaggered up to Tom.

"You was warned," Grissom said. "You should have gone when you was told."

Tom was silent, staring at the leering Grissom. Suddenly he ducked forward and smashed his fist into Grissom's jaw. Grissom staggered back, but the blow was high and the man only shaken. Tom crowded in on him, but before the two could meet, Weaver raised his pistol and brought it down hard on Tom's head.

Dazed, Tom dropped to his knees. He was trying to shake off the darkness that was surging up around him when another blow drove him through the black curtain of unconsciousness....

HE AWOKE to a steady throb of pain in his head. He found himself lying on his back in the long grass, staring up at a star-filled sky. Slowly, fighting the pain that pounded in his head, he rolled over and struggled to his knees. In the faint starlight he made out the dark, shapeless blobs that were his wagon and beyond it the cabin.

He got to his feet, slowly. Weaver and Grissom had probably left him for dead, he thought. It was late now. There were no sounds, and no lights showed from town. Holding tight against the pain in his head, he staggered to the cabin and dropped onto the doorsill. The reek of kerosene reminded him again of what had happened earlier and he dropped his head into his hands.

All was lost now. His merchandise was gone and he had no money to buy more. Ruth was gone, too, and with her went his own life. He could probably scrounge out a living of some kind, of course, and bring her out here; but she'd had everything an indulgent family could give her back home, and he could never ask her to endure a grinding, back-breaking life of poverty.

Suddenly Tom raised his head and listened intently. Someone was coming along the road, his boots thudding dully in the thick dust. Tom moved away from the cabin into the grass, where he crouched low and waited, straining to see through the night.

The footfalls grew louder, and Tom soon made out the sound of two men walking. They were talking softly and he recognized the voices of Weaver and Grissom. Tom's jaw tightened and a faint smile twisted his lips. They'd come back to finish the job apparently. Good. He had a job of his own he'd like to finish, and these two figured prominently in it. He started to move toward his wagon and the rifle there when a clang of metal stopped him.

"Easy with those shovels," Grissom said.

"Who's going to hear them—what's his-name's ghost?"

"Ghost hell," Grissom said. He's gone."

"Gone?"

"That's right. He was lying right here when we left and now he's gone. A good job you did."

"I swear I hit him a lick that would have killed a horse. He couldn't have got far."

"His hat must have saved him," Grissom said. "We'll never find him in the dark, so we better hurry with that gold. No telling where he got to."

The vague shadows of the two men disappeared into the larger darkness of the cabin. Tom moved in a little closer and heard the steady scuff of shovels digging into the dirt floor. For a few moments he stood there listening. *Here were the stage coach bandits the sheriff was looking for, right under his nose.* They'd brought the stolen gold here and buried it in the abandoned cabin near town, where it was easily watched over and easily gotten to, and where no one would suspect it of being hidden.

Tom dropped back into the grass and moved toward the road, but after a few steps he pulled up. He couldn't go and get the sheriff. By the time he got into town and found the lawman and convinced him of what was happening out here, Wea-

ver and Grissom would be gone. Tom lay frowning in the grass, trying to piece together some plan through the heavy throbbing in his head. And suddenly he had it.

Quietly he stole through the grass to his wagon, where he grabbed up his rifle, a blanket and a lantern. He carried them over to the road in front of the cabin, where, hiding under the blanket, he lighted the lantern. He turned the wick high, stood up and hurled the lantern through the air. It arced in a graceful flaming curve through the dark of night and disappeared into the roofless cabin.

FOR A MOMENT all was dark again, and then the kerosene-soaked pile of goods inside the cabin burst into flame. With a roar the flames leaped high over the top of the cabin, reaching frantically for the sky.

Out of the cabin door raced Weaver and Grissom. Tom, crouching hidden in the tall grass, was waiting for them. He snapped the rifle to his shoulder and squeezed off a shot. Weaver screamed, grabbed his leg and dropped writhing to the ground. Grissom, behind him, hesitated, peering anxiously into the menacing gloom beyond the edge of the fire's light. Tom sent a second shot whistling near the man, and Grissom raised his hands overhead.

In town, lights flicked on in windows, voices were raised, and soon the street was filled with ghostly figures flitting about in the faint light of lanterns. Within minutes a group of men marched out toward the cabin, the sheriff in the lead. When the sheriff had come within several yards of Weaver and Grissom, Tom rose up out of the grass and walked over to the group of men.

"You!" the sheriff said. "I warned you, pilgrim!"

"Calm down, Sheriff," Tom said. "These are a couple of the men you've been trailing. The ones who held up your stage coach, it looks like. They'd buried the gold inside this old cabin, so when I started to open up my store, they tried to scare me out."

"That's a lie," Grissom said. "He's the one you want, Sheriff. It's his
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TOO MUCH GRASS

by GILES A. LUTZ

There was no misunderstanding, no need for palaver. Either Loney moved his cattle off this lush graze pronto or they'd be moved for him—permanently.....

IT HAD BEEN a long time since Loney Davis had seen grass like this. It had been a long time since the herd had seen such grass, too, though it was not the sight or smell of the grass that broke them into an awkward, shambling run. It took the smell of water to do that. He restrained his horse from charging after them and pulled the handkerchief down from around his nose and mouth. There was little dust in riding the drag in grass like this, though it was beginning to dry, and a man could hear its crisp crackling as he moved through it.

He sat slack-jointed and weary in the saddle. His hard, wide shoulders sagged, and for an instant there were no thoughts on his face, just a sinking into this blessed, idle moment. He lifted his head and watched his brother, Ames

Davis, ride back toward him. He had to think hard to recall when he had seen such contentment on Ames' face.

As Ames pulled up, Loney said, "Water ahead?"

It was a useless question, both of them knew there was water ahead. The horses knew it, too, for they pawed nervously beneath the riders.

Ames nodded. "The bench slopes down to a river." His voice quickened with enthusiasm. "Prettiest country I've seen in a long time. Big thicket of hazel and arrowwood and scrub oak half-way along the bench. Grazing everywhere you look."

Loney watched the last of the cattle disappear over the crest. "Toucey with them at the river?"

Ames nodded with quick impatience. "Quit fretting. Our worries are over."

Maybe, Loney thought. And maybe not. They had started out with six hundred head and a generous count might give them two hundred left. The parched, drought-stricken country to the southwest had driven them out, and they had left the land they owned. Owing empty land made

a man nothing. It had to produce, or it was worse than valueless. It had been a hard drive. Loney did not like to remember how many days. The weak cattle went first, and for awhile they had shot the ones that fell. Then they just pulled around the fallen ones and left them. That many rifle cartridges ran into a pile of money, and there was little enough of that to start with.

Ames rolled a cigarette. He was seventeen, six

years Loney's junior. He had a big, beefy face with the happy openness of a child's. He hated being worried or plagued. He was willing to do his part



in any work, but he did not want his mind troubled.

He said triumphantly, "Didn't I tell you it'd all work out?"

He's a good kid, Loney thought fiercely. There were just the two of them left, and he had struggled for four long years to hold their little baling-wire spread together. Ames had helped a lot the last couple of years, but by then no one's efforts were much good. It had been a question to get out with what a man could move, or let the stuff die. There was no market for cattle that were so gaunted that a man could hang his hat on either hip-bone. But two hundred head was far better than starting completely over, if they could have a few weeks on grass like this, they could make it.

IT WAS odd that this little valley was just waiting for them. If it was open land as Toucey claimed, someone had surely missed a bet. It was plain to see that this grass had not been grazed at all. It had grown tall, then fallen over, entangling in a thick mat.

Ames said, "I kept thinking Toucey was talking through his hat, when he said he knew of this place."

Loney nodded his agreement. Toucey had come to them five days ago and offered to lead them to plentiful grass and water. He had said it was a hidden valley that few people knew about. It had been an improbable story, but frantic men listened to improbable stories.

Ames said, "We dropped down out of the mountains and right smack into heaven, Loney."

Loney nodded. Ames said it pretty well. After all the heat and parched land, this bowl did indeed look like heaven.

He lifted the reins, and the horse sprang into motion, anxious to get to the water. He owed Toucey a great deal. Again that wonder came into his mind as to what private spur prodded Toucey. The man was a little, scrawny, bent critter with a deep sullenness in his face. His kind never got on with the world, Loney thought, and knew a pity for the man. Maybe he could make it easier for Toucey

in the future; he sure owed him far more than that.

He rode past the outflung finger of the thicket, across the sloping bench, and the blue, sparkling waters of a mountain river was before him. Lord, he had forgotten how good a clear piece of water looked. For so very long he had seen only small, muddy pools in dried-up stream beds, holes not big enough to water all the cattle at once, and the weak ones were trampled under by the push of the stronger, frantic ones. There was plenty of water here for all of them, and the first arrivals had already drunk their fill and were grazing along the banks. As Loney rode past them he thought their sides already looked more filled out. Just a week of water and grass, and most of those hollow sides would disappear.

He stopped beside Toucey and said, "It's better even than you said."

Toucey grunted. He put a brief glance, and Loney wondered about it. Maybe he hates everybody, he thought. Maybe the world's kicked him around so much he's all twisted in his mind. He felt that pity again as he looked at the thin, dirty, little man. Toucey's face was heavily bearded, and tobacco juice encrusted his chin. Just the looks of him would keep him from being wanted in many places, Loney thought.

He must be wrong about the hate in Toucey's eyes. Or if he had seen it, it was not directed at him here. But it was odd how Toucey had looked him up outside that hot, dusty town some thirty miles back. It was odd— Loney shrugged away the thoughts. A man was given a miracle and he turned it over to see if it had a price tag on it? He grinned at the thought.

He said, "Oughta be partridge in that thicket. Fresh bird wouldn't taste bad tonight, would it?"

Toucey grunted again, and Loney felt a surge of irritation. Hard little cuss to know.

It was not difficult to shoot three of the birds. He pinched the neck of a still fluttering bird and stilled its struggles. He hummed a range ballad as he approached the campfire. It had been a long time since his heart had felt so light.



BY THE time he had the birds cleaned, Ames had everything else ready. He had pan bread in the skillet and coffee bubbling in the big iron pot. Toucey always made Ames mad. The man was no help around a camp. Not too good with a herd, either. But he had led them here, and Loney could forgive him everything else.

He spitted the fowls and hung them just out of reach of the leaping flames. Their juices sputtered as it dropped into the fire. Give a man hope and a full belly, and he found his peace. He knew the hope, and the full belly was only moments away. He thought he had his peace.

He put the browned birds on a tinplate and yelled, "Shall I throw it out?"

He grinned at Ames' answering whoop. Loney often wondered where Ames put all the food he ate. He yelled, "Toucey," and received no answer. He said a soft swear word and asked, "Where'd he go?"

Ames' mouth was full, and he shrugged his answer. The shrug said he did not care.

Loney was tempted to let Toucey go, but he wanted nothing to spoil the contentment of being here. Toucey had certainly earned the right to sit at the first worry-free meal. But where had the little cuss slipped off to? Loney had seen him, loung-

ing in the shadows outside of the fire, as he was preparing the birds.

He took a step, and a voice, from outside the radius of the firelight, said coldly, "You know you're trespassing, don't you?"

Surprise widened his eyes at the timber of the voice. That was a girl speaking and the last thing he had in mind. The fire radiance was in his eyes, and he could barely make out the blurred form of the horse and the shadowy figure above it.

He said mildly, "I always like to see who I'm talking to."

He heard the sound of her quickened breath as though his words angered her. Then she moved the horse forward into the light.

He stared in dumb wonder. It had been a long time since he had seen a girl as pretty as this one. She had dark hair that the firelight touched and put red glows in. It was hard to tell the exact color of her eyes, but they were dark and flashingly proud. The nose was a straight line, and it would have been a cold line except for the softening of the full lips beneath it.

She had a proud, determined chin, and it was thrust belligerently forward at Loney. She wore a divided riding skirt, and her boots were new and expensive. He thought her white hat probably cost more than his entire outfit, and he felt like a tramp, standing before her in his dusty and trail-worn clothes.

He rubbed a questing knuckle along his chin line. He sure wished he had shaved this morning. He looked around at Ames, and Ames was staring open-mouthed, a leg of the bird held suspended halfway between his mouth and plate.

LONEY LOOKED back at the girl and grinned. He judged he had a couple of years on her, and that gave him back some of his assurance. He had a good grin, it spread all over his face and lighted his blue eyes. That grin had met with feminine approval before. It was not now. It faltered a little as her look remained cold and impersonal.

He said earnestly, "Ma'am, I sure didn't intend any trespassing. I've got some trail-worn cows that need some

time near this grass and water. If it's your land, I'll make it right with you."

The softness of her mouth completely disappeared. Her horse danced, and she quieted it with an angry hand. A wrinkle appeared between Loney's eyebrows. It looked as though his words about the cows had stirred her in some way.

"It's our land," she cried. "And you'll get those cows off it. Tonight!"

She used more passion than was called for, Loney thought, and the stubborn streak that was never very far below the surface came to light. He said flatly, "I said I'd pay for any grass we use. From the looks of it, it hasn't been grazed for a long time. It's downright sinful to let grass like this go to waste."

She leaned forward, the quirt in her hand jerked, and Loney thought she was going to hit him with it. He stared her down, his eyes hard and probing. She had the grace to blush.

She said, "We'll give you until noon tomorrow to get your cows off our land. Then father will call the sheriff."

She whirled the horse, jabbed her spurs home, and it sprang into an instant run. Loney noticed the direction the horse took. He thoughtfully rubbed his beard stubble.

Ames said in awe, "She was plumb hot. What was that all about, Loney?"

Loney shook his head. He wished he knew. He yelled for Toucey, he yelled until he was hoarse. He went out to look for Toucey's horse, and it was gone. He remained motionless a long while, a hard glint in his eyes. It sure looked as though Toucey had deliberately steered them into something. But what?

In the morning, he shaved, put on a clean shirt, and said against the open jeer in Ames' eyes, "I don't want to look like a bum when I talk to those people." He swung into the saddle and said, "Stay with the herd. And if Toucey shows up, keep him here until I get back." He doubted very much if he would see Toucey again. He rode off in the direction the girl had taken last night, a frown marring his face. It did not seem possible for a man to stay peaceful for very long.

HE COVERED almost two miles before he saw the house. He stopped on the crest of a little rest and approved of the setting. The house nestled in a grove of oak, which would give it shade in the summer and protection from the winter winds. The outbuildings were painted and neat, and he could see no sagging fences. It looked sort of empty and desolate though, and he studied it. It came to him all at once why it looked empty. He had not seen a head of stock all the way here, nor were there any to be seen around the house. He shook his head. All that grass and nothing to eat it.

He moved toward the house, wanting to talk to the girl's father. He kind of hoped he saw her again though, and that slow grin touched his face.

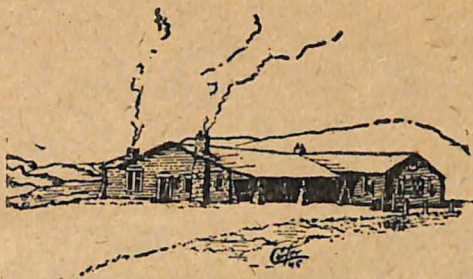
As he neared the house he could see evidence of neglect. Paint peeling in a few places and here and there a board splintering and sagging. From a distance it had looked as pretty as a new saddle. Shame to let a place start running down. Once it started it sure hit a downhill grade. Neglect was like a runaway—a lot easier to catch before it started.

He was almost to the porch before he saw the man, sitting in the chair in a shadowy corner. It was not a cold day, but the man wore a coat, and a blanket was across his lap. Loney realized the man had watched him all the way and never opened his mouth in greeting. He did not ask him to light down, either.

The face was pale and thin, the bone structure standing out in sharp relief. The face showed signs of a sickness. Those eyes stared coldly at Loney, and he thought, the same eyes as the girl's.

He said, "Howdy." His greeting and grin struck no answering response. He kept a grip on his rising anger. He did not relish being treated this way. He said, "Talked to your daughter last night. A little misunderstanding between us. I'd like to—"

A cold, even voice interrupted him. "No misunderstanding. I have already sent notice to the sheriff that you are trespassing. You will have your cattle off my land before noon, or he will attach them for damages."



Loney's eyes blazed. Why, dog-gone such an ornery, old rooster. He said, "Wait a minute. We can work out something. All this grass—"

The man said, "Until noon. It makes no difference to me which way you decide."

Loney's hands opened and closed helplessly. What could he do? It was the man's land. He swore at Toucey under his breath. He wanted to see Toucey again; he had some things to hash over with him.

He said curtly, "Thanks for nothing."

He jerked his horse around and kicked it into a fast lope. He was glad he had not seen the girl again, he did not ever want to see any of that tribe. He jabbed the spurs home, forcing his horse into a top run. He kept it moving for a mile, and the wind could not whip the heat out of his face. The horse was blowing hard when he finally stopped to give it a breather. It made Loney sick to see all this grass going to waste. Ames was going to be sick, too, when Loney told him about it.

He looked back over his shoulder in the direction of the house, his eyes filled with bitter resentment. He could not see it from here, and it was just as well he could not. It was going to be a long time before he got the taste of those people out of his mouth.

His eyes widened, and he whirled the horse around. A black, oily cloud of smoke rolled up above the horizon. He had seen clouds like that before. That was fire with a good start to be raising that much smoke. He hesitated, then kicked the horse forward. It had been a losing argument, telling himself he did not care what was happening at the house. There was a girl there, and from the looks, a sick man. With all this semi-dried grass around, fire would run like the wind.

HE SPURRED over the rise and saw the flames advancing down the opposite slope. There was a wind pushing it down the slope, and Loney breathed a prayer of relief that it was not stronger. He saw two figures, small and distinct, at this distance, in the yard, making slow progress toward the barn. At the rate they were moving, the fire crawling through the stand of yellow wild hay in a choked tangle of half-dead orchard, could catch them. Smoke was getting lighter in color but heavier in volume. Loney whooped to let them know he was coming and spurred down the hill.

He threw off as he reached them, and the girl turned fear-widened eyes toward him. "Help me," she gasped. "Help me get him out of here."

Her father put expressionless eyes on Loney, and Loney swore deep inside. Common decency would not let him do anything else but help them.

He saw that the man dragged a stiffened left leg, and he moved to him and took his weight from the girl's shoulders. He asked, "Can you ride?" and the man nodded. Loney looked at the creeping line of fire. It was drawing nearer and nearer the house, and he was going to have to work fast to save it—if it could be saved.

He helped the man into the saddle and headed the horse toward a bare spot near the top of the slope. He said, "Stay there until I get it turned or out. Ride on, if it gets close to you." He looked at the girl and said, "Saddle a horse and get out of here."

He ran past the barn, scooping up a shovel, leaning against its wall. He lit a backfire, encouraging it to move against the oncoming fire. He flailed furiously with the shovel, when it insisted in creeping toward the house and outbuildings. His breath grew labored in his throat, and his face felt hot and puffy. He ran up and down the line like a wild man, and the tremble became more pronounced in his legs. He knew one man could not possibly extend the line of the fire-guard far enough to protect the house and barn, but his stubbornness would not let him quit.

He turned to chase an elusive tongue of flame and saw the girl. She

worked fifty yards from him, lighting new backfires, and pounding savagely as fingers of flame persisted in going the wrong direction. She had caught on quick, and Loney let her stay. He needed her. He ran up to her and yelled, "Watch yourself."

Her face was soot-blackened, and rivulets of sweat had cut clean paths through the black mask. She gave him a strained, half smile and retorted, "You take care of yourself."

IT WAS ODD how his legs that had been trembling a moment ago now felt as though they had new strength in them. He ran to the other end of the fire-line, struck a match, and extended it a dozen yards farther. He saw with a sinking heart that even with her help, it wasn't going to be enough. One more man might turn it, and where was he going to get that man? He knew his eyebrows were gone, and the soles of his boots felt smoking hot. His arms were getting heavy. If he only had another man—

He heard a whoop and the pound of hoofs. He looked around, and here came Ames, cowboying it like he was going to a rodeo. Loney said a prayer of thanks. He needed that fresh, young strength.

Ames said, "Saw the smoke. When you didn't come back figured you were in trouble. Where do I start?"

Loney put him to extending the backfire beyond the barn. There wasn't much time now, but if he could only put a strip of ten or twelve blackened, burned feet between the buildings and the approaching fire, he thought they would be saved.

The fire met the backfire and flamed high in the joining, then died sullenly out. It crawled around both ends, leaving the house and outbuildings standing in a little island of unburned grass.

Loney leaned on his shovel and panted hard. The slope, up which the fire was now crawling, was rocky, and the fire was finding it harder going. The crest was even rockier, and Loney thought the fire would die out somewhere there. He looked at the girl. Her face was covered with her hands, and her shoulders shook as she sobbed. He could understand the sheer weariness that brought on that

sobbing. He felt a little like it, himself. He moved to her and touched her shoulder.

"Here now," he said softly. "We got it whipped."

There were more clean channels on her cheeks, cut by her tears. Her face was a mess, and Loney thought he had never seen.

She said brokenly, "We tried to run you off. If you hadn't been here—"

He thought she was going to break down completely, then she caught herself and said, "Mother was killed by a crazed steer over a year ago. Father was with her, but he couldn't save her. He got his leg hurt then. He swore there would never be another head of cattle on this place as long as he lived."

Loney stared at her. If her mother were anything like this girl, he could understand how a man's mind might become a little crazed over his loss. But pulling into a shell never solved anything.

She saw the weighing in his eyes and said defiantly, "But you couldn't understand how anyone could love like that."

He said patiently, "I can understand. My father was killed by a horse. I loved him, too. But I didn't blame all horses for it. A man's got to strike some kind of a balance."

HE HAD NOT realized her father had ridden up until he spoke. The man said, "Sitting up there watching you work made me do a lot of thinking. A man can get all turned in on himself until nothing comes straight."

Loney noticed his eyes were not cold and bitter now. He could see some hurt in them, but a different thing than it used to be. This was a human hurt, it asked for help and understanding.

He said steadily, "She wouldn't have wanted you going this road. Land wasn't meant to be left empty."

He thought for an instant he had gone too far, then he saw the slow nod. "Maybe you're right," the man said. "I made Sharon think the same way I did, and that was wrong, too."

Loney flashed a glance at her. Sharon. He liked the name.

"I'm Jeff Hamilton," the man said.

"If I'd kept on running cattle, this grass wouldn't have been so tall. It would've been harder for a fire to take a hold. I guess Somebody is trying to point out a few things to me. Maybe it's time there were cattle on this place again."

The happiness was starting in Loney again, beating like a drum. Hamilton had not said so, but Loney had a feeling the cattle he meant could readily be that tired trail herd.

He started to say something, and an ugly whip-lash crack split the stillness. The slug was close, he heard its evil whine overhead. He pulled Hamilton out of the saddle and threw him flat in the grass. That unseen rifleman was not fooling, the closeness of the slug told that.

Ames had swept Sharon off her feet. Loney pressed tight against the ground, hoping the tall grass gave them some cover from the rifleman. He said softly, "I kinda had a feeling this was a set fire. You know a man named Toucey?"

"Last hand I fired," Hamilton said. "He was no good. Dirty and a petty thief. Swore he'd get even with me."

So that was how it was. Toucey had waited until he thought he had the right set-up. He had led the Davis brothers here, knowing they were trespassing, knowing that Hamilton would order them off. The fire would be a natural thing to blame on the Davises, on the grounds that they were being run off. Perhaps Toucey had figured on killing Hamilton and Sharon from the start. That, too could be blamed on Loney and Ames.

He said, "You got a gun around here?"

"Rifles in the barn," Hamilton answered. He flinched as another bullet furrowed the grass and plowed into the sod. It was not too close, and Loney thought, he changed that to hoped, that Toucey was shooting blind, hoping that a searching slug would find someone.



HE RAISED himself on his hands, took a deep breath, and made a break for the barn. He covered the distance in a twisting, darting run, and the two shots fired at him were not too close. He slipped around the corner, and he thought he was out of sight from Toucey. He found the rifles, picked up one, inspected it to see that it was loaded, then came back to the corner. He peerd around it and saw the smoke puff from the next shot. It came from the top of the hill, and the blackened expanse before it showed the fire had started from there. Loney marked the rifleman down in that little grove of hazel. He pumped two shots at the grove and thought he saw a flurry of sudden movement there.

He called softly, "Ames, get over here."

He laid down a curtain of fire, while Ames made his run. The one returned shot thunked into the side of the barn. Ames pulled up beside him, panting hard. But he was grinning, he was enjoying this.

Loney said, "Another rifle in the barn. Keep him busy."

He hated leaving Sharon and her father out there, but Hamilton could never make the barn. If Ames could keep Toucey occupied, maybe Toucey might forget about the two out in the grass.

He called, "Stay flat, Sharon and Jeff." Both names rolled easily off his tongue. He looked at Ames and said, "May take me some time," and Ames nodded.

He felt naked after leaving the protecting cover of the barn's wall, but no shots came, and he guessed he was still out of Toucey's sight. He heard the slow, spaced hammering of Ames' shooting, and now and then an answering shot came from the hill. He made a wide sweep, working clear around and behind the hill. He moved as fast as he dared but keeping the noise of his passage to a minimum. The burned grass crushed beneath his boots, and the ashes came up in a black cloud. He would sure hate to walk into a waiting rifle.

He crawled up the back side of the hill, his breathing a painful thing in his throat. Ames kept up that steady

(continued on page 61)

MESSAGE FOR WHITE CLOUD

IT WAS NOON when Adam Hamilton first glimpsed the outline of the log buildings that formed the square of the fort. It was built on a plain beneath gently rolling hills covered with timber. Two hundred feet west of the stockade the Columbia flowed on its way to the sea.

Sight of the only white settlement in a thousand miles filled him with a feeling of gladness and homecoming that, for the moment, erased the churning in his breast. Then he saw the teepees clustered outside the fort and the hatred returned, burning brighter than ever.

An hour later he rode through the gates into the square that housed the chief factor's office, the warehouse, and the few white men who lived here with their Indian wives and operated

by
**M. F.
WENSRICH**

the company's business in this raw wilderness. He went directly to the chief factor's office, dismounted, and looped his bridle around a porch support. He tramped up the steps, palmed the latch, and entered the office.

Thomas Curran, seated at his desk, looked up when he heard the door to his private office open. In every detail of appearance, Curran was the opposite of Adam, who was dressed in buckskins and moccasins, and carried a stubble of several days' growth of beard. Curran wore a suit with a string tie; his face had been freshly shaved that morning. Adam was tall and lean of stature. Curran was thick around his waist, showing that the fields north of the fort had given forth a good crop this season. Curran looked more like a business man in Illinois than the best chief factor in the Oregon Territory.

"You brought in a lot of furs again, Adam, but you've got trouble," Curran said with his unflinching prophesy in the fur business.

Adam guessed Curran had watched him ride through the gates, leading the pack horses loaded with beaver

Each struggled
to disarm the
other.



**No damned Indian was going
to murder Adam Hamilton's partner and
get away with it**

pelts. "A damned Injun murdered Ed," Adam said angrily.

Curran crossed his legs and shifted his bulk in his chair. "So it's finally happened," he murmured.

"But I know who the Injun belongs to. He was on of White Cloud's Injuns. I'm goin' after him and cut out his heart," Adam said bitterly.

Curran uncrossed his legs, rose, and walked over to the window. He looked out a minute, then turned to Adam. His voice was dead serious. "We've never had any trouble with White Cloud or any of his band. They've always brought us a lot of pelts. Generally speaking, they're a peaceful lot. If one of them killed Ed, I'm inclined to think Ed probably had it coming."

"No damned Injun murders my partner and lives, as long as I know where I can find him," Adam said hotly.

"You're putting all Indians into one group again, Adam. You learned that trick from Ed. The Walla Wallas are good trappers and fair traders. White Cloud is a peaceful chief. Ed was always fighting the Indians here in the fort for no other reason than he was drunk. Or he'd pick a fight because he didn't like the Indian's face. I was mighty glad when he left last spring. We haven't had any trouble since."

Adam stalked back and forth across the room. He hauled up abruptly in front of Curran. "Ed was the best damn trapper you ever had."

Curran nodded. "He brought in more furs than any other man if that's what you mean," Curran said. "But he caused more trouble and hard feeling than the rest of you put together. That never balanced off the extra furs."

"That don't change a thing. Ed's dead. I know where I can find the damned Injun who killed him. What are you goin' to do about it?" Adam demanded.

"Nothing," Curran replied coolly.

Adam stared at him a long moment. Then he spit contemptuously on the floor and strode to the door.

"Adam."

Adam turned, his hand on the latch.

"There's only a few of us in this fort. There are hundreds of Indians along this river. You stir them up and we'll all be killed," Curran said.

Adam refused to consider this. He felt the loss of his friend too deeply. "Ed was my partner. He and me had the best season this year that we've ever had. No damn Injun is goin' to kill him and git away with it."

He tramped out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

He left his furs with the clerk, took a fresh horse, bacon, coffee, powder for his rifle, and headed east along the river that same afternoon. Curran's disapproval of this journey was evident. But Curran would not try to stop him, he knew. Curran figured he'd probably be killed by White Cloud's band before he caused the trouble that Curran feared.

IT WAS A two-day ride to the winter camp of the Walla Wallas. He followed the river the first day, the fall wind blowing cold on his face, and he smelled rain in the air. That night he camped on a bluff of sagebrush and brown boulders strewn over the land as though a giant had thrown them up in the air and let them scatter. The river flowed below him. He made coffee and fried bacon, then rolled into his blanket. He was on the trail early the next morning, moving away from the river to the north-timber at the hot springs when he came upon the camp of Chief White Cloud and his small band of Walla Wallas.

The incessant barking of dogs announced his arrival a full ten minutes before he saw the teepees with smoke spiralling up from their tops. Then he passed the horse herd, grazing in the underbrush. His anger increased and his determination gained new vigor—for in that herd he recognized three horses that belong to Ed. He needed no more proof.

The children came running out of camp to peer at him. Two dogs barked and snapped at his horse.

Squaws, busy preparing the evening meal of salmon, glanced up at him, then returned to their cooking. These braves, wrapped in blankets, standing off to one side gave him a casual look. These Walla Wallas were accustomed to white men coming freely into their camps. He was no reason for comment beyond the natural curiosity of the children.

He threaded his way among the teepees until he came to one larger than the rest, and whose bright designs indicated that it belonged to the chief. He dismounted in front of the tent, stepped up to the campfire to warm his chilled body, and waited for White Cloud to appear.

A squaw cooking over a nearby campfire waddled over to the teepee and ducked under the flap. A moment later White Cloud emerged, unhurriedly coming over to Adam. He was a tall Indian with a wide forehead and high cheekbones. He walked nobly and his dark eyes seemed to Adam full of wisdom. His arms were wrapped in a bright blanket. A head-dress of colored eagle feathers was upon his head. Every aspect of this man told Adam that he was a venerable chieftain.

Several young warriors appeared and gathered around their chief. White Cloud raised his hand in greeting. Adam said, "I come with a message for White Cloud."

"Welcome, White Brother. We eat. Then we smoke," White Cloud said as though he had not heard Adam. He motioned to his fire where the squaw was finished cooking fish. White Cloud squatted on the ground before the fire. His warriors followed suit, arranging themselves in a circle around their leader. White Cloud motioned to a vacant spot on his right. Adam, impatient with the delay, nevertheless seated himself beside the chief.

They ate boiled salmon and drank of the warm mineral water from the nearby hot springs. Then the peace pipe was brought out and they smoked. Darkness fell before White Cloud spoke.

The long ceremony preceding the was a man who had lived in the wilderness too long to care much for ceremony any more. He said firmly,

"A white man is dead, murdered by one of your people. The man who did this must return to the fort on the great river with me to answer for his crime."

White Cloud was irritated with the bluntness of Adam's speech. "What makes my white brother so certain that it was one of my people who committed this crime? We are a peaceful people. We do not bother the white men if they do not bother us. Many summers now we have traded our furs with the white men. I cannot believe that one of my young men would murder. My white brother is wrong."

A FLASH of anger passed through Adam but he managed to keep his voice firm rather than express the anger he felt. "White Cloud speaks with a forked tongue. In your horse herd are three horses of the dead white man. I want the warrior who owns those horses."

"My young men have been killed by the white trappers from the fort. I have gone there and asked for the murderers. I have been told that the white men will punish their own for their crimes. It is the same with the Walla Wallas. We punish our own," the old chief said with feeling. The light of the campfire cast long shadows on the circle of men seated around it. The shadows made White Cloud's face seem much broader and older.

Adams was not moved although he knew White Cloud spoke the truth. He thought of Ed and the good times they'd had drinking and trapping together. Ed always had a joke on his lips even though he'd had a little more whiskey than he could hold. And Ed always came back loaded with furs. A cold determination settled on Adam.

He stood up, moving into the full light of the campfire. "A Walla Walla has murdered," he said firmly. "He must pay for his crime."

He stood there, staring at White Cloud, expectant.

The old chief's face was blank and he said nothing. In that instant Adam knew that White Cloud would never give up the Indian who owned those horses. He would have to discover the

warrior for himself. There was the rustle of a blanket. He was surprised to see a young warrior rise and take a step forward. The brave began to talk to Adam and White Cloud.

"My name is Grey Bear," he said with dignity. "I have trapped all the streams that flow into the great river. Never have I raised my arm against in peace. Every sunrise I go to my traps three moons ago. Always the traps are broken and the beaver gone. Many sleeps I watched and waited until I saw this white man of whom you speak robbing my traps. For seven sleeps I watched him without raising my knife. Then I waited by the crooked stream all one night until he came to rob me. Then I killed him. He fought hard but I killed him. He was a thief and so I killed him. He will not rob again."

Adam stared at the young warrior. He had been years in the wilderness and he was well aware of the code of the Indians. With an uneasiness growing on him, he considered Grey Bear's words. He recalled his recent conversation with Curran at the fort. Curran and this Indian had the same opinion of Ed. For the first time in his life he stopped and questioned the amazing luck Ed had had trapping this past summer. Never had Ed brought in so many furs. In other seasons it was Adam who caught three fourths of their pelts. Yet, in spite of all this, he was unwilling to put this Indian's word before Ed's. After all, Ed was a white man.

He eyed Grey Bear coldly. "Can Grey Bear prove what he says or does Grey Bear lie to keep the horses?" The Indian's eyes narrowed slightly and, in spite of the expressionless face, Adam knew he had insulted Grey Bear.

Grey Bear called out sharply. A small Indian boy appeared out of the night. The boy ran quickly to Grey Bear's side. Grey Bear murmured a sentence to him and the boy ran swiftly out of the circle toward the teepees farther east. After a strained moment in which Adam and Grey Bear stared at each other, the boy returned. In his hands he carried a small bundle that made Adam's face sweat even though the chill of November was in the night air. For in the boy's

hands was Ed's possum sack. The boy handed it to Grey Bear who angrily threw it at Adam's feet.

"See now if Grey Bear lies," he demanded.

With a feeling of deep apprehension gathering in him, Adam stooped over and picked up Ed's possum sack. His hands fumbled with the buckskin string. The sack came open and Adam saw that it contained four scalps. Without a single doubt he knew they were Walla Walla scalps. There was only one possible way that Ed could have gotten them—murder! The shock made him tremble and he almost dropped the sack. A terrible weariness seemed to come over him.

He wanted to throw the sack at Grey Bear's feet as the warrior had done to him. Then he looked up at Grey Bear and saw an unreserved expression of righteousness in his black eyes. The weariness immediately disappeared from Adam and the old hatred returned. In the back of his mind he knew he should not push the point but the rashness that had brought him this far was not to be denied.

"Grey Bear has killed," he said to White Cloud. "He must return to the fort with me and explain to the chief factor there. The chief factor will decide if he is to be punished."

Before White Cloud could speak, Grey Bear angrily cast off his blanket. With the true pride of a warrior he addressed himself to Adam and White Cloud and all the braves seated around the campfire.

"Grey Bear has done no wrong," he said, his voice edged with rage. "He is an honorable man. The white trapper has said Grey Bear speaks with a forked tongue. For this the white trapper must die."

GREY BEAR strode angrily from the campfire into the darkness. A moment later he reappeared, armed with his lance and shield.

Stark realization flowed through Adam's brain. He had sorely misjudged Grey Bear. He knew now that Grey Bear was an honorable man; that there was more integrity in this warrior's hand than in all of Ed. But it was too late now. His rashness had carried him too far. He had insulted

Grey Bear. Now he must fight Grey Bear to the death.

Grey Bear waited outside the campfire in a small clearing between the teepees. Adam moved out to meet him, dropping Ed's possum sack behind him. With sudden instinct he threw aside his rifle. Grey Bear looked at him incredulously. Then, not to be outdone in the act of bravery, he threw his lance and shield away, and drew his knife. They stood fifteen feet apart, knives drawn, carefully sizing each other up.

Adam charged. Grey Bear grunted savagely and sprang at him, his knife shimmering in the faint light of the campfire. Just the instant he would have slammed into Grey Bear. Adam stepped quickly to his left, lashing out with his knife. He missed the Indian's chest, barely slicing through the flesh of his biceps. He saw a dark splotch of blood run down Grey Bear's arm. Grey Bear recovered quickly and came at Adam, this time catching Adam a painful blow just under his shoulder blade. Adam felt the warm trickle of blood underneath his buckskins.

With pain shocking through him from his wound Adam shoved Grey Bear away from him. Only for an instant. Grey Bear charged in again. Adam stood stock still, standing his ground. But the force of the impact as Grey Bear slammed into him sent them sprawling on the cold ground. They rolled over and over on the ground, each struggling to disarm the other. Adam felt his strength ebbing and he knew he must end this or die. With effort he rammed his knee up into Grey Bear's crotch. He felt Grey Bear's grip loosen slightly as the Indian grunted in pain. Then twisted himself free, rolled over once to his knees, and quickly shoved himself erect.

The Indian had barely reached his knees when Adam flung himself into Grey Bear, knocking him flat on his back with the breath slammed out of him. Adam was astride Grey Bear, pounding his fist viciously into Grey Bear's ribs until he felt Grey Bear go limp. He sat a moment, panting for breath.

Then he raised himself off the pros-

trate figure of the Indian, knife still in hand. He stood there gulping air into his lungs and realizing that he could not kill this man, even though Grey Bear would have killed him if he were lying unconscious on the ground.

A quick glance around the circle of stern-faced Walla Wallas told him that he could kill Grey Bear and ride unharmed out of this camp. But he knew the peace between the company's trappers and White Cloud's band would be at an end. Grey Bear's blood would be only the first to flow needlessly.

He came over to White Cloud and stopped, his knife held in his hand which hung loosely at his side. "As White Cloud is an honorable chief, so Grey Bear is an honorable warrior," he said. "The Walla Wallas are a peaceful people even as the white trappers are peaceful men. Many summers the Walla Wallas and the white trappers have traded in peace. It must continue so. The white trapper who robbed Grey Bear deserved to die for he was a thief. Grey Bear killed only to protect what belonged to him."

Adam heard a shuffling on the ground behind him. He turned to see Grey Bear standing, looking oddly at him. He knew that Adam could have killed him. Adam stepped over to Grey Bear. He must let Grey Bear save face in front of his own people or Grey Bear would be better off dead.

He strode over to the spot where Ed's possum sack lay and picked it up. He came back to Grey Bear, held out the sack, and said, "This belongs to Grey Bear. The horses that belonged to the white thief are also Grey Bear's for the wrongs that Grey Bear suffered at the hands of the white thief."

Then he turned and held out his knife to Grey Bear. Speaking to White Cloud and the warriors who were seated around him, Adam said, "I give Grey Bear my knife. It has followed me many moons in the mountains. It has saved my life; it has given me food to eat when I was hungry; it has skinned the clothes I wear on my back. Only to my brother would I give it. And I give it to Grey

Bear for he is my brother as all the Walla Walla are my brothers." Then he waited.

Grey Bear looked at his chief and the other braves. From their faces he was satisfied that he had not lost his stature as a brave warrior in their eyes. He accepted the knife from Adam, shoving it in his waist band.

He spoke with sincerity and dignity. "This white trapper is my brother. Let him come and go in peace among us."

For the first time since he had

found Ed's body Adam felt at peace with himself. It was strange that after all these years of Indian hating he should now feel this kinship with them. But he did feel it and it was a good feeling.

White Cloud said, "The way to the fort is two sleeps and the night is cold. Our white brother will stay with us until the sun rises." He indicated his teepee with a wave of his hand.

"Your brother will stay," said Adam. ● END

TOO MUCH GRASS

(continued from page 55)

shooting. That kid loved to shoot a gun, even if he could not see what he was shooting at. Loney made a resolution he would buy Ames all the ammunition he wanted to burn, after this was over.

He cautiously stuck his head over the skyline, and the hazel grove was right before him. He froze, his eyes probing through the foliage, then he saw Toucey's outstretched legs. A bush hid the rest of the man. The boots were pointed toward Loney. Toucey still faced the house and barn, he had no suspicions that Loney was behind him.

Loney inched a few yards closer. He could see all of Toucey now. He stood up, and the rifle came up to his shoulder. "Drop it, Toucey." He had him in his sights now and was tempted to put a bullet through his head.

Toucey's gasp sounded like a startled animal's. He jerked his head around, and Loney saw the yellowed teeth beneath the snarling lip. For an instant he thought Toucey would attempt to swing the rifle around, then Toucey's better sense took over. He could not beat Loney, not with Loney's finger ready to tighten on the trigger.

"Drop it and put up your hands," Loney said again, and the rifle fell from Toucey's sullen grasp.

"Stand up," Loney ordered. He raised his voice in a loud whoop to let Ames know that it was over. "Move ahead," he said, and Toucey shuffled through the trees. Loney hollered again as they came into plain view of

the people below. Wouldn't that be something to have Ames put a bullet into him?

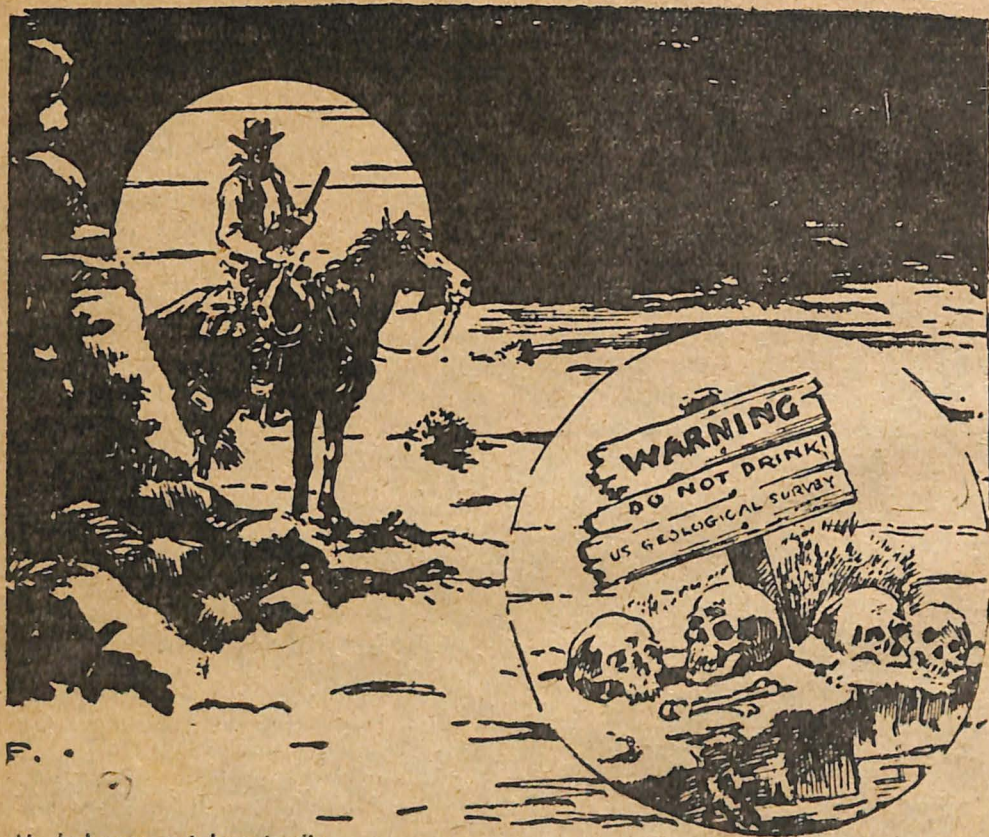
Ames stepped out from behind the corner of the barn and vigorously waved his hat. Loney waved his rifle in return. He saw Sharon and Hamilton straighten from the concealment of the grass. They had been pretty well hidden until now.

He moved Toucey down the slope ahead of him. In the distance, he saw a fast-moving dust cloud, and after a few seconds, the two riders making it. That could be the sheriff Hamilton had sent for and maybe a deputy. The sound of the shots would put that haste into their riding. Loney hoped it was. He wanted to turn over this cringing figure, in front of him, to someone.

He grinned as he thought that an hour ago he might have worried about a sheriff coming. But not now. Something in Hamilton's face told him that all his worrying was over. It was a nice layout below him. Hamilton had the land, he and Ames had the cattle. It should not be hard to work out some kind of a partnership. The place needed some husky men around.

He thought of Sharon, and the word "partnership" came again to his mind, but with a richer, softer meaning. That had to be in the future, but there'd been something in her eyes that would let a man dream.

Loney made Toucey move faster, and he went down the slope with a song rising in his heart. Doggone if he wasn't the happiest, most contented man in the world! ● END



He had come out here to die.

OWLHOOT REBELLION

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN
CLASSIC

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DAWN OF that third day brought the buzzards, a pair. They were cautious at first, wheeling above the littered yard in back of the shack's crumbling wall. Finally one settled on the peaked broken-in-roof of the well-house. The other was bolder, floating in directly to the horse-carcass.

The second bird's slow-moving shadow passed over the face of the man, wakened him. For a long moment he lay there, staring vacantly upward into the blue void of the desert sky. The sound of tearing flesh at length caught his attention, made him turn his head. Then, with a studied deliberation brought on by sheer weakness, he came up onto one elbow and with his right hand lifted the

When Deputy Jim Peters saved that buzzard-branded renegade from alkali death, he didn't figure the owlhoot oldster would gun-scourge his own Malpais spread of the West's deadliest killer crew.....

heavy Colt's .45 from the holster at his thigh. His aim was unsteady, and the explosion of the weapon sent it spinning out of his hand. The buzzards, unhurt, flapped into frantic flight and away. The cracked lips under the man's cornsilk moustache drew out in a thin line, his grizzled face shaping a bleak smile. After that he lay face down, letting the warmth of the sun rid him of the night-long chill that had stiffened his muscles.

This was Lew Tree, outlaw, fifty-four, and facing a chosen death. It was no accident that he now lay here, the line of his body pointing accusingly to the well and the faded sign nailed to one of the uprights above it, "POISON." Day before yesterday he had ridden in here with a half-full canteen and enough food to last him the remaining twenty miles across the desert. But that poorly-lettered warning had filled a need in his mood. He had come out of the saddle and used his own reata to lower the rusty bucket into the well. For the first time in fourteen years he drank his fill—the water was cool, not as bitter as he'd expected—without first watering his dun horse. Once the dun had tried to push on past him and lower his head to the half-full bucket. That had reminded Lew Tree of something. He'd taken off saddle and bridle and tried to drive the dun away.

It was no use. Fourteen years under a gentle hand had taught the animal a few things, one of which was that the company of this soft-spoken man was preferable to heading out alone across the waste of sun and sand that lay horizon to horizon. All that first afternoon Lew Tree had concentrated his attention on breaking off this last and finest friendship, the dun's; for the first time in his life he'd beaten a horse, unmercifully. But the dun came back time and again, head down, and as the first cramps brought on by the poison water knotted the muscles of Lew Tree's stomach he knew that the horse would stay with him until thirst brought him down.

So he had whistled the animal to him where he sat in the shade of the crumbling adobe wall, unable to get up now because of pain in his guts.

The dun had lowered his head and there had been a minute or two of softness, when Tree rubbed the hard flesh behind the horse's ears, the way he'd done since the first day he'd thrown saddle on that short-coupled back. Then the softness left him, and he had put the blued muzzle of his Colt's to the dun's ear and pulled the trigger.

Yesterday he'd crawled once to the well, taken only two swallows of water before his fumbling fingers had lost their grip on the bucket and it had fallen into the depths again. After that he didn't have the strength to pull back the bucket. He debated at some length of using his weapon on himself, as he had on the dun. But the idea of spattering his brains over this desolate spot was nauseous; he was strong enough to wait out his first choice.

This morning his thoughts were laying a clear pattern, the pain in his belly sharpening all his senses. But now that he could think there were the two wheeling shadows of the buzzards to distract his attention. That one shot had frightened them, but only temporarily. Looking up, he could clearly see the turning of their naked red heads as they eyed the waiting meal below.

Lew Tree was a good shot, and now he crawled over the ruin of the adobe wall so that he sat with his back against it. There, he emptied his forty-five at the pair of birds above. Once the largest wheeled out of range, leaving a black pin-feather to float lazily ground-ward. That was the nearest he came to hitting the mark. He thought of reloading the gun; but his disgust at his shaking hand made him lay the weapon in his lap. The sun was warming, and gradually his chin sank to his chest and he dozed.

MINUTES later, the sound of a boot scraping the hard-packed sand nearby jerked him into wakefulness. He looked across in the direction of the sound and met the puzzled stare of a pair of rain-grey eyes set in a lean and bronzed face.

The stranger stood only ten feet away; he was tall, wide framed and his outfit was well worn although

clean-looking like the rest of him. He looked to be thirty, possibly younger. He now came a step closer, holding out a canteen with the cap unscrewed. "Have a drink of good water, old-timer. Guess you can't read. That sign says 'poison.'"

Lew Tree reached for his Colt's, lifted it from the ground and lined it with unmistakable intent: "I can read, I don't want a drink of good water, and I'm goin' to let this thing go off unless you pile out of here!"

The rider hesitated, abrupt amazement sharpening his expression: "You mean you drank that alkali on purpose?" Then, catching the outlaw's brief nod, the muscles along his jaw corded in stubbornness, and he drawled: "The stuff may have you loco, but damned if I'll leave you here!" And he came on another step.

Lew Tree thumbed back the hammer of his weapon, aiming a little to the left of the man's boots, and pulled the trigger. The click of hammer against empty shell-case reminded him that he'd forgotten to reload the weapon. Then, in sudden anger, he lifted the heavy forty-five and threw it at the stranger with all his strength. The gun sailed squarely at its target, but glanced harmlessly off the stranger's shins.

"Now that you've got that off your chest, have a drink." The stranger squatted down alongside, holding out the canteen.

Lew Tree's swinging fist struck the canteen to the ground, so that part of the water was spilled before the stranger righted it. He rocked back on his heels, regarding the outlaw, said shortly, "Am I goin' to have to slug you to make you drink?"

"I reckon you will." Dull anger blazed in Lew Tree's eyes.

"Why?" The stranger brushed aside his vest and reached for a Durham tag hanging from his shirt-pocket.

That gesture, strangely enough, wiped out Lew Tree's anger. For pinned on the pocket of the shirt he saw a nicked badge, lettered, "Deputy Sheriff." He laughed hoarsely, the pain in his guts doubling him up. "Damned if I don't have all the luck!" he said.

"You might call it luck, drinkin' that alkali water. I don't."

"I'm talkin' about that law badge you're wearin'. I'm Lew Tree."

The deputy whistled softly. For a long moment he studied the outlaw, then said, "I'm no bounty hunter. Drink this and let me take you in to a sawbones."

"You go to hell! How many times do I have to tell you I drank that water on purpose? I came here on a fresh horse and with a half full canteen."

"You want to cash in?"

"Don't it look like it?"

Surprise widened the deputy's grey eyes, and suspicion crept in. "Your gang hoorawed the town last night."

"What town?"

"Malpais. I was over in Rockport and heard it. I'm headed back now. Fella named Horn killed the sheriff in a shoot-out."

"Did he?"

"You didn't know, then?"

"I been here three days. Go away."

Lew turned his face to the wall, and let the pain knot his belly.

"Look here," the deputy said presently, after a long and puzzled silence. "You weren't there, were you?"

"I told you I been here three days."

A SHORTER silence; then the deputy said: "Would it help to tell me about it?"

Lew looked briefly at him: "You wouldn't understand." Then he corrected himself. "Maybe you would." His tone was edged with bitterness. "When I rounded that bunch of boys up, we was no different than any maverickin' outfit in this territory—out to get ourselves a stake. Then this Bill Horn drifts in. He's pushed into things I never wanted to and never thought I would. This treecin' a town is one of 'em."

"What's that got to do with you bein' here?"

"He tree'd me too. The rest of the bunch threw in with him."

"You're out?"

"Down and out. Finished, washed up. Now, drag it, will you?" Lew plead. "Hell, can't a man cash in in peace?"

"Why don't you pull out and take your medicine from the law?"

"Hell with the law. I'm takin' my own medicine. If you'll let me alone, you won't have to worry about me."

"You'd only get a couple of years if you could make your story stick. I'd help you with it, too."

Lew Tree gave a mirthless chuckle. "Thanks. I'll help myself."

He wasn't watching closely as the deputy rose to his feet, for the clawing aim of his bunched stomach muscles had made him squint his eyes and clench his teeth. When he felt the hand on his shoulder and looked up, he was too weak to move his head out of the way of the deputy's striking fist.

It wasn't a hard blow, yet hard enough to wipe out Lew Tree's pain-dulled senses. His body hung limp as he was lashed behind the deputy's saddle. And he knew nothing of that long ride to the southern limits of the desert out of that waste of stone and sand and hot sun-glare.

Hours later he opened his eyes to stare upward from his bed at the dark weathered vigas supporting the ceiling of an adobe house. He turned his head and looked about. He was alone in this plainly furnished room. Strangely enough, he felt refreshed.

The pain had eased off. He wondered, idly, how long it would be before the deputy came in through the door to tell him he was under arrest. He really wouldn't mind that, now that he had the chance to think it through. Always honest with himself, he had to admit that this was the best way out, to turn himself over to the law and take what was coming to him. When he was a free man once more he'd make a new start.

All at once the quietness of the house was wiped out by a voice that shuttled in through the open doorway to his room. It was a strange voice, a woman's, rich and musical: "Jim, you can't do this!"

There was a moment of silence; then came a voice Lew Tree recognized as the deputy's: "Nothing can happen, Helen. This gent Horn is bluffing. I'll have twenty guns behind me."

"But you agreed to meet him alone," the girl said. "At sundown, if he hadn't left town."

A step crossed the room beyond; then there was a creaking of hinges, and Jim Peters, deputy sheriff of Jemos County, Arizona, saying gruffly: "I'll be back in half an hour. I have to do it."

A door slammed, and then Lew Tree could hear the stifled sobs of the woman in there. He listened with a coldness settling through him. He turned his head. On a chair alongside the bed lay his clothes, neatly folded, less dusty than he remembered them. And from the head of the chair hung his sagging shell-belt and empty holster.

He threw back the covers, swung his feet to the floor. A surge of dizziness made him take his head in his hands for a moment—until something more urgent made him throw caution aside and reach for his levis.

He was dressed in less than a minute, buckling his belt about his thighs, tying down the holster. At the scrape of his boots shifting against the board floor, the sounds from the other room broke off abruptly.

SHORTLY, the woman's voice called, "Can I do anything for you?" And then her steps were coming across the room beyond and she was standing in the doorway. When she saw Lew Tree, her expression became one of alarm.

"You mustn't," she said. "The doctor said you were to rest for at least three days." Then, in mock sternness: "Don't make me be cross with you."

In a single glance Lew Tree took in the tall gracefulness of this young woman, the beauty of a strong face, blue eyes and ash-blonde hair. Tears she tried to hide brightened the look of those eyes; she tried to hide, too, the fear that lay deep in them, couldn't.

"He's gone out to meet Bill Horn?" Lew asked.

She nodded. Then, firmly: "You must get back in bed."

Lew shook his head: "What I want you to do is hunt me up my gun, Miss. Then I won't be botherin' you any more."

Her glance narrowed as she saw that he intended doing: "You can't

help Jim. I'm his wife, and he wouldn't listen to me."

"In a way, it was me that brought this on. He's told you who I am?" When he caught the answering shake of her head, he added: "I'm Lew Tree."

She couldn't check the scorn that flashed into her eyes the instant his words were out. It was plain that she knew of him. But she was kind enough to say: "You're safe here. Jim's no bounty hunter."

"Would it be too much trouble gettin' me my iron?" Lew came back to the point.

"I won't let you go."

Lew could see the stubbornness come into her eyes. It made him forget his empty holster and step to the window. As he raised one booted foot and stepped across the sill, the girl called, "Please! You're not well!" But then he was gone, striding out across the yard toward the street. And he was glancing toward the west, toward the blood-red disc of the sun that hung above the flat horizon. Sight of that hurried his dragging steps.

Malpais was a cow-town, serving a vast stretch of range that spread east, west and south, away from the desert. Its one street was string-straight, unshaded except for scattered locusts and poplars in the yards of the better houses, one of which was Jim Peters'. Further down the hard-packed path Lew Tree stepped up onto an awninged plank walk that fronted the two dozen stores whose false fronts now reflected redly the last strong sunlight.

A few buckboards and fewer saddle-horses were scattered at the hitch-rails, the ponies downheaded, hipshot, tails lethargically swinging at the flies. Even for the fetlock-deep dust along the street the air was clear and still and hot; and, strangely, the hush of evening seemed to hold this small cluster of humanity under an ominous spell. Lew Tree couldn't see a man moving along the walks, although he made out a few loafing in the shelter of doorways.

He understood this utter stillness as he saw Jim Peters' tall shape leave the shelter of the awning opposite, twenty yards up along the street.

Sight of the deputy hurried Lew Tree's steps, made them firmer as he stiffened himself against the weakness of his legs.

Ten steps further along he found what he wanted, two men who stood in the wide doorway of a store looking up the street, one with his side to him. Unceremoniously, Lew Tree reached out and lifted the man's revolver from the leather sheath at his thigh, saying tersely, "You'll get this back." He inspected the weapon, paused to test the action and see that it was loaded, then dropped it in his holster.

THE MAN had opened his mouth to protest, even reached out a hand to grab the outlaw's sleeve, when all at once recognition wiped out the flaring anger in his glance and he leaned back to whisper something to his neighbor.

As Lew Tree stepped down off the walk and faced west, up-street, he knew exactly what he would see. Across from him, still ten yards ahead, Jim Peters sauntered slowly along, his boots kicking up little puffs of dust, hands swinging freely at his sides, eyes fixed straight ahead. Further along, seventy yards as Lew Tree judged it, a man's heavy squat shape had a bare five seconds ago stepped down off the far walk and turned to face Jim Peters. Above the man a red-lettered sign spelled out, COWMAN'S BAR; behind him, along the front of the building, the swing doors of the saloon rocked on well-oiled hinges.

The man up there was Bill Horn. He stayed where he was, mainly because he had to. His face, covered with a two-day black beard-stubble, was flushed a dark bronze by his three-day diet of whiskey; his legs were spread wide apart to brace him. His pale-grey stetson was pushed onto the back of his head, letting a curly mass of dark hair fall down onto his forehead. Two ivory-handed Colts rode low along his massive thighs.

As Lew Tree made his appearance, Bill Horn's glance swung away from Jim Peters. He called, "Send your friend home, deputy. You said it was to be between the two of..." He

looked at Lew more sharply, suddenly letting out a loud guffaw.... "Hell, don't bother! It's Lew, back for more!"

Jim Peters looked around then, seeing that he had company. He stopped in midstride, drawled, "Clear out."

Lew Tree waited until he was even with the deputy before he replied, "You clear out!"

Jim Peters, sensing that words were futile, broke into his long stride again. And Lew Tree matched that stride, remembering that three days ago this Bill Horn had picked almost the same spot to wait for him.

Three days ago a panic had been running along Lew Tree's nerves, a panic brought on by the knowledge that he faced a better man. It had held him so cruelly in its grip that when Bill Horn drew his gun, his own hand, Lew Tree's, had hung helpless at his side. After that he'd danced out of the way of Bill Horn's bullets in full sight of his own bunch, men who had sided him on the lonesome trail for years and were now to side Bill Horn. He'd ridden out of Malpais a shamed and broken man.

But today it wasn't like that. No trace of emotion rose up within him, beyond the cold and dull hatred he felt toward this killer. He knew Bill Horn from two years of living with the man. Bill would wait, that sneer that now twisted his face holding until the moment the muscles of his right arm tensed. The closer it was, the better Bill Horn would like it. He enjoyed watching his bullets chop into a man.

That thought gave birth to an idea. Abruptly Lew Tree stopped; forty yards separated him from Bill Horn.

He called, "This suits me, Bill!" and watched the surprise that made Bill Horn squint across this distance. Jim Peters, hearing that word, stopped in his tracks.

Three days ago Lew had waited for Horn to make the first move. His code of honor, such as it was, had demanded that. But now, knowing that Jim Peters was waiting his chance, Lew raised his right arm on the heel of his words.

The move took Bill Horn by surprise. For a split second he stood senseless; then, as Lew's gun lifted clear

of leather, Horn's sneer widened to a satisfied smile and his two hands streaked upward.

His guns rocked into line at his hips while Lew's was far short of completing its upward arc. But Lew was raising his weapon to the height of his eyes, to sight his target.

The burst of flame that streaked out of Horn's right-hand gun unsteadied Lew for an instant. He felt the hard whip of air as the bullet fanned his cheek. Then, as Horn's second shot beat an added thunder to the first, Lew squeezed his trigger, the killer's chest full in his sights.

THE SLAM of the weapon back against his palm punctuated the precise instant a harder blow took him below his ribs, far out on his left side. The force of that blow made him stagger backward. Yet his eyes never left Bill Horn.

He saw the man's heavy frame pound against the awning post behind, saw too that Horn's guns were still steady. Then, from off to his right, three explosions blasted out to wipe away the brief silence. Bill Horn's guns swung around; yet unseen blows jerked at his squat body, unsteading his aim.

All at once Horn's two hands opened, clawlike, and his guns dropped into the dust. He tore his shirt open, and for a moment it looked as though his fingers would tear the flesh at his chest. But before he could complete that gesture his head sagged forward, his knees buckled, and he toppled slowly face-down into the dust.

Men ran out from the doorways of the stores. Lew Tree stood stupidly staring at the lifeless figure of Bill Horn for a long five seconds, then, looking to right and left, he ran stumbingly toward a narrow passageway between two buildings across the street from where Bill Horn lay.

Jim Peters saw that move, was about to call out when he checked his words. As he dropped his six-gun into the holster at his thigh a frown sharpened the planes of his lean face, to disappear only when Lew had faded from sight.

Several things happened in the next quarter-minute, all too swiftly for any-

one to say later which had come first. Jim Peters heard a pony get under way in the alley behind the stores across the street. That would be Lew Tree making good his getaway. Peters shrugged lifelessly, turned toward the crowd, a plainly disappointed man.

Then, from close at hand, someone shouted, "They're still in there! Gang 'em, gents!"

But the speaker was too late; for as the crowd melted from around Bill Horn's body and poured through the swing-doors of the Cowman's Saloon, a knot of six horsemen swept out of a narrow alleyway three doors below the saloon, swinging west along the street at a high lope. The tag-end of the crowd sent a few shots after those riders, although their bullets went wide because of the fog of dust kicked up by the ponies.

Late that night, in a town ten miles below the Border, Lew Tree pushed the native doctor aside and got up out of his chair. The flesh wound in his side hurt a little but wasn't serious. He faced the other six men in the room, let the palm of his right hand caress the butt of the six-gun he'd earlier that evening neglected to return to its proper owner.

"Any of you gents feel salty enough to try what Bill did?" he queried.

Silence hung awkwardly on his abrupt words. For the past hour, ever since they'd ridden up outside and come into this one-room adobe hut, one of their hang-outs, to find their old leader sitting in a rawhide chair with the native medico working on the flesh wound in his side, they'd been restless and silent, waiting for what they knew was coming. This was it, then; they took it in surly silence.

"You Freed! Feel like makin' a try at me?" Lew's glance hung for a moment on the man, then shifted to another. "How about it, Mears? Or you, Dodson? Or the whole pack of you!"

NO MOVE, not even an angry glance to return his flashing one. They were remembering, perhaps, that his bullet had taken Bill Horn in the chest not four hours ago.

Lew smiled, picked up his shirt

and pulled it on. When he'd finished that, he took a backward step that put him alongside the door.

"Then get this," he said. "I'm pullin' out, ridin' north. Back to Malpais, to give myself up to a square law man. I'll take what I have comin'."

"Hell, they'll hang you!" This from a man who now looked up from the makin's he had taken out a moment ago to steady his shaking hands.

"They don't hang a man for swingin' a sticky loop in this country. They can't tag me with more than that."

He waited a moment, then brought their questioning glances back to him once by saying: "And get this, too! You're pullin' out along with me. Where to, I don't give a damn. But two days from now Arizona law is goin' to know about every one of your old hideouts, every canyon trail we've used to drive those wet herds to the river. I'll get a square deal from the law, they'll get one from me."

The glance he fixed on them was flint-like, challenging. He was old Lew Tree, the man whose fists and guns had bought him leadership over this pack of curly wolves. They sensed that, held their silence.

"Adios, then," Lew said, tripping the latch to the door and throwing it open. And as he stepped outside, letting the darkness swallow him, he said, tauntingly, "Anyone wantin' to cash in real quick can try followin' me!"

He swung the door shut, stepped quickly out of line. No bullet pounded through the panel after him. In another ten seconds he was in the saddle, swinging out of the yard. All the way to the top of the rise, a hundred yards away, he kept the adobe's single door and lighted window went within his vision. The light stayed on, the door remained closed.

As he lifted his horse into an easy lope, riding straight into the north toward Malpais, he breathed a gusty sigh. He felt good tonight, younger, not minding the bite of pain in the flesh-wound at his side. He had something to look forward to now, something beyond the next meal, the next long ride.

He was making his peace with the law. ● EN

A WEIRD blue twilight lay like a shroud over the Wyoming highlands, but Concho Peters could see and recognize the rider advancing across the prairie half a mile away. Quick anger ran the length of Concho's blocky body, and his lips drew into tight knots at the corners.

"Modoc Bill Tully!" he muttered. "Dang his thievin' hide, I told him I'd fill him fulla lead if he ever set foot on Bar B land ag'in. Now I aim to do it!"

He drew his buckskin to the shelter of a dense lodgepole thicket and tied it to a sapling, then went back and hunkered in a nest of low granite boulders at the thicket-edge. Concho's log ranch house was just over a rise. Not fifty feet to his left was a five-strand barbwire fence. Unless Modoc Bill changed course he would have to pass within a few yards of the spot where Concho hunkered with six-shooter in hand.

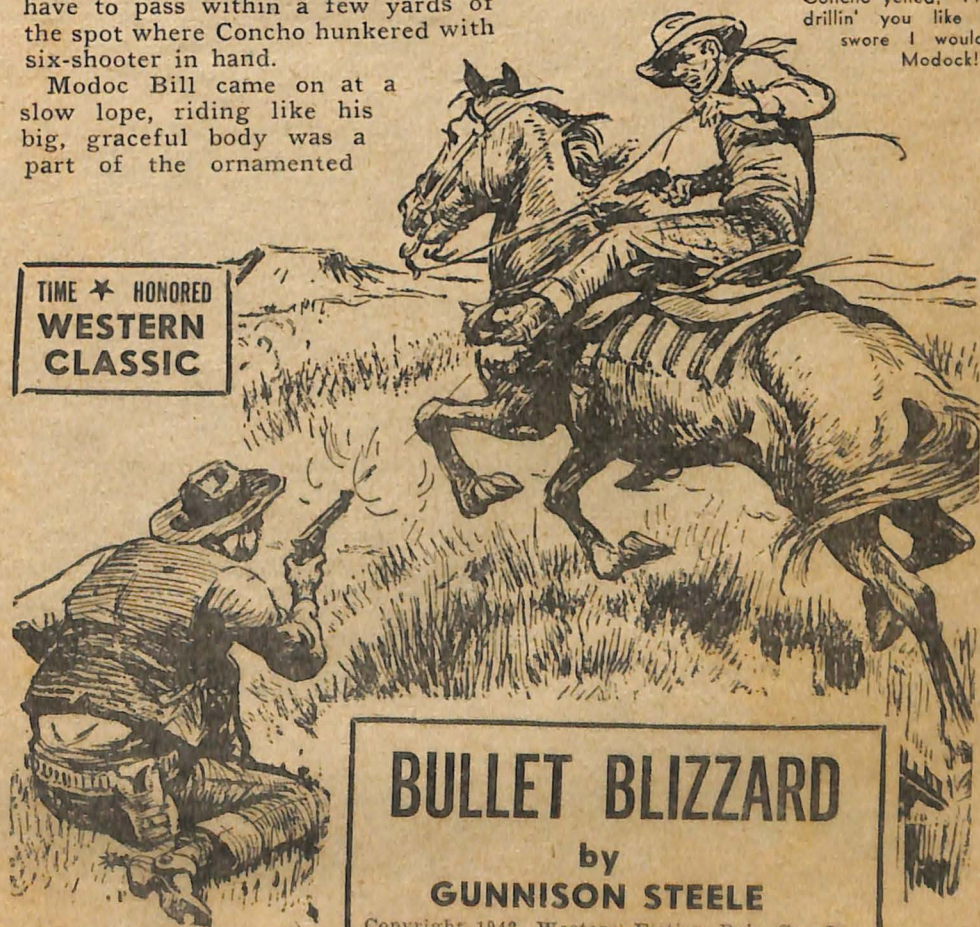
Modoc Bill came on at a slow lope, riding like his big, graceful body was a part of the ornamented

saddle and fancy trappings that be-decked his powerful black. Concho's homely brown face crinkled bitterly. Modoc made a handsome, dashing figure, whether in the dust and sweat of a branding pen or on a wild one in a rodeo arena; but he was onery as hell, and foxy. He was up to some kind of devilment. And if there was to be any advantage in this showdown, Concho Peters wanted it on his side.

His anxious gaze shifted momentar-

Whether in the dust and sweat of a branding pen or on a wild one in a rodeo, Modoc Bill was no man to swap guts for gold...

Concho yelled, "I'm drillin' you like I swore I would Modock!"



TIME * HONORED
WESTERN
CLASSIC

BULLET BLIZZARD

by

GUNNISON STEELE

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ily from the advancing rider to the northern horizon. All morning a dark cloud-mass had crouched up there, and now it was boiling restlessly and beginning to rise. There was no wind, only a vast, encompassing hush; but in the far distance there was a low, restless sound like the rustle of unseen wings. Twilight that was like a transparent blue mist lay over the midday range.

Concho knew the signs: Blizzard! And a blizzard, here on the uplands, pounced with the suddenness and deadliness of a hungry cougar. Concho Peters was ready for it. All his cattle had been hazed to shelter. He'd been returning to the ranch house when he'd sighted Modoc Bill Tully riding toward him. Modoc Bill owned the little Clover Leaf outfit adjoining the Bar B on the north. . . .

Modoc Bill was fifty yards away now. There was anxiety on his hawkish face as he looked over his shoulder at the advancing blizzard. Concho thought, *likely he wants to get his devilment over with before the storm hits.*

He stepped suddenly into the open, gun dangling in his hand, and called sharply, "Pull up, Modoc! I'm drillin' you, like I swore I would if you come onto Bar B land ag'in!"

Startled, Modoc Bill twisted about in the saddle and saw Concho. He yelled, "Damn you, Concho. . ." and the hand nearest his pearl-handled gun moved jerkily.

In the weird hush Concho's gunshot sounded flat and harsh. Modoc's black reared, snorting, and Modoc tumbled to the ground. He reared up, clawing at his gun; but his right leg gave way and he fell back to the ground. He rolled over, surprise and alarm on his face as he glared toward Concho. Then, his injured leg dragging grotesquely, he crawled with frantic haste to the rocky rim of a shallow gully a few feet away and tumbled into the fissure.

Almost instantly, smoke lashed out from the gully and a bullet snarled past Concho's head. He ducked back behind the boulders, cursing his soft-heartedness. At the last second he'd jerked his gun-muzzle, getting Modoc Bill in the thigh. Modoc's leg was likely broken, and now he was mad

and dangerous as a denned-up rattler.

To relieve his feeling, Concho jabbed his six-gun over a boulder and blasted away angrily. Modoc answered, showering Concho with rock fragments. Then Concho huddled there, reloading his hot gun, fierce anger drumming through him. This was the showdown.

THE ENMITY between him and Modoc Bill Tully dated back about three years. Before that, they'd been sidekicks. Blocky, homely Concho Peters and big, fancydressing Modoc Bill. . . they'd made a pair hard to beat. Their break-up had come over almost nothing. Modoc had got tangled up with a dancing girl in a Wapiti saloon, and he'd gambled away some money that belonged partly to Concho. They'd quarreled, and both had been too mule-stubborn to patch it up.

Then, two years ago, they'd filed on adjoining acres. . . and almost at once Concho Peters had started losing cattle. To complicate matters, Modoc Bill swore that his cattle too were mysteriously vanishing; and neither made any secret of the fact that they suspected the other of cattle stealing. Several times their quarrel had come close to erupting into merciless violence. Finally, each had threatened publicly to kill the other without warning whenever caught on enemy land.

Ghost River bounded both their spreads on the west. Across the river was the big Boxed L outfit belonging to hard-fisted old Mulehide Milo, whose word carried weight in that part of the state. Both Concho and Modoc Bill claimed that their cows had been vanishing in a rough strip of deep canyons and ragged walls along the river, where there was no line fence between their outfits.

But Bill, Concho figured, was a dirty liar. Modoc was sore because he'd had to eat crow every time they'd tangled, was trying to get even by stealing his former partner blind. . . .

A gust of wind, incredibly bleak and violent, swept with a shrill screaming sound across the prairie, followed by a momentary hush, with the dead brown grass still writhing from its passage. Now the cloud-masses were

almost overhead, and the twilight had deepened. That screaming sound, like a woman in pain, beat against Concho's eardrums again.

Then the wind struck again, like a monster hammering savagely with icy fists; and suddenly the world about him was a chaotic maelstrom of sound and movement as the blizzard swooped. Concho reared to his feet, dazed by the stark fury of the onslaught, momentarily forgetting the peril huddled a few yards away. Now the fight between him and Modoc Bill seemed a puny thing.

The sleet came first, cutting at his face like a million tiny knives, blotting out everything more than a few feet away. He looked toward the gully where Modoc Bill lay, and saw only a swirling gray wall. He fought toward his horse, head tucked against the sleet and wind, feeling with hands already numbed; found the buckskin and untied the reins.

Foot in the stirrup, he paused and looked again toward the spot where Modoc Bill had crouched. Modoc was hurt... a one-legged man wouldn't have a chance against this blizzard. Then Concho swung quickly into the saddle. To hell with Modoc Bill! If the old wolf hadn't been prowlin' about, bent on devilment, he wouldn't be lying over there with a busted leg. The blizzard would finish the job where Concho had taken cold feet.

Instinctively, the buckskin headed along the fence toward the barn. By the time they reached the barn the sleet had changed to snow. As Concho felt his way from barn to house he couldn't see more than five feet ahead, and the wind was like a screaming giant trying to pull him down. He put fresh wood in the stove, and soon he was thawed out. He put coffee on to boil.

The blizzard's furious, hammering blasts shook the cabin.

"Let 'er blow," Concho muttered. "I'm settin' purty. Plenty wood, plenty grub and tobacco." He rolled a smoke.

But the smoke tasted flat and bitter, and Concho felt sort of heavy inside. He thought, *don't be a sap. Modoc aimed to drill you, didn't he? Still would, if he had the chance. Let 'im lay!*

He got up and put a pot of beans on the stove. Anyway, likely Modoc would pull through despite his busted leg. Modoc was tough, strong as a bull. And the big black hadn't been far away when the blizzard hit. If Modoc could get into the saddle....

The coffee didn't taste right either. Concho went to a window, rubbed the pane clear and tried to see out. It was a hellish night. Nothing could live out there very long without some kind of shelter. A gully wouldn't be much shelter, not enough. Modoc Bill would be getting pretty cold about now.

"What of it?" Concho jeered at himself. "Maybe he'll live long enough to think over his sins. Where he's goin' he won't spend none of the money he got for my cows!"

STILL THERE was the time Modoc had dived in the ice-filled river and pulled Concho out when he was sinking for the last time. Concho stirred uneasily. By gosh, he'd paid Modoc back for that three months later, when he'd shot a crazy-mad bull that had Modoc down. He didn't owe the skunk a dang thing!

And he figured Modoc was lying about losing cattle over there in the rough strip along the river; that was just to cover up his own tricks. He hadn't seen Modoc steal any cows, but he'd seen signs where Bar B stuff had been driven across onto Clover Leaf land. Everything considered, that was pretty convincing evidence.

Concho's blocky body stiffened suddenly. The sound came again... a thumping, scratching noise on the door. Concho leaped to the door and flung it open.

A saddled horse stood there, humped against the driving storm. Modoc Bill's big black! Concho Peters stood there, scarcely feeling the bleak wind and snow. So ol' Modoc hadn't caught the black; the beast, probably drawn by the lamp-light, was seeking shelter. Modoc was still out there.

Concho swore softly, stepped back into the room and pulled on his sheepskin coat and a fur cap. No use letting a dumb brute freeze. But when he tried to catch the black it shied away; when he persisted, it whirled

and vanished into the swirling snow. Concho swore again, and stood braced against the snarling wind. By godfrey, it was cold—so cold it seemed to sheer right through his heavy clothes and to the bone. A gent was lucky to have a cabin and warm bunk tonight.

He started back into the cabin, then stopped, frowning angrily. He was a sap to even think about such a thing. But it was there, pressing like a dark weight against his heart, rising like something bitter in his mouth. A man couldn't get away from what was inside him.

He muttered, "Modoc wouldn't do it for me. He hates me worse'n poison. He'd let me freeze, and laugh his-self to sleep!"

He lunged forward, past the corner of the cabin, and it was almost like ramming his head against an icy wall. Gasping for breath, he pulled his coat collar about his face and staggered toward the barn.

But he didn't take time to saddle the buckskin. A sort of frantic urgency drove him. He found the barb-wire fence; grabbed the top wire and pulled himself along it. This was a real wooly-booger, worse even than he'd thought. He could hardly breathe. Already his body felt numb.

It seemed like he'd gone miles before he reached the top of the rise and started down... more miles before he reached the bottom on the other side.

Branches scraping like icy talons at his face told him when he reached the lodgepole thicket. Instinct guided him past the boulders where he'd hunkered down to escape Modoc Bill's bullets; across the fifty feet of level ground to the gully.

Modoc Bill was there, all hunkered over under the rim of the gully where he'd vainly sought shelter from the blizzard. Concho had to shake him several times before he stirred and muttered, "Go 'way! Nice'n warm—wanta sleep..."

"Sleep your Granny!" Concho yelled, and slapped him in the face. "Get on your feet! You want to freeze?"

"Blast you, lemme be!" Modoc Bill grunted angrily. "Leg busted—can't walk. Just wanta sleep..."

Slap! "You yaller coward!" *Slap-slap!* "Quittin', huh? You ain't worth savin'. Oughta had more sense than to think a cow-stealin' skunk had guts. Get on your feet!"

Modoc blinked, peering at Concho. "Concho Peters, by hell!" he growled. "I thought... What you doin' here?"

"Come to tail you up," Concho yelled. "I'd do the same for any dumb critter that was down. You aim to get up?"

"Concho, you tried to gulch me—"

"We'll settle that, later. Have I got to pack you in?"

THAT MUST have sounded funny. "A runt like you, pack Modoc Bill in?" the big man grinned. "Hell, I got but one leg, but I'll lug you in under my arm!"

It took them ten minutes to get out of the icy gully... twice that long to get across the open space and through the thicket to the fence. They made it, foot by foot, battling the wind and snow every one of those feet, arms about each other. They found the fence and inched along it. Modoc Bill's left leg was all but useless. His weight felt like a ton on Concho's shoulder as they fought their way up the rise.

But Modoc Bill had magnificent strength in his good leg, in his big body. He held Concho Peters up many times when he would have fallen. They both were tired, numb, reeling in mind and body. Alone, maybe neither of them would have lived.

But together, they made it. Up the slippery, wind-lashed slope, and down. Past the barn, the corral. Locked in each other's arms they tumbled through the doorway into the warm cabin....

Later, after Concho had bandaged Modoc Bill's wounded leg, after they'd each downed a quart of hot black coffee and thawed out, they had time to think about what had happened. It didn't make sense. The fight out there, the blizzard—and Concho Peters fighting through an icy hell to save Modoc Bill's life.

"Seems sort of like old times, us holed up like this together," Modoc said. "But there's some things I don't savvy. Out there, a little while ago, I figured you meant to kill me. It

made me mad for a minute, and I shot back."

"I *did* aim to kill you, at first," Concho slowly. "Because I figured you was sneakin' up to drill me."

Modoc Bill looked puzzled. "Some-thin' else. When you was tryin' to tail me up, you called me a cow-stealin' skunk."

"Like I've done a hundred times before. Reckon it still stands."

Modoc Bill grinned slowly. "Now I'm beginnin' to savvy. Did Slim Riker stop by here last night and talk to you?"

"Ain't seen Slim in a month."

"Then that accounts for it," Modoc Bill declared. "Slim was in town late yesterday, when we took the prisoners in to jail. I was all tied-up; but I wanted you to get the news quick as possible, so I told Slim to ride by on his way home and tell you all about it. Looks like he didn't do it."

Concho asked bewilderedly, "What in Tophet you talkin' about? What news... and what prisoners?"

"Why, old Mulehide Milo and couple of his rannies. We caught 'em redhanded, over in the rough strip along the river. They'd driven half a dozen Bar B cows over onto Clover Leaf land and were reworking the brands. I'd begun to suspect somethin' powerful fishy, so I had the sheriff and a couple of deputies hidin' out—and we caught 'em cold."

"Just a minute," Concho said groggily. "Old Mulehide Milo had drove some of *my* cows onto *your* land, and was changin' the brands. Changin' 'em to what?"

"To the Boxed L. Caught with the

goods, the old scalawag caved and admitted the whole thing. It was Milo who's been stealin' all the cattle, from me and you both, during the last two years. It was a pretty slick scheme—havin' me and you suspect each other, when all the time he was robbin' us both blind. He worked it like this: He'd drive a bunch of your cows onto my land—or mine onto yours—leavin' just enough sign to plant suspicion. Then he'd rework the brands, and after dark ease the critters across the river onto Boxed L land.

"But I got suspicious a little while ago, and was layin' for him. We caught the skunk, back in a blind canyon, with one of your cows hog-tied and a hot iron in his hand. I reckon that winds up the thievin' over in the rough strip."

Concho felt sort of tight inside. He said miserably, "Modoc, I'm two inches lower'n a snake's belly. I thought you was up to devilment, when you was just ridin' to tell me how you'd pulled the scales offa Mulehide Milo. That right?"

"Just partly," Modoc Bill said slowly. "Mostly, I was ridin' to admit what a sap I been for the last three years. I thought maybe we could sort of patch things up. "Course, if you don't see it that way...."

It took Concho just three steps to cross the room and grab Modoc Bill's big hand.

"Dang it, Modoc," he grinned, "a gent sort of needs somebody to warm his hoofs on nights like this. We're settin' purty. Plenty wood, plenty grub and tobacco. ●END

A LITTLE HORSEPLAY

gold. We surprised him digging it up and tried to stop him, but he got the drop on us."

The lawman turned a questioning glance to Tom.

Tom laughed scornfully. "Would I be digging with *two shovels*?"

The sheriff pursed his lips. "We can't see much till the fire dies out. Suppose I take the three of you in till we can look around a little."

"Suits me," Tom said. He handed over his rifle to the sheriff and led the way into town and jail.

Several hours later, with dawn

(continued from page 48)
graying the sky, the sheriff came into the jail and unlocked Tom's cell door. "It looks like you're right," he said. "I guess I owe you a vote of thanks." "I'll need more than thanks," Tom said. "I'm wiped out."

The lawman smiled. "Maybe I do have something else for you, at that. There's quite a reward out for these two. Enough for you to open up three stores. Hey, where you going?"

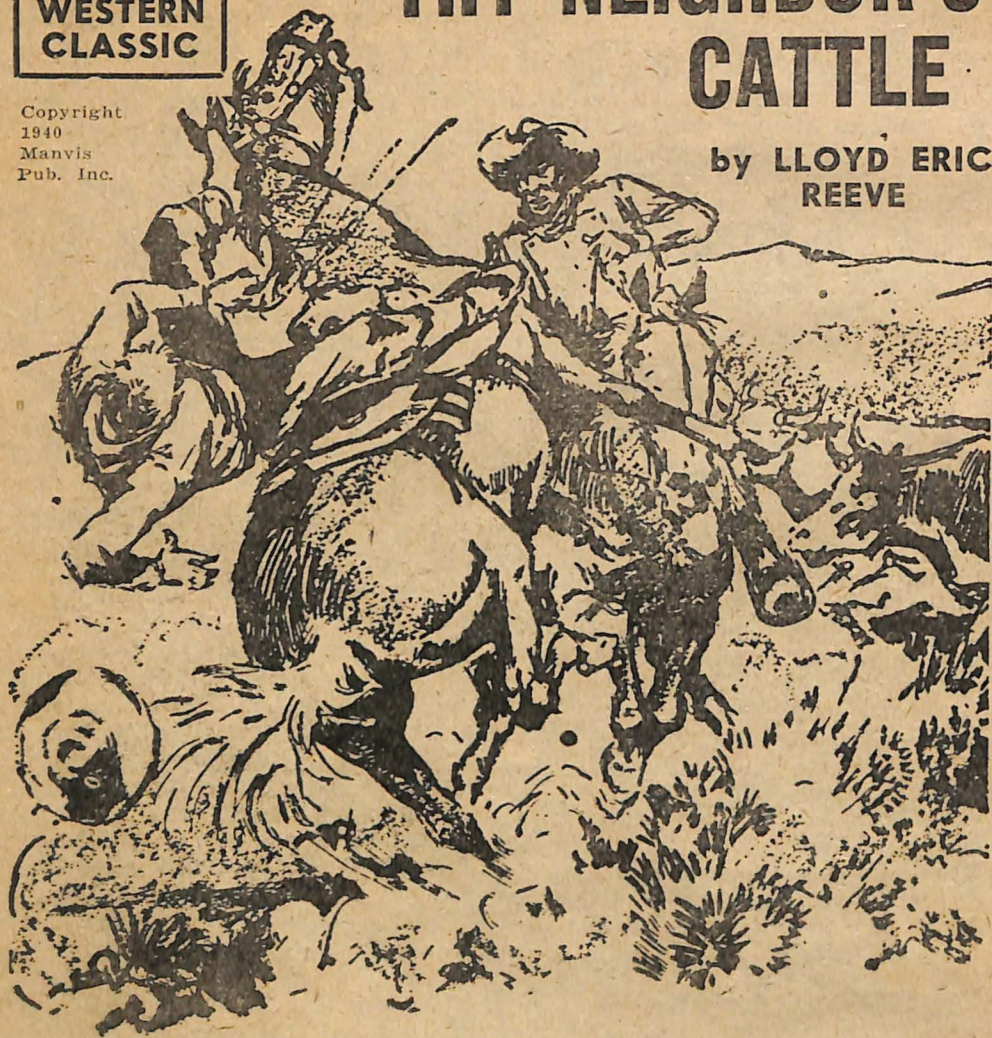
Tom, moving toward the door of the sheriff's office, grinned over his shoulder. "I've got a very important letter to write," he said, "and I don't want to waste a minute." ●END

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THY NEIGHBOR'S CATTLE

by LLOYD ERIC
REEVE



SUNRISE CARMON and Baldy Higgins came through the batwing doors and walked up to the bar. The Hog Trough was fairly crowded with cow-hands, ranchers, a few bearded prospectors, and freighters, and this sudden appearance of the two inseparables created quite a stir. For the most part the eyes turned toward them were amused and speculative, except for those of huge old John Eden, which were definitely affronted. John was seated at a table against the wall, and as he stared stonily at the two new arrivals he began to chew one end of his

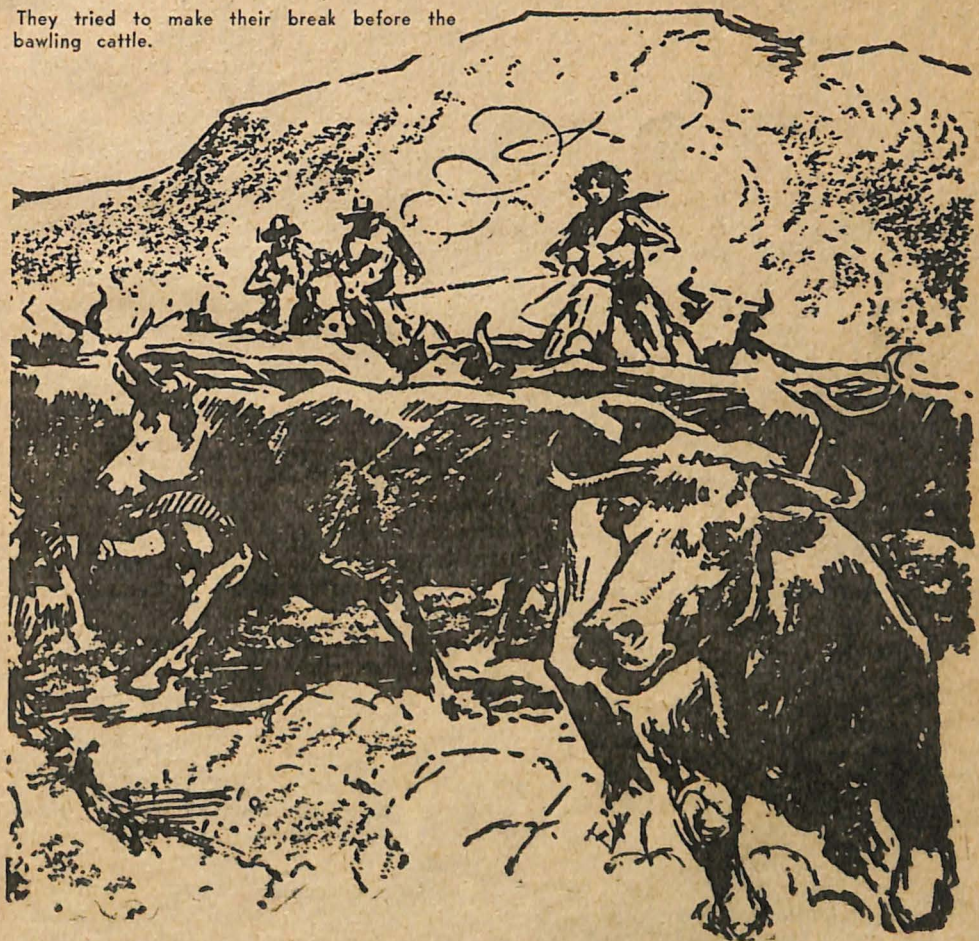
sweeping roan mustache, a sure sign that John was getting proddy. Sunrise and Baldy, for their part, ignored him. Said Sunrise to his partner: "What'll we have to drink, Baldy? Water?"

Baldy, his naturally squat body depressed even lower by the amazing bow of his legs, had to tip back his head to gaze up contemptuously at his tall companion. "Water, Sunrise," he explained, "is for washing."

Sunrise's wind-honed and sanded young face became troubled; he puckered his pale eyebrows meditatively. "Tea?" he suggested.

When that long-loop crew stampeded the herd that would pay off the last note on their little spread, Sunrise and Baldy floated a hot-lead loan!

They tried to make their break before the bawling cattle.



"Well, you can't drink tea unless you sew," Baldy pointed out; "and I left my needle to home."

Sunrise pushed back his dusty sombrero, thoughtfully scratched his tow head. Suddenly he grinned broadly. "Sarsaparilla!" he exclaimed.

"Naw," scorned Baldy. "Why, that stuff bloats you up, son, worse'n a balloon. Like to make a man bust wide open. Now can't you recollect what it is, Sunrise? Think hard."

"All right, all right." Sunrise turned resignedly to the grinning bar-keep. Whiskey he said. Seems like we never can think up anything

to drink but whiskey. Just whiskey, whiskey, whiskey. It gets plumb monotonous."

The bar-tender poured their drinks. They clinked glasses. Said Baldy: "To Mr. John Eden. He raises the fattest beeves in the territory."

A GUST of laughter ran through the saloon. John Eden sprang to his feet, stalked forward. He was shaggy as a buffalo, his face brick-red. He stopped in front of Sunrise and Baldy.

"Sunrise," he said, "you're a damn cow-thief!"

Sunrise drew back, his eyes widening with injured innocence. "Why Mister Eden," he murmured.

"Sunrise," interjected Baldy, "you know what I think?"

"What?" asked Sunrise.

"Why, I think," declared Baldy, "that this man don't like you."

"You mean Mister *Eden*?" Sunrise asked.

"Yep," insisted Baldy. "I don't know why I think it, but I sure do. Maybe I'm physic. That's a word I heard a professor use in a lecture once. It means you know something you don't know, or something like that."

"Physic isn't the word," Sunrise corrected. "I heard that lecture too. He said psychic, not physic."

"Bet you five dollars," snapped Baldy.

"Where would you get five dollars?" scorned Sunrise.

"Borrow it from you," Baldy grinned.

John Eden roared: "Stop that damn fool talk! Sunrise, I called you a cow-thief!"

"Baldy," asked Sunrise, "is this man trying to make me mad?"

"He might be," Baldy hazarded. "Or maybe it's just something he et? Whose beef you been eating lately, Mister Eden?"

"You're drunk!" Eden told Baldy.

Baldy drew himself up to his full five feet two. "Me drunk?" he demanded. "On *one* quart? Mister Eden, that's an insult."

Eden grunted helplessly, glared back at Sunrise. "I called you a cow-thief. Sunrise. You hear, cow-thief, cow-thief, cow-thief!"

"Now let's all join in on the chorus," murmured Sunrise. "He calls me a cow-thief. The pot calls the kettle black. Mister Baldy, meet Mister Pot. I'm Mister Kettle. Mister Pot calls Mister Kettle black."

"I've called you a cow-thief," thundered John Eden. "Can you deny it?"

"He asks me, Baldy," said Sunrise, "can I deny it. Well, if a man denies something then he's admitting he's innocent, but when you admit something that generally means you're guilty, so if I admit I'm innocent that might mean I was guilty, but on the other hand if I deny I'm admit-

ting, it then I'm admitting I denied it. Or is it?"

"Well, it is and it isn't," Baldy wisely decreed.

"That's it!" exclaimed Sunrise. He turned back to Eden with a look of relief. "There's your answer, Mister Eden, just as plain as day—it is and it isn't!"

John Eden flung up both hands in disgust. "All right, all *right!*" he stormed. "But I know you're stealing my cattle as sure as I'm standing here! And sooner or later I'll prove it! I tell you, I—I'll see you both hang yet!"

"He thinks we're pictures, Baldy," explained Sunrise "he wants to see us hang. Nice man, Mr. Eden. Let's have another drink. What'll it be, water?"

"Water," Baldy wearily reiterated, "is for washing."

"Tea?" asked Sunrise.

"Naw!" said Baldy. "Tea's only for—"

"Hell!" said John Eden, and swirling around ploughed out through the grinning saloon crowd. Baldy called politely over his shoulder:

"Goodbye, Mister Pot."

A FEW minutes later Sunrise and Baldy went out of the saloon into the late afternoon heat-haze. As they tramped up the narrow wooden sidewalk Baldy was already tracking a little erratically.

"You keep up at this rate," observed Sunrise, "and I'll have to put you to bed even before dark."

"Well," Baldy apologized, "I been sober three whole days now, and I got a lot of catching up to do."

In front of Wendel's General Store, Sheriff Tom Bightly met them. He said, "Howdy, boys; I want to talk to you, Sunrise."

"Not guilty," Sunrise promptly declared, and Baldy added hastily, "S'help me!"

"Sure, sure," agreed Sheriff Bightly. He lifted one hand and tugged impatiently at his tobacco-stained, walrus mustache. "But just the same, Sunrise, it's going to catch up with you sooner or later."

"It doesn't catch up with John Eden," Sunrise remarked.

The gaunt sheriff shrugged. "That's because Eden stays on the

right side of the law. Kind of. Everybody knows what a dirty deal he gave you, but seems he did it legal, and trying to square it by stealing his cattle ain't legal. It's only a matter of time till he comes to me with proof, and then I got to arrest you. I don't want to, Sunrise, and that's why I'm telling you to quit now while the quitting's good."

Sunrise gazed earnestly toward a hitch-rack across the street, at a row of sad cow-ponies standing dejectedly with lowered heads. "Yes, Tom," he murmured, "we're having uncommon nice weather. Could do with a little rain, though."

"But not too much," put in Baldy; "I always say that too much rain is just as bad as not enough."

The sheriff grunted. Then a brisk step sounded suddenly, coming out of the store, and a liquid voice throaty with anger spoke:

"Things have come to a fine pass when the sheriff stands in the middle of the street in broad daylight hobnobbing with cattle thieves!"

Sunrise lounged around, a broad smile spreading across his face as he pulled off his sombrero. "Why, howdy, Miss Wanda," he said. "I was just talking to your father in the saloon. You know if that old mink ever happened to bite himself he'd die of the poison."

Two bright spots of color kindled in the girl's cheeks. In jeans and a big black sombrero she was slim as a witch, with bright red hair and hazel-green eyes in which smoldered a sultry flame. She said sweetly: "You're such a funny man, Sunrise. It's a wonder to me you don't die laughing at your own jokes."

Sunrise's grin widened. "Well, now, what I wonder about you is how anybody so doggone pretty can still be so doggone ornery."

"All I hope," she told him, "is that some day I get the chance to show you just how ornery I can be." She tossed her bright head haughtily, switched around and walked away idly with a lithely swinging stride.

Sunrise sighed as he put his sombrero back on and turned again to the sheriff. "Now what's the word for that stuff folks take when they get poisoned?" he asked.

"Whiskey," promptly supplied Baldy.

"No," Sunrise said, "it's—"

"An antidote?" asked the sheriff.

"That's it!" agreed Sunrise. "An antidote! Well, if I knew of a good antidote to take afterward I'd plumb marry that girl."

THIS was the third time in two months that Sunrise Carmon and Baldy Higgins, following a rather sudden disappearance, had returned unexpectedly to Mesquite City. Coincident with their disappearance each time had vanished also a sizeable bunch of John Eden's cattle.

Locally it wasn't considered much of a mystery. Old John had come to regard himself as a figure of considerable civic stature, despite the rather miraculous way his cattle had increased in earlier times, and had recently sworn lustily that no daughter of his would ever marry any such shiftless cow-hand as Sunrise Carmon.

Sunrise himself claimed that he wasn't even courting Wanda Eden, that he called on her so often only because he never could resist a good fight.

Nevertheless, he did set out to build a herd, and in this old John saw only an attempt to become eligible as a son-in-law. He considered himself crossed, and to cross John Eden was to make him instantly your enthusiastic enemy. All he did openly, however, was to buy up a note Sunrise had given the Mesquite Bank, and then, when the small beef herd which was to pay it off was rather mysteriously stampeded and lost by two strangers, cheerfully took Sunrise over. Promptly Sunrise had accused old John of hiring the strangers, and Wanda, incensed, had rather poured it into Sunrise. Positively annoyed then, Sunrise swore to square the account.

He had all the local sympathy, and few doubted that once he and Baldy considered the affair with Eden settled they would cease their mysterious activities. In the meantime, however, it was a matter of interested conjecture whether or not old John would first catch them red-handed, and, delightedly, exact the heaviest

penalty the law would allow. No one really wanted it to end thus prematurely, chiefly because it had now become the best show ever put on in that part of the territory.

The first chill light of day woke Sunrise Carmon two mornings later. Before he even opened his eyes the mouth-watering odors of sizzling bacon and boiling coffee pleasantly tantalized his nostrils. He sat up in his soogans and looked across at Baldy, squatted on his heels and holding a frying pan over a small fire as he cooked breakfast. Sunrise, faithful to the proverb that "humans dress up but a cowboy dresses down," put on his hat first, then his pants and then his boots. He sat on his tarp a moment gazing up at a black hawk soaring against a shell-pink sky. The arid gulch in which they were camped was turning bright now, making brittle ebony silhouettes of scattered mesquite and sage-brush. He gazed back speculatively at Baldy's squat foreshortened figure, and presently observed, accusingly:

"Baldy, you're sober again."

Baldy nodded mournfully, without looking around. "It's the third time this month I been cold sober," he contritely admitted. "Seems like I'm getting the habit. Maybe I should ought to take a cure or something. We working tonight, Sunrise?"

"Reckon so." Sunrise nodded thoughtfully. He came erect with slow unfolding of his tall body, commenced to spool up his blankets. "Maybe we can gather enough tonight to finish it. Trail 'em south again, sell quick, and call it quits."

Baldy sighed. "It's a perfession I'm getting to admire. I sort of hate to give it up."

"We stay in it too long and they're like to make us wear neckties," Sunrise pointed out. "Hemp ones, with a tree limb tied on top."

"Well, I ain't never been hanged yet," Baldy admitted. "Reckon I'd hardly know how to act the first time. Maybe a man could get used to it though. Come and get it or I'll throw it out."

THEY ATE sitting on their heels beside the fire, sombreros perched on the backs of their heads. Sunrise

had just swallowed his last curly chip of bacon and was absently wiping off his fingers on the seat of his pants when a run of soft hoof-beats sounded suddenly behind them. He came to his feet with a lithe turning motion that brought him erect facing the intruder. Baldy rose more precipitately, grabbing the handle of his gun. Then he looked sheepish and let go of it. Wanda Eden swung off a paint horse, looping down the reins, and strode forward. Her sultry gaze was a shower of angry sparks.

Sunrise grinned. "For anyone with eyes that never wanted to see me again, you sure put 'em to a lot of trouble," he observed.

She said, "I'd like to shoot you!"

"The lady, Baldy," said Sunrise, "would like to shoot me. Could that mean she doesn't like me?"

"Might be she just likes to see 'em kick," Baldy hazarded.

"Shut up," snapped Wanda Eden. "I had a talk with my father last night. I never believed it when you said he hired those men to make off with your herd. Until he let something slip last night, and then I made him admit it."

"Now that explains everything," Sunrise told Baldy. "She finds out her father pulled a dirty deal on me so now she wants to shoot me. Uncommon pleasant young woman."

"I hate you," declared the girl, "because you were right and I was wrong. And now you're gloating!"

"He's not gloated," Baldy loyally denied. "He drinks whiskey, and you only get gloated from drinking sarsaparilla."

"She said gloating, not bloating," wearily corrected Sunrise.

"Bet you five dollars," snapped Baldy.

"I win," sighed Sunrise, "so I'll pay you later." He looked back at Wanda, grinning. "Is that all you hunted me up for, just to tell me how sorry you are?"

"I stand for fair play," stated Wanda Eden, icily. "You've already taken over five hundred head of my father's cattle. Another three hundred should square the debt. Well, yesterday he moved just about three hundred up into Broken Leg Gulch. If you'll meet me at the foot of the gulch tonight,

I'll lead you to them. You can drive them out, and they'll bring you enough with what you've already taken to pay back any loss you had through dad. Is it a deal?"

"Or a trap," murmured Sunrise. "How do I know it isn't a trap?"

The girl's head went up haughtily. "Did I ever deal from the bottom of a deck?"

"That's right," Sunrise admitted. "You're just about the orneriest female I ever set eyes on, and the prettiest too, but one thing can be said for you, you play square. Why you doing this anyway, because your heart's kind of bleeding like for me?"

"Bosh!" exploded the girl. "It's just that it doesn't seem right to hate you like I do when my father's mistreated you. And as there's nothing I enjoy more than hating you, I want to get things squared as quick as I can so I can go right back to good hard hating again. Now will you meet me tonight?"

SUNRISE grinned. "Sure we will; we'd do just about anything to oblige such a sweet-tempered lady."

"At about nine o'clock then, at the foot of Broken Leg Gulch." She swung up on the paint horse, wheeled it rearing, then raced away with a staccato patter of hoof-beats.

Shortly before nine o'clock that night, Sunrise and Baldy reined in at the foot of Broken Leg Gulch. A moon rode high in the star-flecked sky, silvering the undulating plain behind and silhouetting flatly the upper rims of the gulch, but leaving the canyon itself dark with sooty shadow. Out of these shadows, presently, materialized the figure of a rider, Wanda Eden. She reined up with a jerk, and said snappishly:

"Well, let's get started. The sooner this is over and I can see the last of you the better I'll like it!"

"Got one of your sweeter spells on tonight, eh?" observed Sunrise. "Well, lead ahead; we'll follow."

She pulled around and headed up the wide gulch. Sunrise and Baldy drifted along behind. About twenty minutes later they heard cattle bawling ahead, and presently the dim shapes of the horned beasts loomed before them. Wanda pulled up.

"I'll help you drive them back to the foot of the gulch," she stated. "After that you'll be on your own."

Sunrise agreed, and they circled the cattle, all of three hundred better-fat heeves, and started them streaming slowly down the gulch. They attained the foot of the gulch without mishap, and sent the cattle boiling out slowly onto the moonlit plain.

SUDDENLY then a voice shouted off to the left. To the right a gun coughed. The night was abruptly filled with yelping cries, flashing weapons, and a drumming rush of hoofs as a dozen horsemen poured in swiftly from three sides. Sunrise and Baldy spurred ahead, making their break toward the now frightened and running cattle. Bullets set up a vague hornet humming in the darkness, and Sunrise fired back swiftly, though the darkness combined with the rushing shapes made anything like accurate shooting impossible. For a minute now it seemed that he and Baldy could reach the fleeing cattle ahead, escape through the bawling confusion of the plunging beasts, but then four riders cut suddenly in front of them, spun them back into a closing circle of leveled weapons. Sunrise raised his hands, and Baldy, with a gentle sigh, followed suit. "That red-headed woman," he mourned; "she belayed us."

"Betrayed," snapped Sunrise, "not belay."

"Bet you—" began Baldy, but before he could finish, old John Eden had slammed his running horse to a stiff-legged halt before them, chortling, his voice booming gleefully. "Told you I'd catch you red-handed! Heh, heh. Had the sheriff waiting right here with me to see you driving out my cows. Now you got to arrest 'em, Bightly."

Sheriff Tom Bightly reined forward, jangling a couple of pairs of handcuffs. "Warned you, son," he told Sunrise as he snapped the manacles on. "No hard feelings, eh? It's just the way I make my living" He pulled over to Baldy, snapped the handcuffs on him. Baldy demanded, in sudden desperation, "You have a whiskey allowance in that jail of yours, Tom?"

"And now," busily interrupted John Eden, "we'll stop in at the ranch on the way to town, have some coffee. This calls for a celebration, eh? Steal my cattle, will they? Why, by thunder, I'll hire me a lawyer tomorrow and have them sent up for every last minute the law will give 'em! Heh, heh."

As they rode off Sunrise thought sheepishly of Wanda, of whom so far nothing more had been seen. She had warned him he supposed, in town when she had said she was just waiting for the chance to show him how ornery she could really be. Well, she'd shown him all right; he'd just naturally walked into this trap she and old John had set, blind as any pilgrim. That's what you got for believing a woman.

Half an hour later they all crowded into the big cavernous kitchen of Eden's ranch house, gulped coffee. At last Tom Bightly stirred, said with a sigh: "Well, we better get these boys into town. I want some sleep."

Sunrise and Baldy stood up. But as they turned toward the door, it opened suddenly, and Wanda Eden came striding in. She pulled off her big sombrero angrily and sent it skimming into a corner. Her tousled red hair smoldered in the lamplight. Putting her hands on her hips, she pinned her father with that hazel-green gaze. He was gaping at her blankly. "Now where in tunket you been?" he demanded. "I thought you was in bed."

"Oh, you did, did you?" snapped Wanda. "So you think you're going to send Sunrise to jail?"

"Think?" exploded John Eden. "Dang well know I am! Damn' cattle thief."

"Is being a cattle thief any worse," asked Wanda, "than hiring somebody to make off with a man's beef drive so he can't pay a note you're holding?"

John Eden lifted both hands beside his head, waved them placatingly at her. "Sh, sh," he hastily cautioned. "Now, now, honey, you, go to bed. You're all tired out. You don't know what you're saying."

"Like blazes I don't!" Wanda snapped.

John looked injured. "Now is that any way for a lady to talk?" he demanded.

"Who ever claimed she was a lady?" Sunrise interjected wonderingly.

SHERIFF Tom Bightly had stepped forward, was watching them with a suddenly expectant amusement. Wanda glared at her father. "You think you're just about the big chief around here, don't you, dad? Be a disgrace if your daughter was married to a shiftless cowboy. Well, how would you like people saying she was the wife of a rustler, a jail-bird, a man you'd thrown into jail yourself? That would sound fine, wouldn't it?"

John Eden's face assumed that brick-red hue which came to it only in moments of greatest distress. "Now listen," he flared truculently, "you ain't ever going to marry that mangy cattle thief not if I have to shoot him first!"

"Oh, I'll never marry him," Wanda promised. "I couldn't."

"That's better," growled Eden. "Now get to bed."

"I mean I can't marry him," added Wanda sweetly, "because we're already married. I rode up to Arkville with him and married him yesterday."

John Eden stared at her; he looked as though he had suddenly swallowed a live mouse and it was running around inside of him. Wanda turned to Sunrise and murmured sweetly, "You poor darling—don't worry, honey; Wanda'll take care of you."

Sunrise admitted a small grunt as though he had been hit in the pit of the stomach, and continued to blink at her. Tom Bightly and several other men in the room were commencing to grin broadly. Baldy whispered hoarsely: "I'll never touch another drink! This time I mean it! I never minded seeing snakes, but this—this is too much!"

John Eden finished swallowing his Adam's apple. He puffed, "You're—married—to—that—that—"

"That nice man?" Wanda asked. "Why, *certainly* I married him! The very idea! Why, are you daring to insult me, my own father?"

Old John looked bewildered.

"There, there," he muttered; "I only meant—"

Wanda stamped her foot. "My own father! Daring to say such things about me! Why—"

"There, there," old John hastily repeated. "Of course, you married him, honey! No daughter of mine would do anything else. Of course not."

"Well, *that's* better," Wanda said.

John Eden wheeled uncertainly to the sheriff. "Look here, Tom," he suggested, "maybe—maybe we better forget all about this arresting business."

TOM BIGHTLY adjusted a stern expression on his grizzled face, shook his head solemnly. "It ain't that easy, John," he gruffly explained. "It's out of your hands now. Sunrise is arrested and I got to take him to jail. The law's the law, that's what you always told me when you were trying to get me to arrest him before."

"But it's different now," John Eden objected. "I can't have my own son-in-law, Wanda's husband, in jail, can I?"

"Reckon you got to," declared Tom Bightly. "You'll have to testify against him at his trial too. Yes, sir. The law's the law. Unless—"

"Unless what?" demanded John, grasping now at any straw.

"Well, I tell you," decided the sheriff; "if I could be right sure now that Sunrise would go straight, I might not arrest him this once. Maybe your girl here would be a good influence on him. But I'd want him to be sort of tied down. Tell you what, if you'll make him foreman of this ranch, and deed him, say, a half interest in it, then I might let him go."

"Make that cow-thief my foreman?" exploded John Eden. "Give him a half interest in my ranch—why—why—" Suddenly he softened his bellow, lowered his shaggy head. "All right, all right," he growled. "You're all against me, everyone of you! You'll have me giving him the *whole* damn ranch next thing I know!"

Half an hour later, after John Eden had gruffly shaken his hand and suggested by-gones be by-gones, Sunrise found himself standing in the middle

of Wanda Eden's room. He stared at her a little warily, a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Aren't we in a mess *now*?" he moaned. "Old John thinks we're married, everybody thinks so. We're the only ones who know we ain't. What're we going to do?"

Wanda grinned at him, apparently delighted at his discomfort. "You're such a smart man, do something yourself," she said. "I've done my part."

"You sure have," Sunrise agreed. "And what I want to know is why?"

"Just to prove I was playing square with you; it seems dad had been watching you, sent for the sheriff and followed you when you went after the cattle tonight. But I didn't know a thing about it, and he didn't even know I'd talked to you."

"And I figured you'd—"

"Set a trap for you?" exclaimed Wanda. "Why, I ought to scratch your eyes out!"

"You probably will," Sunrise hazarded.

Just then there was a sound at the open window. They saw a gun come poking through, and behind it rose the grinning face of Baldy Higgins. "Sunrise," Baldy solemnly intoned, "you and that girl do just what I say now, or I'll shoot you both! S'helpme, I will. Now come out this window to me."

Sunrise looked hastily at Wanda. "We better do what he says," he warned. "When he's like this you got to humor him."

Baldy's gun was waving erratically, and Wanda, followed by Sunrise, tumbled through the window with more speed than grace. Still sternly waving the gun and reeling grandly Baldy herded them across the ranchyard to a huddled heap on the ground. Baldy poked the heap, which was groaning a little, with his gun.

"Half killed my horse riding into town to get this," he explained. "It's a parson; I roped it in town and brung it out here just as fast as I could." He pulled loose the ropes on the moaning heap. "Now up on your hind legs, parson," he grimly ordered, "and say them words fast."

THE FRIGHTENED little minister bounced to his feet. He jerked

a book from his pocket and demanded in a breathless rush, "Do you, Wanda Eden, take this man, Sunrise Carmon, for your wedded husband?"

Baldy wriggled his gun at Wanda. "Say, 'I do,'" he hoarsely ordered.

"I do!" gasped Wanda.

"And do you, Sunrise Carmon," gulped the preacher, "take this woman?"

"Say 'I do,'" threatened Baldy. "This is going to be a holy deadlock."

"I do," snapped Sunrise. "And the word's wedlock, not deadlock."

"Bet you five dollars!" declared Baldy.

The preacher gasped, "Now pronounce you man and wife."

"It's done!" chortled Baldy. "Only I hope it ain't too mixed up, and she's hitched to you, Sunrise, and not me, or leastwise that it's not you and me that's married." He pulled a whiskey bottle from his pocket. "Have a drink, parson?"

The little minister flung up his hands and fled in horror. Baldy sighed happily "I had to do it, Sunrise," he explained. "You and her alone this way. And at night. Everybody figuring you was married and you wasn't. Never heard of such immortal goings on!"

"Get out of here, Baldy!" exploded

Sunrise. "I want to talk to this woman I'm sentenced to."

"I'll go if you give me a job here," countered Baldy cagily. "You're foreman now."

"Hired," snapped Sunrise; "now get out of my sight."

Baldy went staggering away in long sweeping loops, and Sunrise turned on Wanda.

"I've a notion to turn you upside down and tan the living daylight out of you," he growled.

Her head went up, those hazel-green eyes flashing. "I'd just like to see you try it!"

He took a long step toward her, and her face lifted toward his and her lips held a taunting smile. He had her in his arms then, with his own mouth hard against that sultry smile. He drew back after a minute and took a deep breath. "Gosh!" he said. "If that's the way you feel about me, Wanda, maybe it won't be so bad after all!"

She hooked her arm through his. "Let's go home, Sunrise," she suggested. "The way I feel about you is this—I'd a lot rather be married to you than not, because that way I'll have you kind of tied close where I can make you miserable just any time I feel like it!" ● END

THE LONG CHANCE

riving to find Loving weak and ill, but seemingly improved. After a brief visit, Goodnight left to round up some scattered cattle in the mountains. A speeding courier overtook him on the way. Gangrene had set in on Loving's wounded arm, but he would not consent to an operation unless his friend Goodnight was there. Failing rapidly after surgery, the sick man beckoned the colonel.

"When I die," he murmured faintly, "don't leave me in this blasted foreign soil. Promise you'll take me back to Texas." In those rugged days, a promise was regarded as a sacred trust. The colonel gave his word.

Loving's wasted body had to lie temporarily in the hated "foreign soil" of New Mexico, but after a few weeks a metallic casket was freighted in. A wagon box was removed and the heavy coffin lashed to the running gear. With the colonel riding ahead, and

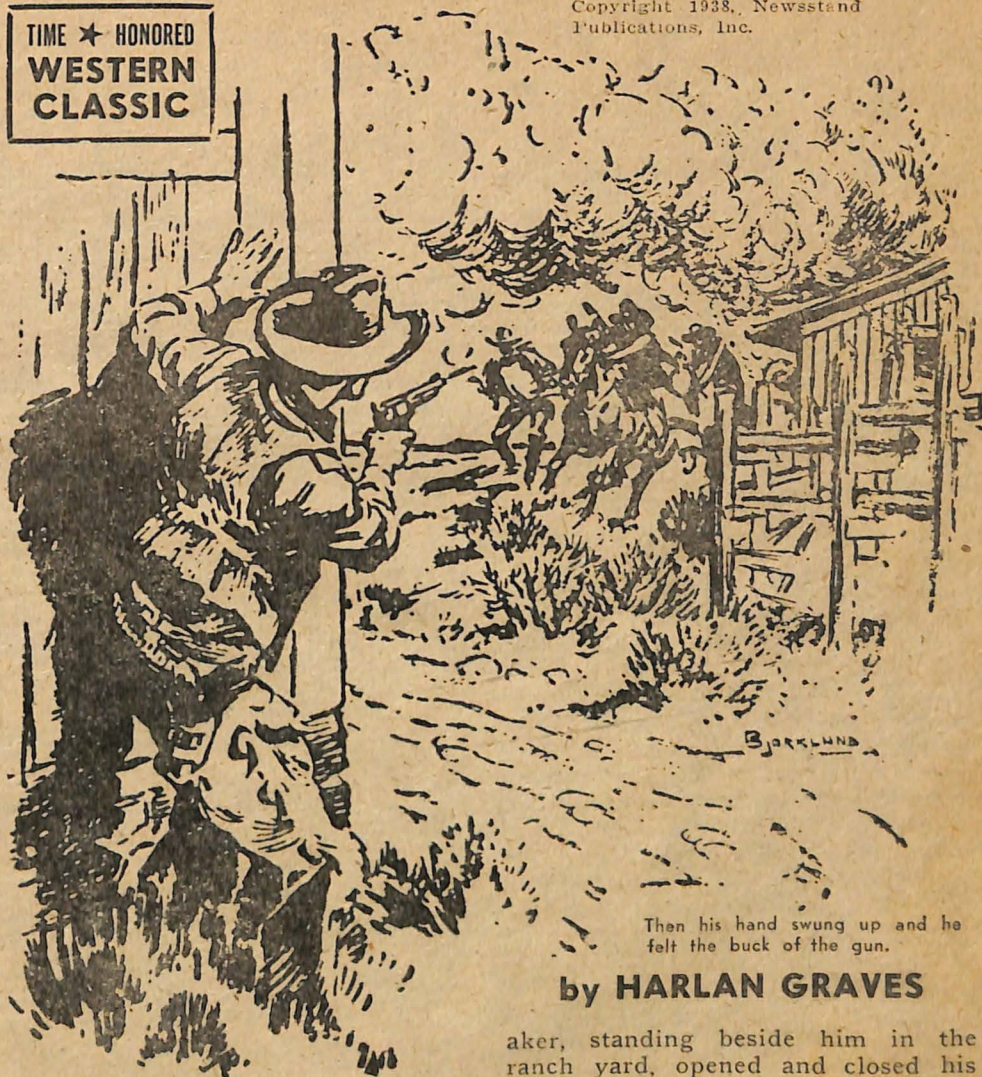
(continued from page 37)

an honor guard on either side, the caravan set out on the long trek to Texas. That march through mountain passes, over sun-scorched plains and high mesas, was the strangest funeral procession ever known in American frontier history. From their hiding places, Indian bands must have stared, awed and puzzled, at that somber cavalcade with armed outriders guarding the long, dark box. Not even the boldest warriors dared attack the mysterious travelers. The cortege passed safely where others would have lost their scalps.

Finally the weary group arrived at Oliver Loving's old home in Texas. The ponderous metal casket was reverently lowered to its place in the soil he had loved and cherished. With a silent farewell to his friend and partner, the colonel turned away. He had kept his word. ● END

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Then his hand swung up and he
felt the buck of the gun.

by HARLAN GRAVES

PAYDIRT FOR BUSHWHACKERS

JIM LAYTON looked dazedly at the lifeless form in the bed of Sheriff Wingo's buckboard. A hard knot of muscle appeared on the side of his lean jaw. Old Sam Whit-

aker, standing beside him in the ranch yard, opened and closed his hands slowly over the butts of the two guns at his sides.

Just a few hours ago, Bill Feeder, their partner, had started for Loma with five thousand dollars in gold in his saddle bags. Now, Bill Feeder was dead—shot in the back—and the gold was gone!

Jim Layton's eyes were a queer mixture of fire and ice as he looked

**Jim Layton's best friend
was boothill-bound—rid-
dled by bullets from the
Colt of Jim's own gun-
hireling!**

at the sheriff. His expression was wooden. He seemed unable to comprehend the thing Sheriff Wingo had told them when he'd driven up with Bill Feeder's body. Old Sam Whitaker didn't seem to comprehend it either.

"Got any ideas?" Jim asked the sheriff slowly. "Got anything to work on, Sheriff?"

"It's like I said, Jim." Sheriff Wingo held up a concho-studded sombrero and turned it over and over in his hands. I found Feeder in Vulture Pass, a hole in his back. This hat lay just off the trail not far away. You say Tito, that Mex helper of yours, started to town with him. It looks like he's the gent we want."

Jim Layton nodded wordlessly. His mind was churning with a million confused thoughts. Bill Feeder had been more than a partner to young Jim Layton and Sam Whitaker. He had given Jim Layton a job when nobody else would. He had seen a man in old Sam Whitaker when everybody else saw only a drunken saddle-bum. He had made them both partners in the struggling Rocker T outfit. And now....

"I'll get a posse together right away," Sheriff Wingo's voice came to him again. "We'll trail that murdering Mex from hell to breakfast!"

As they lifted the limp form out of the buckboard, Jim Layton's mind turned back over the past five years. He remembered how he had come to the Rocker T, sick and broke. He remembered how Bill Feeder had taken him and treated him like a son. He recalled the disheartening struggle against drought and heat and sand, and how old Bill Feeder was determined to make a prosperous spread of the Rocker T.

"It's been my one big dream," old Bill had said once. "I want to ride through the hills and see my—our brand on thousands of cattle. I want to know that I've licked everything, the sun and the wind and the sand. And, by God, I'll do it yet!"

IT HAD been a long, hard struggle, with setback after setback. It had been even harder because of Lew Johnson, the banker in Loma. Johnson wanted the Rocker T north

range. He wanted to build a dam in Crazy Canyon and sell water to the other ranchers. He had tried to buy the place, but Bill Feeder wouldn't sell. Then, a year ago, when things looked the blackest he had loaned Bill five thousand dollars in the hope that it never would be repaid.

Old Sam Whitaker had come to them then. Jim Layton used to wonder sometimes if it wasn't Fate that sent Sam Whitaker to the Rocker T. Bill Feeder took him in, listened to his wild tales of rich gold strikes to the north. He listened and wondered if this was the way out, the way to his dream for the Rocker T....

They went to the new gold fields, stayed eight months. They came back with eighty thousand dollars in dust and nuggets.

"I'll pay off Johnson and tell him to go to hell" Bill Feeder had said then. "I'll tell him I won't even keep the money in his bank. I'll hide it here on the ranch, and nobody will know where it is but me. Then, when this drought lets up—"

It was dark as Jim Layton and Sam Whitaker sat silently at a table in the tiny living room of the ranch house.

Somehow, only one thing seemed important now. Jim Layton kept thinking about it as they buried old Bill near the ranch house. He was thinking of it now as he sat across the table from Sam Whitaker.

"That note was due today," Jim said tonelessly. "Bill was on his way to pay it when—"

Sam Whitaker nodded solemnly. "And we ain't got the slightest idea where the rest of that gold is hid. That was a crazy thing to do, Jim! Bill should of told us what he did with it."

"Maybe he would have, if we'd asked him," said Jim Layton. "We always left all the business of the outfit to him. But we've got to find that gold, Sam. Old Bill put his life and his hope in this spread, and nobody's gonna take it now. We've got to pay off that note somehow. After that—"

Sam Whitaker picked up the concho-studded sombrero for the tenth time and studied it savagely. After that... Sam's hand moved slowly to

the butt of the gun at his hip. After that, they would ride on the trail of a bushwhacking Mexican....

The beat of horses' hoofs broke suddenly through the hush of the night outside. Swelling like an avalanche of sound, it swept up to the little ranch house and came to a rumbling halt. There was the sound of voices and the tinkle of spurs on the porch.

Jim Layton went to the door and opened it. He saw a group of riders in the shaft of yellow light made by the lamp behind him. Sheriff Wingo crossed the porch and came in the house. Behind him came Lew Johnson, and a hard-eyed gent named Burr Clagget.

"I knew you'd want to know," the sheriff said as he came in, "so we dropped by on the way back to town. We trailed the Mex as far south as San Miguel, but we lost him in the hills there. Sheriff Roberts, in the next county, has the passes blocked to the south, so he won't get far. We'll pick up the trail tomorrow."

Jim Layton nodded. "Thanks, Sheriff," he said. "If there's anything we can do—"

SHERIFF WINGO pressed his arm comfortingly. "We'll take care of everything, Jim," he said. "I know how you and Sam feel over this. I'll let you know when something turns up."

Johnson and Clagget stayed behind after Sheriff Wingo and the posse had gone. Johnson seemed to have something on his mind that he didn't quite know how to say. Jim Layton thought he knew what it was.

"I—I was sure sorry to hear about old Bill," Johnson finally said. "Not a squarer man ever lived."

Sam Whitaker made a funny noise in his throat, but he didn't say anything.

"I understand he was on his way to see me when he—when he got—" Johnson hesitated, smiled helplessly. "Bushwhacked!" old Sam finished coldly. "That's the word you want, Johnson!"

Jim Layton looked at the two men before them. Clagget, thin-lipped, cold-eyed, standing like an icy statue

near the door. Johnson, bulky, oily, reminding Layton of a huge toad. Jim wondered at the queer feeling that rose within him as he looked at them. He knew that Lew Johnson wasn't sorry to hear of the death of Bill Feeder. He thought maybe Lew Johnson was glad. Bill Feeder had stood between Johnson and a dam in Crazy Canyon. He had kept Johnson from making a fortune at the expense of the ranchers. And now Johnson was saying that he was sorry, hinting that Bill Feeder was on his way to the bank when...

"I get what you mean, Johnson," Jim Layton said stonily. "Bill was on his way to pay off that note, but he didn't get there. Well, don't worry. You'll get your money."

"Oh, sure!" Johnson broke in quickly. "I wasn't worrying about that. I wouldn't even mention it at a time like this, but you know how hard this dry spell has hit the bank. You'll—you'll have the money in town tomorrow then?" He watched Jim Layton's face closely as he spoke.

"Tomorrow?" Jim echoed. He looked quickly at Sam Whitaker, then at the tight-lipped smile on the face of Burr Clagget. Clagget seemed to be watching him with a peculiar sort of interest.

"It was due today," Johnson reminded.

"Okay," said Jim Layton. "You'll have your money—tomorrow!"

But the next day dawned, brightened and ebbed, and Jim Layton had not been to town.

They had searched every corner of the house, had ransacked the out-buildings, had even moved the hay and grain in the barn—but nowhere could they find a trace of the gold Bill Feeder had hidden. Nearly seventy-five thousand dollars in dust and nuggets somewhere on the ranch, and they couldn't find it!

Jim Layton sank heavily into a chair, sighed deeply. "It may take weeks to find that gold," he told Sam. "Johnson wants this place bad, and he'll take it. We've got to do something!" He brought his fist down on the table with a crash. Something round and heavy and dull bounced

into the air and rolled off across the floor....

Jim leaped from his chair, had it in his hand before it stopped rolling. His fingers trembled as he turned it over in his hand. It was a gold nugget!

Old Sam's mouth flew open and his eyes became nervously bright. "Where did *that* come from?" he demanded. Both men were on their feet now.

"It was on the table here," Jim said quickly. "It must have been. But I—I didn't see it there this morning."

"It wasn't there this morning," old Sam said excitedly. "There wasn't nothing on that table but the lamp, an old crust of bread, this box of shells—"

"Why, sure!" Jim broke in, his face suddenly alight. "That's the answer! The crust of bread! Where is it?"

SAM WHITAKER'S jaw sagged. "It's gone! Those damned thieving—"

"Don't you see, Sam?" Jim cut in. "A pack rat took the crust and left this nugget in its place! And there ain't any nugget gold within a hundred miles of here! The rat's found old Bill's cache!"

"We ain't no better off than before," Sam pointed out dismally, "—except knowing that a damned rat's hauling our gold off *poco a poco!*"

Jim Layton nodded disappointedly. Then his eyes brightened again. "If that rat hauls any more of our gold off, he'll have to go back to the cache. Maybe we can lay out baits, watch for him, see where he goes. There's a bare chance he might take us to the gold!"

Sam snorted skeptically.

Together they rummaged the house for objects that might tempt the curious little rodent. A pocket knife—another crust of bread—metal bottle tops—a red railroad flare with a shiny metal tip—these and a dozen other things they laid out carefully on the kitchen floor. About the whole they sprinkled a thin layer of soot from the blackened fireplace. It was dark before they finished their strange task.

"You never can tell what'll strike a trade rat's fancy," Jim said as he surveyed the queer assortment of odds and ends on the floor. "Sometimes they'll take a shiny piece of tin and leave food behind. And they always leave something in place of what they take. They're sure funny little devils."

As a final touch, old Sam sprinkled a box of cartridges within the soot-encircled area. Then they put out the oil lamp and waited.

For several hours they sat in silence, straining through the blackness for the sound of scampering toenails. On any other night the familiar scratching noise would have been as inevitable as the yammering of the coyotes in the nearby hills. But now they heard nothing but the sound of their own breathing.

At midnight, Jim rose stiffly from his chair. "I'll get some sleep," he whispered to Sam. "Call me in a few hours and I'll spell you."

Old Sam grunted as Jim Layton tip-toed off to the bunkroom.

When Jim Layton opened his eyes again sunlight rested on his face.

Jim bounded out of bed, hurried past his sleeping partner to the kitchen. His eye swept over the clutter on the floor, and he groaned.

He grasped old Sam by the shoulder.

"Huh—what—what's the matter?" Sam blinked dazedly as he sat up.

"You're a hell of a night guard!" Jim said half angrily. "A herd of Texas longhorns could have stampeded through here last night and you wouldn't have known it!"

"Huh—er—did that rat come back?"

"Have a look for yourself."

The red flare with the shiny metal tip was gone, and in its place a bleached stick. A sooty smear stretched across the floor toward the door, circled underneath the table, then disappeared behind the stove. Following its uncertain course on hands and knees, old Sam let out a sudden yell.

"It went in here!" he shouted, poking his head through a hole in the floor. "Get a crowbar!"

EAGERLY they moved out the stove and tore up the floorboards.

They could not follow the trail in the sand beneath, but the joists under the flooring limited the direction in which the rat could have moved. Old Sam wormed his way through the tunnel thus made. At the opposite wall he found a second hole through the outside boarding.

Outside, a faint streak in the sand showed where the rat had dragged his burden for a few feet, then picked it up. There the trail ended.

"I told you that was a fool stunt!" old Sam snorted peevishly. "Me breaking my neck in a hard chair all night, and what good did it do? You can cut rat-sign if you want to! Me, I'm eating."

After a quick meal, they laid careful plans for the day. Their gamble with the pack rat seemed to have got them nowhere. In desperation now, they returned to their former plan of covering the entire ranch, foot by foot, in a grim game of hide and seek.

Jim went over the ground covered before, more thoroughly this time. He tapped the fireplace for loose stones, tore apart mattresses, ripped up flooring. Outside, he searched the bunkhouse and barns again, moved wood-piles, dug in the sand beneath suspicious-looking rocks.

Sam Whitaker spent the day in the saddle, away from the house. It would not be unlike Bill Feeder to choose one of the numerous small caves in the hills as a safe deposit vault for their gold.

Blindly, almost frantically, they continued the hunt until night closed about them and made further search for that day impossible. Then they returned to the ranch house, empty-handed and peevish.

"It's got me worried," Jim Layton said as they ate supper. "Bill Feeder dreamed of making something outa the Rocker T. We could do it if we could find that gold. But now it looks like we'll be getting our walking papers from Lew Johnson before we find it."

Old Sam Whitaker bristled. "I'd like to see Lew Johnson run me off the Rocker T!" he growled. "The law may be on his side, but it's gonna take lead to budge me! Johnson or no Johnson, there's gonna be herds on

the Rocker T, just like Bill Feeder wanted. Bill may not be here to see 'em, but—"

A sudden crash of glass behind them broke off Sam Whitaker's words. Both men jumped to their feet as a rock clattered across the kitchen floor. Old Sam started for the door, gun in hand.

Jim Layton shouted a warning. "Stay away from that door! Maybe—"

Then they saw the piece of paper tied to the rock. Jim Layton scooped it up, untied it, spread it out. He read aloud:

Tito have not kill yore friend.
Tito know who have. Please not to shoot.

They stared at the paper for an instant. The Mexican helper who had started for town with Bill Feeder! He had come back, was outside!

Jim Layton rushed to the door and threw it open. Eyes squinting through the night, he could not see the figure crouching in the shadows just outside the shaft of yellow light that thrust through the door.

"Tito," he called out. "Tito."

There was no answer. Only a coyote mocking them in the distance.

"It's all right, Tito," Jim called again. "We won't hurt you."

SLOWLY, a figure emerged from the blackness, halted in the beam of light. It was a hatless figure, torn, face scratched, terror lurking in the eyes.

"Senores," the Mexican pleaded, holding his hands before him, "do not shoot."

Jim Layton rushed out and took the Mexican by the arm, pulled him in through the door. "It's all right, Tito," he said. "If you didn't do it, there ain't nothing to worry about."

"I swear it, Senores! By the Saints, I swear it!"

Then the tromp of hoofs sounded in the yard behind them. Not the rumble of horses racing openly, but the soft beat of horses reined in, approaching stealthily.

"It is them!" the Mexican cried in terror as the sound came to them. "They have come to kill me!" His

knees began to tremble noticeably beneath him.

Jim Layton snatched up the lamp with his left hand. His right might be needed for other work. He knew the unreasoning madness of men who traveled with ropes on their saddles.

Jim stepped from the porch, held the lamp high. He could make out four blotches of darkness in the flickering light. The only one close enough to recognize was Lew Johnson.

"We want that Mex," Johnson announced curtly. "Do we get him, Layton?"

"Don't tell us he ain't here," the voice of Burr Clagget clipped through the darkness. "We been following him."

Jim Layton didn't answer for a moment. Vaguely, he sensed that something was wrong. Four men, not a sheriff's posse, following the Mexican to the ranch, wanting to hang him....

"I don't see any sheriff with you," Jim said evenly. "What's this Mex got to do with you gents?"

"He's a murderer!" Lew Johnson replied. "We got ways of dealing with murderers around here!"

Then suddenly, something seemed to click in Jim Layton's mind. He remembered what Tito had written on the note he'd thrown through the window, about knowing who had killed Bill Feeder. He remembered what Bill Feeder had said, after they'd found the gold.

"I'll tell Johnson to go to hell," Feeder had said. "I'll tell him I won't keep the gold in his bank. I'll hide it, and nobody will know where it is but me—"

Maybe Bill Feeder had told Lew Johnson that. Maybe Lew Johnson had known that Bill Feeder was the only one who knew where the gold was. Maybe he figured that if Bill Feeder was dead....

"Listen, Johnson," Jim said stonily. "I'm turning the Mex over to Sheriff Wingo for a fair trial. I ain't so sure he—"

"We're taking him, Layton!" Johnson cut in savagely. "I'm warning you, it'll be too bad if you stand in the way!"

"Why argue with the damn fool!"

Clagget growled. "Let's get this over with."

Jim Layton's eye caught the gleam of metal in the lamplight. He knew it was too late to draw. Clagget's gun was already rising over his saddle horn.

Jim's left arm thrust forward quickly. The lighted lamp swished in a wide arc through the darkness, hurtled straight for Burr Clagget's barrel-like chest. Horses reared in air-pawing pirouettes, men cursed. A bullet fanned the air close to Jim Layton's ear.

Jim heard a crash of glass as the lamp struck. There was an instant of darkness, then a flicker of light. Clagget's oil soaked clothes burst into instant flame....

A WILD, panicky yell burst from Clagget's throat. The bronc beneath him reared, bolted, and Clagget was nearly thrown from the heaving saddle. Arms flailing now, spurs cutting savagely into the bronc's flanks, Clagget speared his plunging mount toward the barn. Ripping his blazing shirt away as he rode, he dived headlong into the watering trough.

Jim Layton stood there for a moment, unmoving. Then the thud of a bullet in the sand close to him reminded him of his exposed position. He dived quickly behind the shelter of a woodpile.

Panic seized the three riders before him. Spurs raked over quivering horse-flesh. Cursing men raced for the nearest shelter. From the direction of the house came the roar of a .45-70 rifle. That would be Sam Whitaker firing blindly into the night.

A horse squealed and fell. Johnson sprang clear of his mount and scrambled after the others afoot. He was a sure target from the woodpile. Jim raised his gun slowly, steadied it, then cursed softly to himself. He couldn't shoot any man in the back without giving him a chance—not even the murderer of old Bill Feeder. And maybe Lew Johnson was....

The dying flame from Clagget's oil-drenched shirt burst into new brilliance now. Jim knew what caused it. A pile of dry straw near the bunkhouse had ignited. It spread rapidly,

licked against the side of the bunk-house. Soon the building itself crackled and blazed, casting an eerie light over the ranch yard.

Jim Layton stood up, peered across the light-flooded area. There would be light to see by now. That would be better than flying blindly at flaming gun spikes, hoping to hit the shadows behind them....

A gun blazed across the yard, and Jim heard the whine of a bullet over his head. He marked the position of the orange tongue of flame and thumbed an answering shot. The voice of Burt Clagget boomed across the mesquite fringed clearing.

"It's fire you want, is it!" he roared. "We'll make it hotter than you like.

The woodpile was well lighted now by the blazing bunk-house. The glare of it blinded Jim, made it hard for him to see the shadows on the other side of the yard. If he were only on the other side, with Johnson between him and the bunk-house....

Jim wondered if he could make it to the mesquite behind him without being seen. He crawled fast toward it.

Ten yards more, and he reached the mesquite. With less caution now, he raced deep into it, began a wide circle around the rear of the house. He could hear the roar of Sam Whitaker's rifle from within.

Pushing a zigzag course through the thicket, Jim suddenly stopped. He saw a dim figure moving through the shadows toward him. He recognized the outline of Burr Clagget....

Clagget saw him at almost the same instant. He whirled. Jim Layton felt a searing pain in his left arm as Clagget's gun flamed. Then his own right hand swung up, and he felt the buck of his gun as red flame licked out toward the shadowy outline before him. Burr Clagget stiffened, plunged forward on his face.

Jim waited for the still form to move, but it didn't. Then he went on again through the thicket, toward the other three....

THE CRASH of six-guns told him that the others were still there. But, vaguely, he sensed that something was wrong. There was no sound

of lead smashing against the house... Then he saw a group of riders move out into the lighted clearing before the ranch house. He saw that it was Sheriff Wingo and a group of men from town. They had come up behind Johnson and the other two, had driven them out into the clearing with raised hands. Jim Layton holstered his gun and ran forward. His arm pained him as he ran, and he could see Sam Whitaker and Tito coming across the yard from the house.

"What in hell goes on here, Layton?" Sheriff Wingo asked.

Jim shrugged, looked at Lew Johnson and the other two men. "A little smoking-out party, Sheriff," he said. "You might ask these gents just what it's all about."

"We saw the blaze from town and rode out," the sheriff went on. "Are these the jaspers doing the smoking?" He jerked a thumb toward the three men, eyed Lew Johnson suspiciously.

"Them and one more," said Jim. "You'll find Burr Claggett's body in the bushes behind the house."

"Burr Clagget's body?" the sheriff echoed. "What—" Then his eyes bulged as he saw Tito coming across the yard with Sam Whitaker.

"You're just in time, Sheriff," old Sam told him. "This Mex has got a story you'll want to hear. Johnson and Clagget couleed Bill Feeder. They tried to kill the Mex too so he couldn't talk, but he got away from 'em."

"It's a damn lie!" Lew Johnson cried out. "You ain't gonna believe what that dirty—"

Jim Layton felt the hackles on his neck rise. Johnson and Clagget the murderers of old Bill Feeder! It all added up now. Old Bill had talked too much in front of Johnson. They'd known he'd be in with the money on the day it was due. They'd waited for him....

"Why did you hide out?" Sheriff Wingo asked the Mexican curtly. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"That I could not, Senor," the Mexican protested. "Those two others," he pointed at the two men

behind Johnson, "—they follow at my heels. For two days I hide in the hills without food. I come when it is safe."

Lew Johnson's lips twisted downward in a cruel sneer now. The fingers of his left hand moved nervously over his head. Jim Layton saw that the gun from his right holster was gone, dropped to the ground when Sheriff Wingo came up behind him. But his left gun was still in its holster. Johnson's eyes slitted, and he glared at the men about him.

"Think you've got me, huh!" he cried suddenly. "Well, maybe you have, but you ain't hanging me! I—"

His hand swept downward in a quick, nervous gesture. Jim Layton was ready for it. His gun leaped up, bucked. Lew Johnson swayed as a bullet smashed into him.

Desperately, Johnson tried to raise the gun in his hand, but there seemed to be no strength in his arm. He swayed crazily for an instant, then sprawled grotesquely in the sand...

THE MEN looked at the huddled figure silently, then at the smoking gun in Jim Layton's hand.

"I reckon that was as good as a confession," one of them said. "And

it saves fouling a good rope."

The embers of the bunk-house fire were dying now, casting a dull glow over the group of men in the yard. Then, as though at some pre-arranged signal, the redness of the light deepened, became somberly grotesque as it threw a queer fiery crimson light out over the ranch yard.

"Jim! Look!" Old Sam's voice rang out.

Jim Layton stood there, unmoving, his gun still in his hand. He looked at Sam, and saw the glint of understanding in his eyes. A red light... The flare carried off by the pack rat... Bill Feeder's cache of gold...!

Together they raced for the bunk-house, began kicking at the glowing embers. A coffee can, blackened but intact, came into view. Then another...

Jim Layton looked up into the lined face of old Sam Whitaker. Sam was looking at the cans, but he didn't seem to be seeing them. Jim Layton wondered if old Sam was seeing the same things he was. New buildings on the Rocker T... Wells and rich grasslands... Thousands of cattle with the Rocker T brand on them... Bill Feeder's dream come true.

● END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1932, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code Section 235) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION OF

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1954. My commission expires March 30, 1956.

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Commission Expires March 30, 1956.

He knew he never should have turned his back on Sims.



COLT REPRIEVE

by JAMES SHAFFER

AS THE FIRST streaks of morning sunlight fell across his face, Bud Halsey sat up with a jerk, eyes whipping around the unfamiliar surroundings. Then he remembered where he was, and he enjoyed the luxury of a long, slow stretch. He was in his own bed, back at his own ranch, and somehow the stretch

seemed to drive the memory of the grim prison farther back in his mind.

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN
CLASSIC

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Hit the trail and don't stop till you're someplace nobody knows you, the warden told Bud Halsey, but Bud figured he could win his final freedom only in the dust of his home town....

His bunk in his cell hadn't been big enough for him to stretch on.

Not that he could forget the penitentiary very soon. There was still his dad, Bud thought. And too, the grim warning of the warden was still fresh in his mind.

"I don't want to see you back here, Halsey," the official had said, when Bud had been brought to his office the last time.

"Don't worry," the young rancher had declared fiercely. "You won't."

THE WARDEN bit off the end of a cigar. "I understand you've been talking about going back home." Bud nodded. "That's bad," the warden bit out. "You're a marked man if you go back there. Hit the trail—and don't stop till you're some place where no one knows you. You've no business back in Twin Poplars."

Bud's jaw had jutted, and his hands clenched. "Me and dad have a ranch there. I'm going back to it. I aim to have it in shape—when he gets out."

"People will be against you," the warden repeated grimly. "You'll be carrying a brand."

"I'm not ashamed of it," Bud said hotly. "And I'm going back."

And now, as he rolled out of bed and fixed breakfast, the warden's grim words came back to him, and he wondered. But no—this was his home, his and dad's, and he meant to keep it.

A sardonic smile twisted his face, as he looked out of the paneless kitchen window. The Lazy H was in as bad a shape as a ranch could get. There was plenty of work to do before dad got here.

He stiffened as a rider rode out of the brush down near the barn. On stiff legs, he walked to the sagging kitchen door and waited as the man rode up; his eyes narrowed.

"Told you once to stay off the Lazy H, didn't I, Jessup?" Bud snapped.

Sime Jessup appeared not to hear Bud's cold words. His tall, bony body was draped awkwardly across his saddle. His thin lips, a mere slash under his hawk nose, twisted in what passed for a smile.

"Bud Halsey! I'll be damned! When'd you git ou—uh, damned if

this ain't a surprise. Why'n't you let somebody know you was coming back? Glad to see you, Bud."

Bud's face was white with stubbornness under its coat of tan. Bud had been lucky about prison pallor. He'd gotten an outside job, working in the blacksmith shop at an outside anvil. He was as brown as he'd been the day he'd entered prison.

"Can't say that I'm glad to see you," Bud said harshly. His tall, lean body was tense as he stared at Jessup. Swinging that sledge as he'd worked on the anvil had kept his body in fine shape. Jessup noted that with a long, curious stare.

"No, you never was very glad to see me, when I used to come over and see your old man," Sime Jessup said thoughtfully. His right hand strayed close to the butt of his Colt, his eyes taking in the fact that Bud wore no gun.

Bud grunted, but didn't trust himself to speak. For he knew he'd start cussing Jessup. This was the hombre that was responsible for Bud and his dad going to the pen. Not that Bud thought of his dad as being blameless. No, his dad had done wrong, and he was paying for it.

But it had been Jessup who'd talked Jeff Halsey into trying to gather in some easy money. Some easy money to pay off that mortgage Frank Munro had against the Lazy H.

Well, it hadn't been easy. Sheriff Hickman and a posse had broken up that little rustling party before it had gotten started good. And Frank Munro still held the mortgage.

Old Jeff had stopped lead the first crack out of the box. He'd come home that night with a skin full of lead and a posse on his backtrail. And Bud Halsey had done what anybody else would have done. Bud hadn't been in on the rustling, but when his dad had come home, Bud reached for his Colt and tried to hold off the posse long enough for his dad to reach the high country.

He hadn't held the posse off—and old Jeff Halsey hadn't reached the mountains.

SIME JESSUP who had run at the first sign of the posse, had proved that he'd been in the back room of a

saloon playing poker at the time of the raid.

"That's right, Sime," he said evenly. "Never was happy to see you, and now I've got reason to hate the sight of you. Stay off the Lazy H."

Sime sneered. "Don't pull that hifaluting stuff on me, Halsey," he flared. "I ain't taking that kind of talk—from a jailbird!" He spat in the dust. "I seen the smoke in your house and rid over. Thought some saddle bum might be making his home here and doing damage to the place. You see? I was trying to do you a favor, and you give me that kind of talk!"

"Don't want any favors from you!" Bud snapped. He was remembering the word 'jailbird'. So that's what he was, eh? That's what folks would call him, now. All right, let 'em. He didn't give a damn.

Sime colored, but seemed determined not to be insulted. "When's your dad get out?"

Jeff Halsey's prison sentence had been longer than Bud's.

"None of your business!" Bud flared. "Now git off—"

Sime jerked convulsively. "Told you I wasn't taking any more of your lip!" he snarled. His bony frame quivered as his skinny hand snaked for his gun. Bud leaped at him. He got a twisting grip on Sime's gun wrist and jerked. Jessup cursed in sudden pain and leaned over to hit at Bud. The young rancher ducked under the blow, then struck upward.

He felt his knuckles land solidly, and Jessup sagged. Bud struck again. Sime moaned, and dropped his gun. He would have slid out of the saddle, but Bud steadied him. He shoved him upright, then slapped his mount sharply. With hot, smoky eyes he watched horse and rider disappear.

He was still remembering Sime's word—jailbird—when he rode into Twin Poplars that afternoon, and the memory of it brought a strange foreboding as the familiar outlines of the town appeared. There was trouble ahead for him. He could feel it. His jaw settled into grim lines. Let there be trouble. Only let it come before his dad got out.

Twin Poplars was the same as he'd left it. One long, crooked street of ankle deep dust, flanked on both sides by unpainted, false-fronted buildings. There were small clusters of hip-shot horses in front of each saloon, a few people on the streets. That was all.

Bud felt the eyes of those few people on him, and his spine tingled as he wondered if they were thinking the same thing that Sime Jessup had put into words. Jailbird. He saw people he knew, but there were no nods of greeting as his horse trotted down the dusty thoroughfare.

The full impact of the warden's grim warning struck him now. He was home, where his brand was known. He shrugged the thoughts away. He'd known it was going to be tough, coming back like this. But he'd paid for his mistake. And there was dad, expecting to come back to the Lazy H when he got out.

BUD NEEDED supplies. The long trail home had exhausted his meager ration of bacon and beans. He reined up in front of the general store, tossed his reins across the hitch rack and walked in. John Harvey looked up from his ledger book as he came in.

"Howdy, Mr. Harvey," Bud said. "Got a list of stuff here I need."

"Heard you was back," Harvey said flatly. He picked up the pencil list Bud had laid on the counter. "Got any money?"

"A little," Bud admitted. "Was kinda hoping to hang onto my ready cash. Figured on getting this stuff on credit."

Harvey dropped the list back to the counter. "And what kind of security would you have?" There was faint sarcasm in his voice.

Bud felt his face growing red and hot. "Reckon I still got the Lazy H," he said.

"Reckon you ain't," Harvey snapped, turning back to his books. "Leastways, you ain't got much of it left—and won't have that long."

Bud Halsey could hardly believe his ears. He stared in open mouthed surprise at the dour storekeeper. Harvey was presumably engrossed in his

ledger. Bud grabbed the book and slammed it shut.

"What you mean—ain't got much of it left?" he demanded.

"Had it mortgaged, didn't you?" Harvey snapped irritably. "Bank had the mortgage, didn't it? Then find out at the bank. This ain't no information office."

Bud strode out, and turned his steps toward Fred Munro's bank. He disregarded the cold glances he received, and the knowing looks as people spotted Sime Jessup's gun tucked in his waistband. The bank was the only brick building in town. Bud jerked the door open and strode in—almost into the arms of Sheriff Hickman.

"Hello, Bud. Heard you were back," the lawman said simply. His weathered gray eyes caught Halsey in a long look.

"Hello, sheriff," Bud said. "I want to see Munro."

The lawman nodded, but still didn't move. "Where'd you git that gun? You got no business with one."

"I'm a free man, now, Hickman," Bud snapped. "If I take a notion to wear a whole shooting gallery, I'll do it, savvy?"

The lawman nodded, his expression saying that he understood only too well. "What's your business with Munro?"

"The Lazy H."

The sheriff nodded slowly. "All right. We'll go in together."

Fred Munro stood up behind his big desk as they entered. Munro was fat, the fat that comes with big eating and little work.

"Come in, sheriff." He nodded in Bud's direction. "So you're back."

Bud dispensed with preliminaries. "I tried to buy supplies at Harvey's. He made some talk about the Lazy H. What's it about?"

Munro looked at Sheriff Hickman. "This is why I wanted you here—especially when he rode into town with a gun—" He turned to Bud, clearing his throat nervously. "It was necessary to foreclose on some of the ranch—and to sell some for taxes—"

"Dad had money on deposit here," Bud cut in harshly. "Enough to pay interest on that mortgage and to take care of the taxes—"

MUNRO TAPPED on the desk with his pencil, his eyes shifting quickly from Bud to the sheriff.

"There were some debts your father owed—"

"I don't believe it," Bud snarled.

"Easy, now, Halsey," the sheriff broke in. "Everything's been done legal. I saw to that."

Bud was puzzled and mad. He'd have sworn there were no outstanding debts against his father. But, while he didn't particularly like Sheriff Hickman, he believed the lawman honest.

"I have all the papers here, if you want to look them over," Munro said.

Bud shook his head. "Harvey said something about I wouldn't have the Lazy H long. What'd he mean by that?"

Munro began sorting through the papers. He picked up a long legal document and put his glasses on.

"Never mind all that," Bud cut in harshly. "Tell it to me in simple words."

Munro nodded. "You've got twenty-six days to raise fourteen hundred dollars—or you'll lose the whole ranch."

Bud just stared. He could think of nothing to say. Where could he—just out of the pen—raise that kind of money?

"Now if that's all, I've got to arrange for a payroll shipment that's leaving by stage tonight. Too bad, Halsey. I did all I could."

But there was a new glint in Bud's eye. He grinned slightly at the banker. "Save your sympathy, Munro," he said. "I'll have that money. I just thought of something."

The lawman and the banker exchanged glances as Bud kicked his chair back and strode out of the office.

It was almost dark when Bud rode into the weed grown yard of the Lazy H. There was a big bag of supplies behind his saddle. He'd spent his ready cash for it. But he'd need it.

As he slid out of the saddle, another rider trotted around the corner of the corral. Bud tensed. It was Sime Jessup. The young rancher's hand slid to the butt of the gun stuck in his waistband, but although Sime had found another gun, he made no move

toward it. Instead, he seemed in a jovial mood.

"Whoa, now," his laugh was a high cackle. "Ain't aiming to rile you again, Bud." He rubbed his chin.

Bud was puzzled. He knew Sime had the disposition of a rattlesnake, especially when someone crossed him. His hand stayed close to the gun.

"Thought I told you this morning to stay—"

"Aw, now listen, Halsey," Jessup said in an injured tone. "All I been trying to do is be friendly. Don't you think I feel bad about your dad and you going to the pen? Think I ain't got no feelings? Besides, I came over to warn you."

"Warn me about what?"

Sime leaned out of his saddle and assumed a confidential tone. "Son, you hadn't ought to made that remark you made in Frank Munro's office—about knowing where to git some money—especially with payroll money on the stage tonight."

BUD WAS THUNDERSTRUCK. He vaguely remembered Munro saying something about a money shipment, but his mind had been busy with the thought of losing the Lazy H, and he had paid no attention. But now he remembered!

"Where'd you hear about it, Sime?" There had been but two people in the office.

Jessup sighed and made a weary gesture. "It's all over town, Bud. Tell me they're even betting whether you'll try it or not. The odds are you will."

Bud laughed bitterly. "Better take some of that money, Sime. You'll win."

"You ain't got no notions like that, have you, Bud?" Sime Jessup asked anxiously.

"Think I'm a fool?" Bud retorted. "I have got me an idea about keeping the Lazy H, but there's no stage hold-up mixed up in it." His bleak gaze swept the run down Lazy H. Nowhere was there the sign of any cattle. "Didn't take rustlers and neighbors long to clean it off," he said half-musingly, "but there's one place they missed."

"Think you know where you can

round up some dogies, huh?" Sime asked.

Bud nodded. "Way back in the hills there's a little valley. The mouth's pretty well hid, and I'm betting no body's found it. Only found it myself about two weeks before me'n dad—got in trouble. There were some Lazy H beef in it and I reckon they're probably still there."

Sime rolled a smoke. "And you figure on rounding 'em up and using the proceeds to hold onto the Lazy H."

Bud nodded.

"Them mossyhorns will be wilder'n bobcats," Sime said. "You'll need another man." He slid out of the saddle. "Reckon the least I can do is help you, Bud."

"Why—thanks, Sime." Bud was forgetting his enmity toward the lanky outlaw. After all, he was thinking, Jessup had been about the only person who hadn't treated him like poison. "C'mon in, and I'll rustle us some supper."

He turned and led the way to the house, carrying his sack of supplies. Sime followed along behind. Bud kicked the door open and started to ask Sime to light the lamp. That was when Sime hit him.

Bud felt, rather than saw, the blow coming and tried to dodge, but the barrel of Jessup's gun landed across his head. Brilliant lights and total blackness swam before Bud's eyes. He fell to his knees, then tried to push erect again.

"Slug me, will you?" Sime Jessup growled, as he closed in again. Bud saw the gun going up, saw it start down. He let the stiffness go out of his elbows and fell flat, rolling over as he did so.

"Still got fight, huh?" Sime belted and charged. Bud saw him through a haze. He shoved one foot up; caught Jessup in the stomach, but there was no strength in his legs. Sime slammed his leg aside, swinging his gun down again.

WHEN BUD came to, he was stretched out on his bunk. The room was swimming grotesquely and his head was pounding with the regularity of a pile driver. He tried to put his hand to his head, and found that he was tied hand and foot.

From the kitchen he could hear Sime rattling pans, as he prepared supper. Bud cursed and tried to roll over. The strain brought shooting pains through his head and he groaned. Jessup giggled, and his footsteps moved over to the door.

He was grinning when he looked in. "How you feel, Bud? Work up an appetite while you was laying there resting?"

"What the hell you up to, Sime?" Halsey gritted.

Sime Jessup laughed. "That plan of yours for raising money to save the Lazy H is a swell one. Trouble is, ain't no profit in it for me. I figgered me out one where I git all the profit—and you git all the blame!

"I had some jobs all lined up for you and me when you got out of the pen, but no, you was going to turn honest! And you got mean about it and slugged me. So I figured I could turn your meanness into profit for me."

Bud struggled half erect. "Sime, if I catch you rustling any more stock off the Lazy H—"

Jessup laughed uproariously. "Rustling! That's hard work. Not for me. I'm picking up some easy money. I'm robbing the stage tonight and putting the blame on you."

"You better kill me while you got a chance, Jessup! Because if you don't I'll track you down—"

Jessup was enjoying his joke. "I'm leaving a trail to and from that stage that a blind man could follow—all pointing to you. I'm leaving you tied loose. You can wriggle free a few minutes after I'm gone. If you don't wriggle loose the sheriff'll figure you tied yourself up. If you do get loose, you'd better start running, jailbird!"

Bud clenched his teeth till he could feel the enamel grind off, and the blood pounded through his head like a pressure pump. His eyes were mere slits. His utter helplessness filled him with a blinding rage. He squirmed and twisted like a mad man at his bonds.

Sime grinned in pure enjoyment. "That's right, squirm and kick like hell. But you ain't squirming half as bad as when they send you back to the pen. When they do, just think of me,

laying around with my pockets stuffed with easy money."

Bud thought of the hot, choking, filthy prison; the dull faces of its inmates; the tortuous nights he'd spent on that hard little bunk, looking up at a small patch of stars that he could see through his barred window. He started struggling again. Sime laughed.

"Pleasant dreams, Bud!" He stepped forward, his fist lashing out. It caught Bud flush on the chin, and he sank back, his senses dulling.

Sime was gone when he came to. The blow on his chin had started his head throbbing with increased intensity, and he had to lie still for a moment as a wave of nausea swept over him.

Cautiously, then, he began to experiment with his bonds, and he found that Sime had told the truth. The ropes binding him were very loose. From the kitchen he could still smell the odor of hot coffee. That meant he hadn't been unconscious very long the last time. In a frenzy of haste he began twisting at the ropes.

BUT THAT didn't work. "Easy does it," he muttered, and began to twist his hands around, feeling of the knots that held him. He found a loose one, and began working at it with his fingers. It almost fell apart.

"My guess is that Sime didn't figure I'd wake up soon's I did. He can't be over ten minutes ahead of me." He loosened his ankles and got to his feet. He had to steady himself with the wall, but his driving urge was to get outside. He kicked the screen open.

"I got a chance," Bud muttered. "That sidewinder figured my chin was softer than it is. Whoa, now, whoa. Take it easy."

The horse shied away, but Bud lunged for the trailing reins and got them. "Sime's horse," he muttered as he climbed aboard. "He ain't overlooking no bets of pinning this job on me."

But at the first step the horse took, his hopes crashed. The horse was lame! Bud cursed futilely. Jessup hadn't overlooked a single bet. Sobbing a curse, he swung out of the sad-

dle, led the horse into the light from the kitchen door and lifted the lame hoof.

A sharp rock was sticking into the hoof. It looked as if it had been driven in deliberately. Bud whipped out his knife and gouged the rock out, but the damage was done, and the horse could only limp along.

"Hate to use you this way, pardner," he muttered to the animal, "but I'm promising you a long rest after this night's work."

He struck straight across country, heading for the road at the nearest point from his ranch. But it was slow, torturing work, and the lack of speed made a raging devil out of Bud.

The night wore on, and he knew that the stage had either run by now, or it was nearly time for it. And he was still miles from the road.

Then faintly out of the night came the rumble of guns. Bud pulled up, his heart skipping a beat at the ominous sound. Four rolling shots, then silence.

But there were no other sounds after that. Only four shots faintly in the night, then—nothing.

"You're skylighted, Halsey! Lift your hands and keep 'em there!" There was no mistaking the grim tone in Sheriff Hickman's voice. Bud pulled up, hands raised. The lawman stepped into sight—a dim blob in the darkness—and came forward. Another man accompanied him.

"You—you don't think I robbed that stage do you, sheriff?" Bud burst out. The other man laughed, and Bud recognized the sound. It was Frank Munro.

Bud bit his lip. Why had he burst out like that? He'd given himself away at the very beginning by confessing knowledge of the robbery.

"I do," Hickman said shortly. "Had no idea you'd try it, and couldn't figure how you expected to get away with it. I see now. Gonna play innocent, huh? Riding a lame horse and got no gun. Wa-al we found the gun you threw away—the same gun you had this afternoon!"

BUD'S SHOULDERS sagged. He was guilty as far as they were concerned, without ever being tried.

"Let's go, sheriff," he said dully. "My horse is lame. I want to take the weight off him as soon as I can."

The three of them rode slowly through the night.

"A good thing I prevailed on you to ride the stage, sheriff," Munro said. "By being right on the spot, we made the capture immediately. It won't be hard to find the money. Halsey hasn't had much time to hide it."

The lawman grunted sourly. "A pity you couldn't put your brains to something better'n outlawry, Halsey. It took real brains and cold nerve to rob that stage tonight, when you were pretty sure I'd be riding it." He was silent for a moment. "A brainy thing to do, turning it over as it rounded a bend, and grabbing the dinero before we could untangle ourselves. Only—Hep Carson's dead. Your bullet caught him dead center."

So now murder was added to his crimes, Bud thought.

"My horse is getting worse," Bud said. "I better take another look at his hoof. All right?"

The sheriff gave assent and Bud slipped out of the saddle. He struck a match and examined the ailing hoof.

"Can't see anything wrong," Frank Munro snapped, leaning out of his saddle.

Bud struck. A rock he'd picked up he threw at the belly of the sheriff's mount. It snorted and shied. Bud leaped for the banker. He slammed a hard right at Munro's soft chin. He dragged him out of the saddle, jerking him around between himself and the sheriff. His hand snaked for Munro's armpit; re-appeared with a Der-ringer.

"Drop your gun, sheriff—drop it, I say! Now move away from it—that's far enough." He felt better when his hand closed over the big butt of the lawman's Colt.

"You're making a mistake, Halsey," Hickman said flatly.

"You and Munro ride double from here on and we'll leave the lame horse," Bud ordered. "We'll make better time."

"Better time to where?" Hickman asked.

Bud searched them both, satisfied

himself that they had no more guns, then boosted the groggy Munro behind the lawman, mounting the banker's horse himself.

"I got one chance of clearing myself, sheriff," Bud said. "A long one, but I can't be choosy. Ain't no use telling you the whole story—you wouldn't believe it anyhow. Only chance I got is to *prove* it to you! Now, let's ride."

Bud ordered a halt a quarter of a mile from Sime Jessup's shack. They left the horses and continued on foot. Munro started to protest, but Bud prodded him with the Colt and the banker fell silent.

There was no light in Sime's cabin. That worried Bud, but he did not relax caution. Noiselessly they crept within fifteen feet of a window.

In the dead silence they heard the "plop" of a cork being pulled from a bottle, then a long gurgle. Evidently Jessup had gone to bed for the night, with his bottle at his bedside. Bud put his mouth against Sheriff Hickman's ear.

"This is my long chance." He pressed the muzzle of the gun against the sheriff's ribs. "Say exactly what I tell you—loud enough for Sime to hear!"

MUNRO fidgeted nervously. Bud shoved the Derringer into the banker's stomach and the fidgeting ceased. He leaned close to the lawman.

"A crazy yarn that Bud Halsey told," Sheriff Hickman said in a loud whisper. "I wouldn't have believed it—only a man tells the truth when he's dying."

Inside the cabin a bed spring squeaked ever so slightly.

"Who'da thought Sime Jessup would figure out a way to frame Halsey like he did?" Hickman went on. "But it must be true—when a man's dying he tells the truth, don't you think, Munro?"

Orange flame and roaring thunder lashed at them from the window. Bud

shoved the lawman down, his gun lifting to center on those bright flashes. He felt the big gun buck in his hands, heard Sime Jessup scream in pain.

"Damn you, Munro!" Jessup bawled. "You was supposed to—"

Bud Halsey felt the Derringer ripped from his grasp. But Munro was still shooting. He focused his attention on the gun flashes in the window, and steadily triggered the Colt.

Behind him sounded the flat bark of a Derringer. He flinched, expecting the numbing rip of hot lead, but none came.

"That's enough, Bud," Sheriff Halsey said quietly. "Sime's quit shooting. I reckon it's because he ain't able."

Bud turned. Frank Munro was on the ground, clutching a bleeding shoulder. His Derringer was at his feet.

"What was you supposed to do, Munro?" the lawman demanded. "Sime said you was supposed to do something?"

The banker moaned in pain. "Figure things out—and see that Sime had an alibi. We—worked together—framed Halsey's old man. I figured I'd have the Lazy H before either got out of prison—when Bud got out sooner than I figured—had to do something—"

"That's enough for me," the lawman grunted. Bud bent down and picked up the Derringer. Then, surprised, he smelled the barrel. He remembered the Derringer shot.

"This hasn't been fired."

Hickman chuckled. "Ain't been a lawman thirty years 'thout knowing a little about hiding a gun on me." He looked at Bud a long moment. "When you started to make your play I decided to see it through. Been suspecting these two a long time—but couldn't get nothing definite."

He laid his hand on Bud's shoulder. "Help me get these two to town. I'm thinking you'll get a warmer reception in Twin Poplars than you got this morning!" ● END



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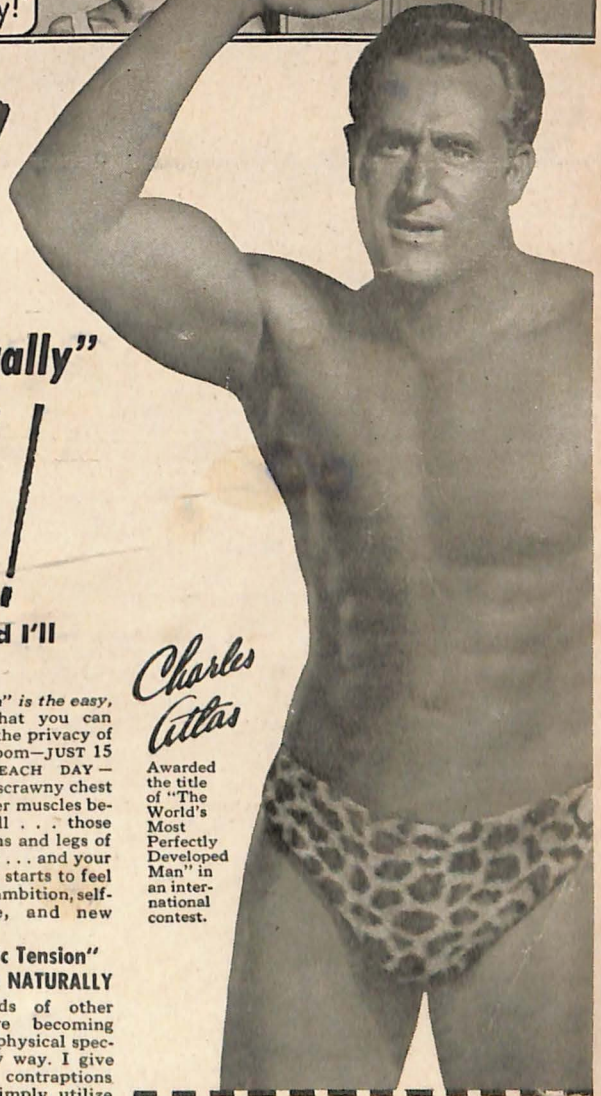
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