

LOVE STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

ROMANCES

WESTERN

APR. 25¢ 1952

132
PAGES

NO BRAND FOR DUKE

by Roe
Richmond

A
DOUBLE-ACTION
MAGAZINE

THAT RAFTER-L GIRL

by Roberta
J. Pate

Wanted by
the Sheriff



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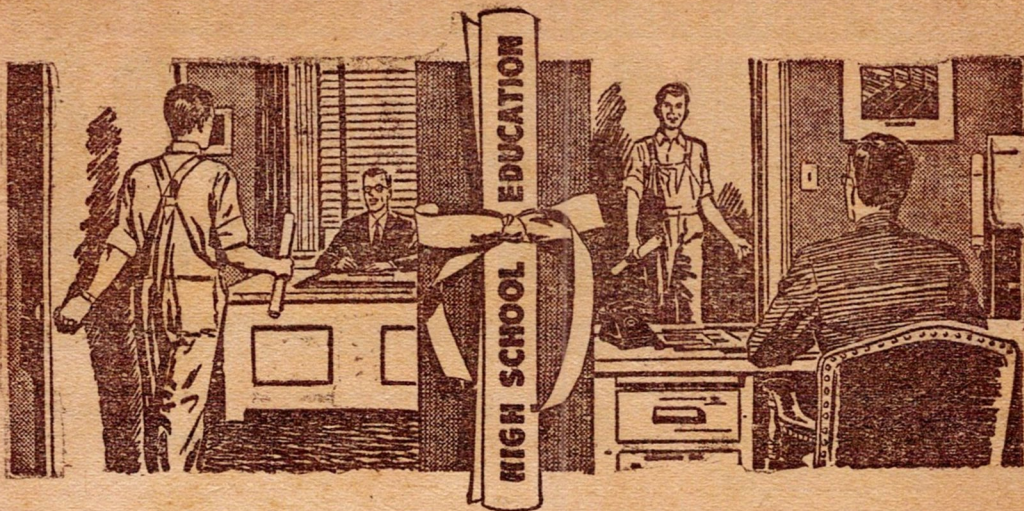
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LOVE STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

ROMANCES

WESTERN

Volume 2

April, 1952

Number 6

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★ MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, Editor

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Managing Editor



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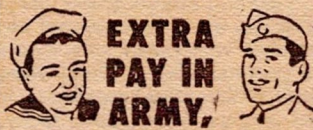
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Suddenly Bonnie realized that the plan was to kill Duke . . .

NO BRAND FOR DUKE

By Roe Richmond

He was a wanderer, completely self-sufficient, and Bonnie suspected that she was not the first girl to suffer because of inability to master and hold Duke Monsell . . .

Chapter One

BONNIE BRETTON was up on the North Tract watching the boys repair a line shack, when Pop Lander rode in looking sadder than ever. "The Duke's fixin' to travel, Bonnie," the old man said, morbidly munching his chew. "I tried to talk to him, but the Duke ain't listenin'. He's got the fever for fair this time. I don't reckon even you can stop him, gal."

"I can try, Pop," the girl said grimly. "They tell me a forty-four'll stop most anybody."

Lander spat in explosive protest. "You ain't goin' to throw down on the Duke, Bonnie? You can't do that no-how, gal."

"I need him, Pop. I'm goin' to keep him on Bracket some way."

Bonnie swung into her saddle with lithe easy grace, a fine girlish figure even in dusty faded jeans and a torn bleached shirt. The hair under her weathered hat glistened coppery red in the fine bronzed face. She was a whole lot of woman, Pop Lander admitted to himself, but it'd take more'n that to hold a born fiddle-foot like big Duke Monsell when his mind was made up on moving. . . . "See that the boys patch that roof, Pop, instead of waitin' till it rains," she said, and loped the rangy sorrel off on the downgrade toward the ranch.

Bonnie had seen the restlessness growing in Duke before the beef roundup was finished that fall. She had been running the Bracket B, ever

●●●●● FEATURE NOVELET ●●●●●

since her father and brother died under those rustlers' guns. Two years ago, that was... Bonnie had done a good job of it, too. She could handle men, as well as horses and cattle, but she never could quite dominate Monsell. It piqued and annoyed her, because most men were willing, even eager, to serve her every whim and wish. But there was a strong wilful independence in the Duke. He had been a good foreman, the best in the Canisaw country, but nobody would ever own Monsell through paying him top wages. Or by any other means.

He was a wanderer, complete in himself, and Bonnie suspected that she was not the first woman to suffer through her inability to master and hold Duke Monsell... Anger flicking raw and red in her blood, Bonnie boot-ed the gelding into a full gallop, exulting in the speed and power of the magnificent beast and her own ease in the leather. The rolling plains were brown and yellow with autumn, the cottonwoods along the Canisaw River burnt bronze in the sunlight, but Bonnie saw no beauty in any of it now. Even the familiar and beloved layout of ranch buildings failed to stir the usual pride and satisfaction in her, at this moment. If Monsell went, much of the warmth and color and life would go out of Bracket. He was that kind of a man. His presence made that much difference in a place. Pop Lander and the rest of the riders felt as she did about the Duke. His going would leave an emptiness, that no one else could fill.

BONNIE raced into the yard, with long saffron streamers of dust unfurling behind her, and flung out of the saddle at the bunkhouse. Duke Monsell appeared in the doorway, washed and shaved in a clean outfit of range clothes, a tall lounging man with clear gray eyes in a grave sun-darkened face.

"Where do you think you're goin', Duke?" she demanded.

He smiled at her soberly. "Old men like Pop talk too much sometimes. I told you I'd be ridin' on, Bonnie.

Three years in one place is a long time for me."

"You weren't even goin' to say goodbye!" Bonnie flared. "What kind of a man are you anyway?"

"Not very good at sayin' goodbye," Monsell drawled. "Sentimental, maybe, and kinda shy."

"Sentimental! You've got no more feelin' than a totem pole!"

He shook his high dark head. "You're wrong, Bonnie. A man can feel things without makin' a show of it."

"Some men but not you," she declared with scorn. "You were a shot-up half-dead saddle tramp when Dad and Jim took you in. Bracket has been your home for three years. And you were goin' to slink off without a word!"

"Sorry, Bonnie. I'm real obliged and grateful—for everythin'. But I'm one of them drifters, I can't stay put. Too long in one spot's like bein' dead, for me... Now that roundup's over, you can get along without me, Bonnie."

"You've got all the gratitude of a mangy alley cat!" she accused. "You just want to get into town and get roarin' drunk with that washed out blonde woman at *El Dorado*. That painted-up Crystal Holway!"

Monsell's smile was somber. "Now I might do some drinkin', Bonnie, and maybe dance a little with Crystal. But that's not my aim and destination, by any means. I'm headin' far out and long gone from the Canisaw."

"But *why*, Duke?" asked Bonnie Bretton. "Why and where and what for, man?"

"Well, for one thing, I've always wanted to meet up with Choya Kress and his outfit again. That account's far from squared up."

"It won't bring Dad and Jim back, to kill Choya Kress. And your bullet-holes healed a long time ago, Duke."

Monsell grinned wryly. "I still feel 'em some, when it's damp and cold."

"Just an excuse, Duke. And a poor one, at that."

"Maybe so, Bonnie," he said slow-

ly. "The main thing is I'm the rovin' kind."

She gestured despairingly. "Nothin' I can say or do will stop you, Duke?"

"Reckon not. Though if anybody could, you could..."

"Well, you probably aren't worth savin' anyway, Duke." Her proud features and strange golden eyes were contemptuous.

Monsell nodded approvingly. "Now you're talkin' sense, Bon."

In sudden fury, Bonnie reached for



the gun holstered on her right hip. She was fast, too, but Monsell was faster. Striding forward he caught her wrist and held it firmly. Bonnie's left hand flashed at his face, but Monsell gripped that wrist, holding both her arms tightly. Struggling wildly the girl started to kick at him, but Monsell drew her close against him to forestall that threat. Helpless in his iron grasp, fired as always by his nearness, Bonnie melted against him with a sigh: "Oh Duke, Duke!"

"Wildcat," he murmured, smiling and releasing her wrists.

Bonnie's arms went around him, locking hard, and her face lifted to his, the full red mouth reaching for his. Monsell obviously tried to remain aloof, but her urgency and loveliness were too much to resist. Reluctant still, fearful of the girl's gripping appeal, Monsell bent until his lips crushed the ripeness of hers and an up-sweeping flame welded them together... Bonnie had kissed him before but never with such hunger and abandon. Shaken to the depths, Monsell finally forced himself to let go of the girl, to hold her off with gentle strength.

"Can you still go?" she asked, amber eyes and scarlet mouth challenging him. "Can you still say goodbye and walk away from me, Duke?"

His dark head inclined wistfully, sorrowfully. "I've got to, Bonnie. It's nothin' I can pick and choose about."

"All right, go!" she cried, flouncing defiantly away from him. "Go ahead, get out of here, you fiddle-footed fool!"

"Sure, Bonnie, sure." Duke Monsell turned back into the bunkhouse, moving with the stilted grace of a rider, a high rangy broad-shouldered figure, brooding and remote and lonely in his single-minded pride. Driven by something stronger than himself, beyond her and everyone else.

WHEN Monsell came out with his saddlebags, bedroll and carbine, Bonnie Bretton was waiting in the stable doorway. At her command, Huckfield, the cripple-legged hostler, was transferring Duke's saddle from his horse to Storm King, a great mottled gray of claybank stock, one of the finest geldings in the Bracket remuda.

"I'm sorry, Duke," the girl said simply. "It's your life. I won't try to interfere any more. But I do hate to see you go."

"I'll miss Bracket more'n I ever missed any place," Monsell told her. "Maybe I'll drift back this way someday." Then he saw his saddle on the big gray, with the silvery-white mane and tail. "What's the idea, Bonnie?"

"Don't you like Storm King, Duke?"

"Sure, but I got no license ridin' a horse that good, Bonnie. The bay's good enough and I can afford him."

"I want you to have Storm King, Duke, and leave the bay here." She knew that Duke always had admired the gray.

"But I can't do that, Bonnie," he mumbled, touched and embarrassed by her generous gesture.

"Storm King's yours, Duke. That's all there is to it. You've been a mighty good ramrod. Bracket owes you somethin' over and above your pay."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't, Bonnie, much as I appreciate it. A horse like

the King's wasted on a driftin' rider like me."

"I don't think so. The King and the Duke, they kind of go together. Don't you think so, Huck?"

The little wrangler nodded emphatically. "Sure do, ma'am. The best hoss for the top hand, every time. There you are, Duke."

"Thanks, Huck." Monsell shook hands with him, and Huckfield turned away blinking and scowling, chewing hard on his tobacco.

Bonnie held out her hand, and Monsell took it. "I can't tell you, Bonnie..." he said huskily.

"I know, Duke. You don't have to try. Just come back—sometime."

"I hope so, Bon. Say so long to the boys for me." They kissed, quickly and briefly this time, and Monsell stepped into the saddle.

He rode away without a backward glance, a splendid figure on the superb claybank gelding, and Bonnie Bretton watched him with blurred eyes and an aching lump in her throat... *I hate to do it, she thought. It's a lowdown dirty trick, but if it'll keep him here in Canisaw... Bracket needs him, I need him myself, and there's a chance it'll work. After he has his drunk and sobers up in jail, perhaps he'll be broke and subdued enough to stay in this country. Another year maybe, long enough to save up a stake... And if I can't win him over in that time. I guess I never will. I'll just have to give up.*

Chapter Two

MUSIC blared from *El Dorado* dance hall in Canisaw Crossing, as Bonnie Bretton and Sheriff George Partee approached it from the rear. It was the second evening since Duke Monsell's departure from Bracket. According to rumor, the Duke was still celebrating around town, spending much of his time with Crystal Holway, the voluptuous blonde belle of *El Dorado*.

The moment of springing her runs

at hand, Bonnie was hesitant and filled with chill foreboding. "I don't want him hurt, George," she repeated again.

Partee smiled without humor. "No, I guess you just want him, Bonnie," he grumbled. "The first poor judgment you ever showed."

George Partee had been pleased when Bonnie first requested the warrant, but now he was beginning to suspect some underlying motive in her act. A broad solid powerful man with a certain rugged nobility of features bearing, Partee had once been the favorite among Bonnie's suitors, whom she kept on a casual friendly basis, for the most part. That was before Duke Monsell had come to Bracket B. Since then Bonnie had looked at no other man with interest.

"Who you sendin' after him, George?" she inquired.

"Greer and Tomkins volunteered real prompt."

"Sure, they never liked Duke. They're hot-headed and tough and fancy themselves as gun-sharps. There'll be trouble, George."

"There generally is when you go to arrest a hardcase like Monsell." The sheriff's tone was dry and cryptic. "What do you expect, Bonnie?"

She stared hard at him. "You'd like to see them kill him, wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't cry much," Partee confessed. "But I told the boys not to use guns. Unless they had to."

"You should've sent somebody else, George."

Partee's craggy face tautened. "I run the sheriff's office, Bonnie. Even you can't tell me how to do it. You wanted a warrant swore out. The rest of it's my job."

"I know, George, I know." Bonnie sighed wearily, restraining him in the shadows behind the long, gaudily-lighted building. She had dressed for town in a dark divided skirt and a golden shirt checked thinly with crimson. She was so lovely in the dimness, that Partee had to fight down a compulsion to take her in his arms. He

knew from experience such tactics were futile with this girl.

"Why does it have to be *him*, Bonnie?" asked Partee, with pain in his gruff voice.

Her amber glance was level and steady. "Who can answer that, George?" In many respects Bonnie Bretton was as frank, forthright and direct as a man, yet every line of her profile and full-curved form was delightfully feminine.

"Nobody, I reckon," Partee grumbled. "Let's get inside, Bonnie."

They were expected, a houseman stood waiting within the back entrance to usher them into a small private dining room. There was whiskey for the sheriff, a light wine for the girl. From the brocaded curtains screening the booth, they could look out over the dance floor and bar. At a corner table immediately below, Duke Monsell was laughing merrily with Crystal Holway. . . *Is it the liquor or the woman?* Bonnie wondered. *He was never so gay and happy with me. Duke doesn't look drunk at all. Maybe he belongs with that kind of a hussy instead of me.*

AT THE NEAR end of the bar, Monk Antone, the proprietor of *El Dorado*, was chatting with two of his gun-guards, Shadnik and Vermilya. They seemed to be watching Monsell, but Bonnie couldn't be certain. In a few minutes Antone tapped discreetly and opened the door of their cubicle, smiling, bowing, very dapper in a white suit that accentuated the darkness of his bold face, hooded eyes, and thick curly hair. A little man but a dangerous one, deadly with gun or knife or bare hands, it was told. A man of mystery, but law-abiding enough since his arrival in Canisaw.

"Miss Bretton," he said politely. "And Sheriff Partee. I trust that everything is satisfactory." Antone handed the officer a long cigar, and bowed once more to Bonnie. "You are looking very beautiful tonight."

They thanked him, assured him

that everything was fine, and Monk Antone withdrew shortly, as courtly as a cavalier of old. Bonnie grimaced and sipped her wine. "He makes my skin creep, George."

"Monk affects lots of folks that way," Partee said. "We've watched him pretty close, Bonnie, but never found anythin' out of line."

Bonnie nodded her rust-red head. "Canisaw's been pretty peaceful since that last rustlin' war."

Partee's rocklike jaws bulged with muscle. "Choya Kress," he said with quiet bitterness. "I'd sure like to get him at the end of a gun—or a rope."

"So would Duke Monsell."

"The one thing we agree on, I reckon," Partee said grimly.

Through a slit in the drapes, Bonnie was observing Monsell and his companion. Laughing as he was tonight, the Duke looked years younger, handsome and almost boyish. Crystal Holway was undeniably attractive in a brazen fashion, her hair shimmering gold in the lamplight, her smile dazzling bright, her tightly-gowned body flaunting its sex. A lush overripe creature, rouged and bleached and polished to a fleshy glitter, the wisdom of the ages in her arch violet eyes and sensuous scarlet mouth.

It turned Bonnie sick inside to see Duke with that woman, and enjoying himself so thoroughly. She knew that, whatever his past had been, there was good blood and breeding in Duke Monsell, real quality and character. It was a shame to see a man like him entrapped by a painted trollop of the frontier dance halls. It filled Bonnie with scalding fury and hatred.

"Here they come," she said suddenly, spotting Partee's gunslick deputies at the main entrance.

Greer was a bulky arrogant bull of a man, broad and strutting, with a beak-nosed black-bearded face and small malevolent eyes. In sharp contrast, Tomkins was slender and trim, quiet and lazy-acting, reserved and mild-mannered. Greer broke men to pieces with his huge terrible hands,



and Tomkins was a wizard with the Colts. Both had long resented Duke Monsell, and were pleased with this opportunity to serve a warrant on him. They stopped for a drink at the bar, and Bonnie noticed with relief that Duke's gun belt was draped on a chair at the table, not too handy to his reach. She wanted no gunplay.

THE DEPUTIES sauntered on to the secluded corner table and stood looking down at Duke Monsell. He put down his glass and regarded them soberly, questioningly, with one brief regretful flick of his gray eyes toward the gun belt on the next chair. It was Greer's deep hoarse voice that came first to Bonnie's ears: "We got a warrant for you, Monsell. Don't try to make any play."

"Joke, maybe?" drawled the Duke.

"No joke," Greer said stiffly. "We're takin' you in, mister."

"For what?" Monsell rose leisurely, mild exasperation in his face and tone.

"For stealin' a horse."

Monsell laughed aloud. "That is a joke. You boys run along now."

"You're a horse thief, Monsell," growled Greer. "And we're arrestin' you for it."

"What horse?"

"That gray from Bracket—Storm King."

Monsell gestured. "Bonnie Bretton gave me that geldin'; don't prod me any farther, Greer."

"You wanta see the warrant, friend? Bonnie Bretton had it made out for you!"

Monsell moved away from the table. "What kind of damn-fool business is

this anyway?" He stood tall and lithe before them, loose and limber, his face bleak as bone now.

Tomkins spoke for the first time, soft and easy; "Come on with us, Duke. We've got the drop on you. You ain't got a prayer, Duke." He smiled with lazy self-assurance, and that smile must have done it.

Monsell lashed out and knocked Tomkins flat on his back ten feet away, sliding still farther on the polished hardwood. Before Duke could turn, Greer was on top of him like a maddened monster. They went down with a crash, rolling and thrashing on the floor, but Monsell somehow broke loose from that gorilla-like grasp.

Duke was up swiftly, smashing the bearded face left and right, as Greer floundered on his knees, driving the deputy over onto his shoulderblades. A chair splintered and the table toppled with the sound of breaking glass. Crystal Holway had risen and retreated, calm and silent. Tomkins charged in from the rear, clubbing Monsell behind the ears and neck, and Duke fell forward on hands and knees. He was groping for his belt and holster, when Greer's gun barrel slammed wickedly across his dark head. Monsell slumped face down, the two deputies landing on his back with whipping gun barrels, slashing fists, and pistoned knees.

Monsell bucked and rolled, kicked and fought and finally exploded clear of them in some miraculous manner, springing upright with Colt in hand at last. Tomkins was about to fire from his kneeling position, when Monsell pistol-whipped him flat and senseless on the floorboards.

Greer came up in a spraddled crouch, blood dripping from his beard, and fire spurted as his gun roared deafeningly at Monsell. The Duke felt the scorching nearness of that slug, as he wheeled and threw down on the hulking deputy, his own muzzle-blast leaping back into the fading light of the other. Jolted erect and backward, Greer spun a wavering leaning circle,

fired into the floor, and sprawled across a table, that tipped and spilled his massive body against the wall. He lay without stirring, a lifeless-looking bulk.

"THIS WAY, Duke," called Crystal Holway, from the entryway, near the booth occupied by Bonnie and the sheriff. Monsell backed after her, his poised gun and gray eyes covering Monk Antone, Shadnik, Vermilya, and the entire hall. They vanished into the dim corridor.

"I'll take him myself," George Partee said, reaching for his holster and turning to intercept Duke on his way to the rear door.

Bonnie stood up across the table, a derringer lined on the sheriff. "No, you won't, George. Let him go!"

Partee whirled, brown eyes bulging and jaws drooping. "What you doin', girl? Are you crazy?"

"Maybe I am," Bonnie Bretton said. "Just let him go, George."

"But he's a killer now!" panted Partee. "He killed Greer—and maybe Tomkins." The backdoor banged with the passage of Duke and Crystal.

"It was all my fault, my doin'," Bonnie said. "The least I can do is give him a chance to get away."

"He won't get far!" Partee promised, teeth clamped and jaws set like stone. "You don't get away with killin' lawmen in this country." He made for the door, but the girl halted him again:

"Don't hurry, George. Give him a little time."

Partee glared at her, mumbling profanely under his breath.

On the main floor men were gathered about Tomkins and Greer, but no one had moved to follow Duke Monsell. A man said: "Greer ain't dead, but he's hard hit. Somebody get the doc!" Another voice added: "Tomkins'll be all right maybe, except for a helluva headache." A percentage girl was bathing Tomkins' head and face.

"I'm goin' out to see my boys," Partee announced. "If you wanta shoot

me in the back, Bonnie, go ahead and shoot. Somebody else'll raise a posse, if I don't." He stomped to the door, stolid and sullen.

Bonnie sighed, lowered the little weapon, and sank back into her chair. Peering through the curtains later, she saw the men swarming around the sheriff to volunteer for the posse, which would hunt Monsell to the death. Foremost among them were little Monk Antone and big Shadnik and the sleek Vermilya. Bonnie bowed her red head.

"What have I done to you, Duke?" she moaned. "What have I done? I only wanted to keep you here and love you—and marry you, if I could. Now I've made an outlaw of you. And chances are a dead man." With a small, stifled cry of anguish, Bonnie Bretton lowered her stricken face into her tense crossed arms.

Chapter Three

IT TOOK some time to recruit a posse and round up the horses, pack saddlebags, fill canteens, pick up rifles, and replenish shell belts. Evidently no one had witnessed Duke Monsell's exit from *El Dorado*, or seen him leaving town. Storm King was still in the livery barn, but it was assumed that Monsell had ridden out on another mount. The Crossing seethed with excitement in the night, pedestrians and horsemen dashing to and fro, working up the bloodlust with hot words and hotter whiskey, the mob spirit rampant in the streets.

Tomkins had recovered sufficiently to insist on riding with the rest, but Greer was still unconscious in Doc Gentry's care and not expected to live. So far as the citizens of Canisaw were concerned, the brawny deputy was already dead and Duke Monsell a killer.

Bonnie watched these hectic preparations with panic fluttering through her and nausea churning in her stomach. Then she went in search of

Pop Lander and the other Bracket hands, who had accompanied her to town. She had no plan, only the driving desire to somehow help the Duke, save him from the predicament she had unwittingly plunged him into. Her harmless prank had turned to stark tragedy, and there was bound to be more bloodshed and death, if and when the posse overhauled Duke Monsell.

It was hideous to see a crowd of human beings change into a mob of brutes before your eyes, particularly when the object of this reasonless wrath and hate is the man you love. Writhing and pushing her way through the jostling throngs, Bonnie Bretton never had known such a hopeless sinking sensation of dread and fear, coupled with self-condemnation.

This strange alchemy in human nature was incomprehensible to Bonnie. Men who liked Monsell far better than they did Greer, were now shouting for the Duke's blood. She saw and heard them all about her. People telling one another they always knew Duke was a bad one, for he had the look of a killer, a professional gunfighter. Maybe he was in with Choya Kress's wild bunch that time. They hit Bracket after Monsell went to work there, killing old Jud and young Jim Bretton when they ran off that big herd. . . "Yessuh, there was always somethin' dark and cold and mysterious about that Duke Monsell!"

Eyeing these speakers with contempt, Bonnie brushed by them and came upon her Bracket crew in front of the *Arcadia*, a saloon and pool room. Old Pop Lander, gimp-legged Huckfield, the blond Norvill, and dark fiery Kelleher. They had heard the story, of course, and were puzzled by it: Old Pop tugged his gray mustache and stared quizzically at Bonnie.

"Somethin' kinda backfired, didn't it, gal?"

Bonnie nodded glumly. "How can we help him, Pop?"

"It looks like it's a little late to help the Duke outa this one. But maybe we can figure a way."

"We've got to try," Bonnie said. "Get our horses and one of you boys ride Storm King."

RIDERS were clattering out of town, whooping hordes heading in all directions with more enthusiasm than system. It occurred to Bonnie that Duke might have holed-up temporarily within the community limits. Crystal Holway had an adobe house on the bank of the Canisaw River, at the western outskirts. It was a hunch worth playing.

The Crossing had an empty abandoned aspect, when the Bracket riders gathered again with young Kelleher mounted on the gray gelding that had started all this furore. Bonnie spoke tersely to them, and they drifted out the northerly road, circling back into the west after the lights of town sunk behind them. Forging the stream they swung a wide arc, that would bring them back to the western shoreline opposite the Holway house.

Gunfire shattered the moonlit night ahead, and Bonnie knew with sickening surety that someone else had felt a similar hunch to her own. The Holway adobe on the eastern bank was already besieged, and the Bracket party watched the flickerflare of gunplay from a ridge overlooking the marginal cottonwoods and willows of the waterway. So Duke was forted up with Crystal, and apparently she was helping him fight off the attackers. That would bring Duke closer than ever to the blonde woman, and he'd hate Bonnie for the rest of his life. . . Which might be a very short one now.

During a lull in the firing, Crystal Holway called out from the adobe walls: "Monsell's not in here, you fools! Quit shootin' my windows out, Partee!" It was the sheriff himself who had shared Bonnie's hunch, and with him were Monk Antone and Vermilya and Shadnik, along with others. Bonnie knew now why she had wanted Storm King, and precisely what she was going to do. Young Kelleher grinned with reckless delight,

as she gave him his instructions. With a gay flirt of his hand, Kelleher wheeled the gray and dropped down the back side of the scrub-wooded ridge.

When he reappeared far to the north, Storm King was unmistakable even at that distance, white mane and tail streaming in the moonlight as Kelleher ran him across an open stretch of plain. Bracket immediately started yelling and shooting wildly in that direction. "*There he goes!... That's Monsell on Storm King!*" Lander and the other pair took off after the gray horse, leaving Bonnie alone on the ridgetop. The sheriff's company came splashing across the river, spray rising in sheets of silver, to join in the pursuit. Hoofbeats filled the air.

Bonnie watched them surge northward with a smile on her face. Storm King could outrun and outlast any of them. Kelleher was safe enough. If the chase got too close, all he had to do was identify himself. An innocent cowhand taking the gray back to the home spread. Once they were well out of the way, Bonnie slid her sorrel down the front slope, threading through trees, brush and boulders to cross the moongleaming water with brilliant showers fountaining around her plunging mount.

THE ADOBE walls were scarred and pitted with bullets, and not a window remained intact. Bonnie stepped down to let the sorrel shake himself, and Crystal Holway came to the front door holding a short carbine. "What do you want here?" she demanded, white teeth bared between thinned lips, eyes lighted venomously.

"Where is he?" asked Bonnie.

"What do you care? Haven't you done enough to him? I ought to put a bullet through your foolish red head!" Crystal half-raised the rifle.

"Don't try it," Bonnie advised coolly. "I can draw and fire before you get that thing aimed. Where's Duke Monsell?"

"He's gone, dearie," mocked Crystal.

"And you'll never see him again. Not if Duke can help it!" She regarded the other girl with supreme scorn. "A fine specimen of womanhood! You couldn't hold him yourself, so you tried to get him jailed—or killed!"

Bonnie shook her coppery head. "Everythin' went wrong, that's all. I didn't mean any harm to him."

"Get out!" ordered Crystal. "Before I blow your brainless head off!"

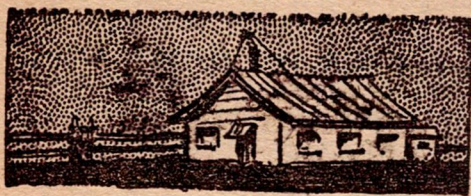
"I want to help him get away."

"He don't need you or want you. Beat it, Redhead, before I start blastin' you apart!"

Bonnie sighed in weary disgust. "Save your breath for *El Dorado*. You probably couldn't hit me at this range." She swung back into the saddle and reined away, feeling the other woman's eyes on her for some distance, half-expecting the shock of a bullet between her shoulder blades. *Crystal must love him too, she thought. To get that riled and wrought up. She'd shoot me in a minute, if she thought Duke had any more interest in me.*

Riding in toward Canisaw Crossing, Bonnie tried to put herself in Duke's place and figure what he'd be doing next. He'd go into town to get a horse, and then hit for the hills, she decided. But there was something else that hovered just beyond her reach. How would a man forced into outlawhood feel? Bitter, yes, and reckless and vengeful. He might resort to being a bandit, now that the unfair brand was on him. With the town virtually deserted, it would be comparatively simple to make a haul, secure an ample grubstake for the long runaway trail. The bank perhaps. Or the safe in a saloon or gambling joint. Or the Wells Fargo express office.

Yes, the idea could tempt a man who had been suddenly turned into a hunted animal, through no fault of his own. Bonnie pressed her mount forward in the empty shadow-barred streets. In the space of an hour, Canisaw had become like a ghost town. With luck and nerve, a desperate man



could rob the whole place, ransack and strip it clean.

Chapter Four

A FEW LONELY horses were scattered at the racks along Main Street, but their owners were not in sight. All the stores and some of the saloons were closed and dark, while the night-spots that showed lights seemed vacant and silent. Tethering her sorrel out behind the feed store, Bonnie Bretton began prowling around in search of Duke Monsell. Although she actually saw no one, certain furtive noises and flitting shadows convinced her that somebody else was skulking about side alleys and back areas. She sensed other presences and some kind of danger. Bonnie kept the Colt she had strapped on loose in its sheath, and the derringer handy in her waistband. Thanks to her dad and brother Jim, and later the Duke, she could handle guns, as well as horses, cattle and a rope.

After two complete circuits of the backyards in the business section, Bonnie came to the conclusion that Monsell must have ridden straight out. But someone else was sneaking around town, she would have sworn. Bonnie felt rather than saw them, and that prickling sense of menace persisted. Ice along her spine, a crawling of the scalp, trembling leg muscles, and a hollow flutter in the breast. Once she was nearly positive she heard strange sounds issuing from the dark shuttered bank building. Again they seemed to come from the general merchandise office. But always they faded, and nothing suspicious was to be seen.

Bonnie was ready to give it up, when something impelled her to scout

once more behind the Wells Fargo station. Flattened in the shadows there, she glimpsed a blur of movement on the rear loading platform. Inside those windows was a large richly laden safe, and an agent who might be forced to open it, at the point of a gun... Moonbeams filtered through the jumble of bales and crates on the platform, and fell across the long lean figure of a man. Without seeing his face, Bonnie knew it was Duke Monsell, and gliding noiselessly forward she called his name softly.

The Duke spun smoothly, a long-barreled .44 glimmering in his hand, and for an instant Bonnie looked death in the eye. Then Monsell recognized her and lowered the gun. "Get away from here, Bonnie!" His voice was harsher than she'd ever heard it.

"Don't do it, Duke," she pleaded. "Please don't do it."

"Don't do *what*? What are you talkin' about?"

"Don't turn thief, Duke."

Monsell laughed gently. "I don't have to; you already made me one."

"You know why I did it, Duke. Just to keep you here. I meant well, but it turned out bad... I think we can square it though, Duke."

"Not if Greer dies. Maybe not even if he lives. Now get out of here. Bonnie. I've got some work to do."

"No, Duke," she said. "I can't let you do it."

MONSELL dropped lightly from the platform to her side, towering over her in the vague light. "You sure can't stop me, Bon. Breeze before you get hurt. There's apt to be trouble here."

"You hate me, don't you?"

"No, I don't, Bonnie. But you've got to go. I—" Monsell ceased abruptly and went rigid, listening intently. The crunch of boots was audible then, coming closer in the darkness. Monsell shoved her roughly before him, past the end of the loading platform, into the shelter of stacked freight boxes and black shadow.

"The posse?" she whispered, frozen with horror.

His high head turned. "I don't think so. We'll see in a minute."

The footsteps came on, three or four men, it sounded like, treading light and easy in the gravel. Aching with tension, but happy to have found Duke, in spite of her fear, Bonnie peeped over the barrier of crates and bransacks, loaded and solid before them.

"It is the posse," she breathed, seeing Monk Antone's white trousers below the long duster he had donned, then recognizing the huge Shadnik and sly sharp Vermilya. The fourth man she didn't know.

"Not quite," murmured Duke Monsell. "The other one is Choya Kress himself."

"But what on earth—?" gasped the girl.

"They picked a nice night to clean out Canisaw Crossing. They've hit the bank and general store and a few other places. This is their last stop—in more ways than one." Monsell's bronze face was drawn taut over the strong bone structure, his eyes flaring slits of pale fire. He was thinking of Choya Kress' band shooting him to pieces, and a year later killing Jud and Jim Bretton.

Bonnie Bretton saw it all then, or most of it. Duke had come to suspect that Antone and his gunhands were, or had been associated with Choya Kress. From Crystal Holway he had learned the facts, at last, and Bonnie's scheme had almost ruined everything. Antone and his bodyguards must have doubled back from the posse. Working with Kress' gang, they were set for a clean sweep in the town.

The four outlaws came through a ragged fretwork of light-and-shadow, and Bonnie saw that Choya Kress was tall, spare and hawk-faced, moving with ease and perfect confidence. "It's all set up here," little Monk Antone said, with suave satisfaction. "Every detail arranged. It won't take a minute."

Choya Kress smiled. "It's like robbin' the blind. Too easy to be much fun, Monk."

Big Shadnik grunted. "Yuh, just so you git out before that posse comes back, Choya."

"Don't fret, Shad," laughed Kress. "We could take the whole town tonight, if it wasn't so heavy to carry. Them suckers sure played into our hands."

"If they hadn't chased Monsell out we was goin' to take care of him, Choya," said Vermilya, tweaking his neat mustache.

"He was gettin' wise, huh?"

"Obviously," said Monk Antone. "Crystal's tongue must have loosened somewhat. It may be necessary for us to remove that tongue. Or possibly her golden head."

LAUGHING appreciatively at that, they were almost to the edge of the platform, when Duke spoke from the deeper blackness on their left: "You're covered, men! A dozen guns on you. Put 'em up and stand still!"

"He's bluffin'!" ripped out Choya Kress, wheeling into a flawless two-handed draw, his guns blaring and bullets smashing into the barricade of freight.

"Keep down, Bon," said Monsell, lining a shot at Kress, the wallop of the .44 slug slamming the outlaw chief sidewise against the loading platform.

But Bonnie Bretton was up and firing at Monsell's side, for Monk Antone had cut loose with his quick gun, while Shadnik and Vermilya were breaking for cover. With muzzle-flashes tonguing toward her and splinters stinging her cheeks, Bonnie stood firm and aimed low, shooting at the white-trousered legs beneath Antone's dust-coat, slashing those legs from under him. Monk went down writhing and groaning with the splintering agony of shattered ankles.

Hunched on the platform edge, Choya Kress was still hammering his shots at them, the lead screeching into the wood and tearing off fragments.

Duke Monsell had stepped clear of the freight-pile to face the bandit in the open. The Duke's Colt leveled and leaped aflame once more. Choya Kress heaved forward with a strangled curse, tripped and floundered full length in the dirt, his guns stilled at last.

Vermilya and Shadnik had fled into outer darkness, but Monsell knew that Kress' crew would be coming next. "Run for it, Bonnie," he said. "The whole gang'll be on us in a minute."

"No, Duke," she said quietly. "I'm stayin' with you."

They reloaded and waited, the silence strange in their ears after all that gunfire, their faces shining dully with sweat. Out front in the street there were trampling boots, hoarse cries, the blasting of guns, and a rushing thunder of hoofs that swelled above all other sounds. The shooting went on, rising, falling, fading away finally. . . . Still Bonnie and Duke waited, listening to Antone's sobbing groans now, watching his slow squirm and the motionless form of Choya Kress.

"The posse must've come, Duke," said the girl.

"I hope so," Monsell drawled.

"This'll clear you, Duke."

"Maybe. . . . If Greer don't die."

"Even if he does, it was self-defense."

Monsell shook his head, smiling wryly. "No, it was resistin' arrest, Bonnie. Greer was the law, and he had a warrant."

"Why don't you make a break then?" asked Bonnie. "You can still get away, Duke."

"No, I'll stick around," Monsell said. "Until this mess is cleared up some."

Mounted men were coming down the alley then, looming high in the backyard, and slanting moonlight touched a few of them. Sheriff George Partee and a couple of deputies, Pop Lander and Huckfield and young Norvill. . . . Suddenly faint and weak, now that it was over, Bonnie Bretton swayed against Monsell. His arm went around her in support, but Duke made no ef-

fort to embrace or kiss her. *I've lost him after all*, she thought. *Whether he goes to jail or away from here, he's gone from me—forever.*

Gently Monsell led her out before the approaching horsemen.

"Who've you got here?" Partee inquired, indicating the two men on the ground. Monsell told him, and the sheriff went on: "We got most of the others out front. They were makin' quite a haul." He scowled down at Monsell. "You might've let me in on it, Duke."

"I didn't know, George. Until I was an outlaw myself."

"Good job you done here," Partee said gruffly. "But you're still under arrest." He dismounted to inspect Antone and Kress.

Bonnie Bretton raised her coppery head. "You can't hold him, George. That warrant was a lie."

Partee snorted angrily. "You're the one that should go to jail, Bonnie, and that's a fact. Playin' games with the law!"

"I'm sorry, George," she said humbly.

Partee looked up from the two bodies. "Monk's got two busted legs. Take him to Doc Gentry's, some of you boys. Choya's a goner, I guess, and you'll have a reward comin' to you, Monsell."

"Bonnie ought to get half of it, George."

The girl protested quickly: "Not by a long shot, Duke. That's yours!" And she was thinking: *Your grubstake to ride away from me on. More money that a foreman's wage would bring you in years. Nothing will ever keep Duke Monsell in the Canisaw now.*

Young Kelleher rode into the shadowy yard on Storm King, and stepped down in front of Monsell. "Here's your horse, Duke. I just stopped by Doc Gentry's. He says Greer's goin' to pull through all right."

Monsell glanced at Sheriff Partee. "Take the damn horse!" Partee said roughly. "He's yours. She gave him to you!"

"I'm free to go, George?"

"I ain't holdin' you. But you ought to wait around for that reward."

"Thanks, George. I'll be back after it later," Monsell drawled, turning to the girl. "And thank you, Bonnie."

"Don't thank me, Duke," she said bravely, shaking hands with him. "Sorry I—I put you through all this 'o-night."

"Well, it turned out all right anyway," Duke Monsell said, stepping into the leather on the big gray gelding's back. "So long, folks. I'll be seein' you all." Everyone there but Bonnie watched him ride off into the darkness.

Bonnie Bretton was stumbling blindly away across rubble-littered backlots to pick up her own sorrel behind the feed store.

Chapter Five

SHE HAD no idea how long she'd been sitting numbly on an overturned barrel, when a shadow fell across her and she looked up to see George Partee standing wide and solid before her, his rugged face solemn with sympathy and some deeper emotion.

"You all right, Bonnie?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"The Duke is too, but he's a drifter," Partee said heavily. "You can't pin him down, Bonnie. Nodody or nothin' can hold a man like that. Just one of them things... Don't let it break your heart, Bonnie."

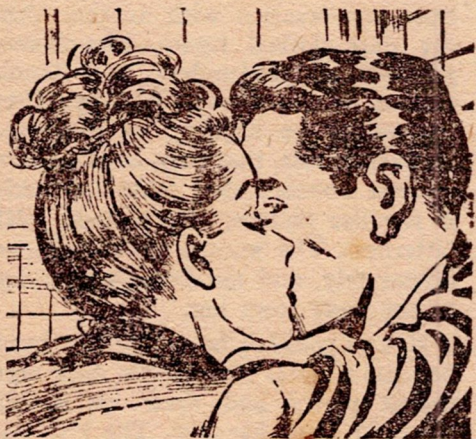
"No, George. I won't let it break me. I'll get over it—in time."

"Well, I'll be waitin' around. Remember that, Bonnie. I'll always be here. Waitin' and hopin'."

"You shouldn't, George. You're too good a man. You ought to marry and raise a family. Lots of girls'd be glad to say Yes. Better women than me, George."

The sheriff waved this aside with a broad hand. "You're the only one for me, Bonnie. Even if you never get around to wantin' me."

"It's an honor, George. More than I deserve. It makes me grateful and humble. I wish—I wish things could be different." Her voice quavered near the breaking point. Her amber eyes were swimming, her throat choking full.



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"Maybe they will be—someday," Partee said. "Things change, Bonnie. Time works wonders. . . We—we could have a fine life together."

"I know it, George. I know we could. If only. . ." Bonnie rose with a small hopeless gesture. Standing close to him, she felt the stolid reassuring strength, dependability and comfort of this good steady man. Like an oak tree to shelter you, like a great rock to cling to. She saw again the rough nobility of his face and bearing. He would be a devoted husband, a kind father, thoughtful and considerate and reliable. . . *What fools women are!* she thought. *Always trying to hold the wind, bind a fire, reach the unattainable.*

"You're tired, Bonnie," said Partee softly. "You've been through a lot. Take a room in the hotel and get some rest, girl."

"No, I'll ride out to Bracket."

"I wish I could help you, Bonnie."

"Oh, George," she murmured, and then she was abruptly in his arms, wanting and needing the calm buttress of his strength, the tender soothing quality of his embrace. Holding her like something precious and fragile, Partee lowered his mouth onto hers in a clean gentle kiss. It did not set her aflame and atingle with rapture, as Duke's kisses did, but it was pleasant and gratifying, made her feel secure, safe and at ease. There was hunger in it too, as their lips lingered, but Partee kept it under firm restraint and control. A gentleman of the old tradition, a man like her father. But, even now, Bonnie was thinking of the whiplash grace and fire of Duke Monsell.

The moment she started to withdraw, Partee let her go, mumbling awkward apologies, afraid he had offended her. *That's the trouble with men like George,* she thought. *They're too kind and good, easy and gentle. They aren't ruthless enough.*

"I'd better be goin', George," she said dully.

"Yeah, I've got a lot of things to do

myself," he agreed. "But I was worried about you, Bonnie. Hated to see you hurt and lonesome."

"You've helped me—a lot."

"Afraid not. But maybe I can—sometime."

She untied the reins and Partee gave her a hand into the saddle, walking beside her to the street, turning off there toward the jailhouse, while Bonnie pointed the sorrel north in the direction of the ranch. She should marry George, she knew. If she had an ounce of intelligence she'd marry him and try to forget about Duke. But it wouldn't be fair to George, or herself. . . For the Duke would always be there with them, between them, overshadowing everything they did.



NEAR THE northern end of the dark empty street, Bonnie Bretton pulled up at the unexpected sight of a gray horse with silver mane and tail. At first she thought it was her imagination, but a steady stare convinced her it was really Storm King, empty-saddled, and under the nearby wooden awning Duke Monsell was in close conversation with another slender dark-clothed figure. Moonbeams glittered on golden hair, and Bonnie realized it was Crystal Holway. They seemed to be arguing, so engrossed in their debate, that they hadn't heard or seen Bonnie's slow quiet approach. A familiar picture, she thought with bitterness. The woman was clinging on desperately, and the Duke was trying to get away from her.

But he couldn't be trying too hard, because Crystal clasped his neck with urgent power and drew his mouth down to meet her own. The kiss was brief, with Monsell wrenching away, but to Bonnie it seemed altogether too long and ardent. A living horror in her eyes, a steel blade deep in her bosom, as she kneed the sorrel into the blackness of the nearest alley, where she waited for the slow painful return of sanity.

When it came, Duke Monsell was leaving Crystal, striding away to mount Storm King and ride on. But it wasn't that easy to get away from Crystal Holway. Her voice rose in impassioned frenzy, and she moved out into the street with a revolver lined at Duke's back. "I'll kill you then! Stop, Duke, or I'll shoot you out of that saddle! I won't let you go, Duke. I'll kill you first!"

Monsell rode on as if deaf, neither turning nor glancing back at the screaming woman, and Bonnie put her sorrel forward on the jump, as Crystal targeted carefully and was about to trigger...

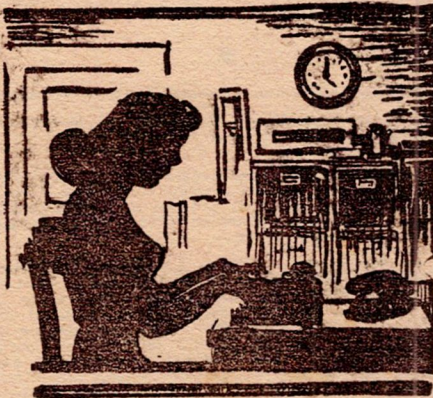
The first shot flew wild, the onrushing hoofbeats startling the blonde woman. The second shot streaked back at Bonnie, as Crystal Holway whirled and fired frantically. Blinded by the muzzle-flash, seared by the closeness of the bullet, Bonnie drove her mount straight on toward the dance hall belle, without thinking of using her own gun now. She wanted to ride Crys-

tal down, trample her under, and then feel the woman's flesh under her own furious hands.

The pistol exploded again, the sorrel veering to the left, Crystal dodging to the sidewalk, and Bonnie Bretton left the leather in a reckless flying leap through space. Her boots struck Crystal's back, flattening her face down on the slats, with Bonnie bouncing aside and rolling in the dirt. Jarred breathless and half-stunned, Bonnie scrambled upright to pounce tigerlike on the other girl, but there was no need for it. Crystal lay stretched on the boards, her yellow head slumped senseless, the gun ten feet beyond her limp hand... Instead of hatred and the lust to maim, Bonnie felt nothing but pity for the crumpled figure on the planks.

DUKE MONSELL had wheeled the gray back into a gallop, and was swinging down before the gelding slid to a stop. Bonnie was kneeling and

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Our big March issue features

LOVE AFTER TOMORROW

by **Francis Flick**

IDEAL LOVE STORIES

lifting Crystal in her arms, when the Duke got there, and Crystal was conscious, sobbing for breath: "Glad—I didn't hit—anybody," she panted. "Never was—much good—with a gun."

"I hope you aren't hurt bad," Bonnie said.

"I'm all right," gasped Crystal. "Just knocked—the wind—out of me."

Monsell hoisted them both to their feet, grinning and shaking his dark head. "Women," he murmured. "A man's got more chance with characters like Choya Kress." Far back in the street, men were coming out to see what this new outburst of shooting was about.

"I'll be goin' home, I guess," Crystal Holway said, trying her legs experimentally. "It's late, even for a gal in my business."

Bonnie pointed to the revolver on the sidewalk. "Don't you want your gun?"

"What for?" Crystal laughed. "I'm not thinkin' of suicide. And I sure couldn't hit anybody else with it. For which I'm just as thankful. Good night and good luck—to both of you." She walked unsteadily away, turning into a westward alley in the direction of her adobe house on the riverbank.

Bonnie stared after her. "She's quite a woman, at that."

"Sure," drawled Monsell. "And so are you, Bon. Catch that sorrel horse, if you're ridin' my way."

"Your way?" she asked wonderingly.

Monsell smiled. "I'm beginnin' to think my way'd better be your way, Bonnie. If I want to live any longer, and stay out of jail."

"You don't *have* to. Just because I—"

"No, it's not just because you saved my life, which you said earlier wasn't worth savin'. It's just that I'm gettin' too old and set in my ways to go roamin' around the country any more, I reckon."

Then they were wrapped in one another's arms, lips fused in sweet racing fire, forgetful of horses and strife and everything else...

They were still there when the townsmen reached the spot, amazed at coming upon a love instead of a death scene.

The arrival of spectators prompted Bonnie and Duke to break apart and mount up, for their ride to Bracket B and home.

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LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 24th day of September, 1951. Maurice Coyne (My commission expires March 30, 1952). (SEAL)

Lucky Horseshoe

By Ruth P. Collins

Peg needed a lot of luck if she was going to lose her heart to the owner of the Table Top ranch.



Peg tried to push the man away.

“**W**HAT IS it now?” Peg Nolan pulled her pony back out of the dust, dashed ahead to see what the trouble was. The herd, lean, bawling, gray with the three-week trek down from Colorado, was crowded down into a narrow gully. But that *ornery* little spotted calf was back up on the road again, stranded this time clean in the

middle of the cattle-guard. And just beyond was a big horse-wagon; two curious pony-noses stuck out over the rail, two furious faces under wide white Stetsons, poked from the windows.

Peg's eyes, blue as Texas bluebonnets between dust-laden lashes, sparked fire as she saw a gun suddenly appear. "No, stop! You mustn't!" she screamed.

But her voice was lost in the sharp crack of bullets. *One, two, three, four*—they missed the calf's hoofs by a bare inch, then ricocheted on across the steel rails. It was good shooting. The calf, terror-stricken, had gone to its knees, twisting and turning madly.

Peg's hand had flashed back to her holster. The next moment her old six-shooter sang out. In an instant the two men were out. The one with the gun in his hand, was a little man in too-fancy dude clothes. The other, a tall, good-looking rancher in frontier pants and flannel shirt, let out a string of oaths.

"What the heck you think you're doing, cowboy?" he shouted. "Why don't you keep your cows off the road?"

"What you think you're doing, shootin' strays?" Peg's voice had suddenly faltered. A moment before she had been cold with rage. Now she was hot all over.

Why, it's Ruck—Ruck Martin, her heart was crying out. Ruck, the handsome foreman of the Table Top Ranch, the only man who had ever kissed her. Kissed her then run when the trouble came! Peg's lip curled. How had she ever thought he was handsome! He was coarse and cruel when he could laugh at the struggles of a little calf!

"Why, it's a gal, Martin. A little make-believe cowgal," the dude was jeering now.

"Well, if she can't do any better than that with her herd she better leave it to the cowboys—" Ruck broke in ugly.

"What's all the shootin' about, folks?" A tall, lean cowboy in worn chaps, greasy old hat, emerged from behind. He jumped from his pony, picked his way out across the guard, squatted by the calf. "Why, you poor little dogie," he murmured. "You sure gone an' got yourself trapped hard down here." He glanced back at the two men. "Got her hoof down between the rails, gosh only knows how—whoa there now! Whoa! Take it easy!"

He straddled the back of the calf, gripped the little hind leg firmly, gently eased it out. The calf bawled pitifully. "Got a nasty cut here, poor little critter!" The cowboy lifted the calf bodily, made his way off the guard, down into the gully. He turned, smiled up into Peg's eyes, said, "There now, ma'am. Just let her get her breath an' she'll be okay."

"Hi there, cowboy!" Ruck let out a shout from above. "Can you give us a hand?"

But the cowboy had turned to Peg. "Looks like you could do with another hand with your herd, ma'am," he said.

She glanced from the cloud of dust ahead to the calf. "If you could just keep an eye on it for a few minutes till I round 'em up ahead there—"

"Sure, ma'am, sure."

PEG DUG her heels into her pony's flank, went galloping up the road, till she got ahead of the herd. "Keep 'em here, Rover! Keep 'em here!" she called to the shaggy old collie. Then she dashed across, pulled out a pair of wire-clippers, cut the strands of barbed wire of the old fence alongside. The next moment with a wild *Yippee!* and the sharp crack of her gun she had the cattle shoving into the green pasture beyond. She waited till the last one was in, then gathered up the cut wire, began to twist it deftly back into place. Then took off her old hat, ran her fingers back through a mop of auburn curls. She looked out over the pasture, at the

lean, dusty cattle feverishly cropping at the green grass. She closed her eyes and from under the long lashes two big tears coursed down her dusty cheeks.

She opened her eyes quickly, brushed angrily at her tears though when she heard a soft voice saying, "Looks like you're 'bout all in, ma'am." His eyes went on inquiringly to the fence.

"I'm not breakin' in," she flashed out bitterly. "I'm runnin' my herd in on our own range." Then, when he didn't answer, she added, "You must be a stranger round these parts."

"Reckon I am, ma'am. Just come down from Wyoming, been doin' some cow-punchin' up the way here at the O 4 Bar."

She glanced back up the road.

"Little dogie's okay, ma'am. Got her tied up down there. I'll put her over on the range. And—Slim Smith's the name."

She rode on slowly till she came to the big gate, with its faded sign *Lucky Horseshoe Ranch*. Underneath was the rusted horseshoe Gramp Nolan had put there years before. Back in under the giant cottonwoods too was the old sod house he had built for his bride. And beyond she could see the purple outline of the Horseshoe Canyon against the gold of the prairie. It all looked just as it had five years ago when she—a scrawny kid of fifteen—and Gramp, had driven away to live with his folks in Colorado. Gramp had vowed he would never come back, but she had vowed just the opposite and a month before when the tenants had written they were leaving she had persuaded Gramp to come. He had come on ahead a week before, and arrived safely she thought with relief when she saw smoke curling up out of the chimney.

There was a lump in her throat as she went on up the sun-baked trail, went into the old house. But her tone was gay as she called out, "Hi, Gramp, here I am!"

The old man turned from the stove.

"Took you a mighty long time," he remarked.

"Cowhand run out on me two days back," she told him, "Had to bring 'em on by myself." She was staring around the shabby comfortable old room, felt a great contentment. Then she glanced out through the open door, across the canyon, where the land rose sharp on the other side, and outlined clear against the sky was a string of white Brahma cattle. Her face hardened. "Reckon I ought to get washed up and get busy," she said.

AT SUNSET Peg made her way up across the range to look for her little dogie. "Fresh as a daisy, pretty as a picture," old Gramp had murmured when she had come out in a fresh though faded blue cotton dress. Her eyes were alight now as she went through the long fresh green pasture, saw her cattle chewing contentedly. They seemed to have filled out already. When she came to shallow dip up by the fence she stopped short. Slim Smith was down there kneeling over the spotted calf, deftly bandaging up its foot.

"Poor little maverick—both o' them," he was saying softly to himself, "both need a heap o' carin'—" He stopped short, suddenly aware of her above. She saw the color creep up his tanned neck. "Poor little critter's got a bad foot here. I brought along some linament," he explained, "an' I aimed to tether her up here so she won't go wanderin' an' go over that canyon when she's not got her balance proper."

Peg had slipped down the gully, was kneeling on the other side of the calf. For a moment Slim's hard brown hand, unknowingly, rested on hers on the shaggy little flank. For a moment Peg found herself looking into the nicest brown eyes she had ever seen. Conscious of a strange little something she had never known before she got to her feet. Her cheeks were flaming.

Slim shook his head. "If I may sa,

ma'am, it don't look just right for a little girl like you to be workin' like a cowhand out on the range. Oh," as he saw her quick angry look, "not that you can't do it. But—it's a man's job."

"I've been ridin' the range ever since I was able to stick on a horse," she said proudly.

"I could see that, ma'am."

"And Gramp Nolan brought the first herd o' white Brahmas into the county here." Peg's eyes, fixed on the cattle across the canyon, were hard. "By rights that lot right across there now belongs to us."

"What you mean, ma'am."

"You've not been round these parts much," she said again. Then in a hard flat voice she explained, "My pappy was killed because of that herd 'cross there. And I've been waitin' for five long years to come back to our place here an' take those white Brahmas away from the Table Top Ranch."

"I reckon I still don't get it, ma'am." Slim was studying her face, half-pitying, half-admiring.

"Gramp had to sell off his Brahmas to old Winters over there on the TT the year we had the drought. But he and Dad started in right then to save to buy the stock back. It took him ten years to get a thousand dollars to buy fifty head back. The night he bought them he was brandin' 'em down there in the canyon with our LH brand when along come a posse, said he'd rustled 'em. That old Winters had been found shot in the back up on the trail." Peg's hands were clenched at her side, her voice still flat. "Dad put up a fight, dared them to touch one o' the cattle seein' he'd paid for them. And then—he got shot. He—wouldn't run. The Nolans don't run. They fight."

SLIM LIT a cigarette. "Sounds like they had the cards pretty well stacked against your Pa," he said slowly. "Didn't he have any paper to show he'd paid for the cattle? Anyone

who saw them makin' the deal?"

"Only Gramp an' me. We'd seen him take out the old cash-box where he always kept his money and start off across the canyon over to the TT. We saw him comin' back, drivin' the cattle down the trail. I reckon he had a receipt alright but the skunk who shot old man Winters and took that thousand dollars must have got that receipt too. I reckon we won't ever find that paper now. But I reckon on trackin' down that bad man if it takes me all the rest o' my life."

Slim shook his head. "Why don't you let it rest, ma'am? You look too little an' soft to be fightin' a big thing like this."

Peg turned to look up through the cottonwoods. In the setting sun her hair was all flame. She looked very lonely. "I reckon Pa up there under the trees wouldn't rest if his own kin didn't try to clear his name," she said quietly.

"Your dad—" Slim hesitated, "did he have a chance to say anything—"

She shook her head. "No. All we could make out was something about the lucky horseshoe—he was out of his head—" she drew a long breath, turned to go back to the house.

Slim walked along with her. "You wouldn't by any chance be needin' a hand round here, would you? Mendin' the fences and odd jobs. I see the fence broke down bad in spots. I'm good at fences. I—" as she shook her head no, "I'd stay on just for my keep for a few days, till I can find a steady job. All's I want would be a shakedown."

"We have plenty of room in the house," she said abruptly.

LA TE THAT night Peg came out of the old house again, stood looking over the moon-silvered range. Gramp and Slim had long since gone to bed. The new hand, she told herself, had really been a blessing. Somehow she had dreaded this first night back in the old home but it hadn't been lonely, and full of ghosts as she

had expected. Slim and Gramp had sat for hours over supper, yarning. Gramp had taken to him the moment he saw him. Afterwards the two men had gone to see the calf, had brought her up, put her in the shed.

Slim was restful and friendly. It wasn't like having a stranger in the place. Now a sudden great joy at being back on her own land filled her. A soft spring breeze was carrying the scent of the wild flowers up from the canyon, she could hear the babble of the creek far below and behind was the herd, full, contented, chewing their cud.

Peg threw back her head, closed her eyes, drank in the loveliness of it all. Then behind her she heard someone say, "Good evenin', ma'am!"

It was Ruck Martin. Bareheaded now, looking very handsome. He stopped short, staring at her, said, "Why—it's not—not Peggy Nolan, surely!" When she didn't answer, he came on closer, dropped his hand on her shoulder. His dark eyes still incredulous, admiring, swept down over her. "That little cowgal up the road there wasn't you, Peg, was it?"

"I reckon you were too busy shootin' dogies to see who I was," she said coldly.

"That's why I come over, Peg. To apologize for that drunken dude I had along. But I—" he gave a little laugh, "I might have known it was you, spunky little Peg Nolan—Gosh, Peg, but you're grown up—" his voice sank to that romantic note she remembered so well, "prettiest woman I ever saw, too."

The slight curl of her lip seemed to make him more eager. "I tried to get in touch with you, Peg. Honest I did. After all that trouble no one seemed to know where you'd gone. I always thought if I'd been round it never would have happened at all. But you know I'd gone off to Amarillo, buyin', you know. I felt pretty sick when I got back, hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye. Because—" he

took her hand now, pressed it gently, "you had me pretty well bowled over just those few times we did meet. Remember?"

Yes, she remembered. Peg's face hardened.

"Course I knew your pa never did any rustiin'—"

Peg drew her hand quickly away. Ruck was coarse, tactless, and she didn't want to discuss it with him anyway.

"—if I'd been round they never would ha' got that posse out. I always thought that little crook, Marinez, had somethin' to do with it—he did a buck right after—"

"I don't want to talk about it," Peg said sharply.

"I know how you feel." Ruck's voice was soft again, "but don't you think I ever forgot you, Peg. Every time I passed that old gate down there I stopped, remembered that last night before I went to Amarillo—remembered that kiss, Peg—" He had dropped his hands on her shoulders now, was drawing her close to him. But she drew back.

"No," she said, "I don't remember anything but that your crowd from Winters' ranch killed my dad and I'm never going to rest till I clear his name."

HE SHOOK his head. "You're going to find it pretty tough going, Peg. Farmin's bad round here. That rancher you let your place to these last five years let it go bad. It'll take a thousand dollars straight to mend the fences—"

"I reckon it won't be any tougher now than it was for Gramp when he first came out here. Fendin' against the Indians on one side, the Winters on the other."

He laughed, grudgingly. "Same little Peg! But—you don't know what you're up against. I reckon it'll be a lot tougher. Takes cash these days. Hard cash."

She winced. He had struck a sore

spot. Ruck must have known that.

"I got an idea for you, Peg," Ruck said kindly. "Why don't you sell off a few acres of your land. Sell some o' the canyon down there. I'll give you five thousand spot cash for that canyon. You'll never miss it."

"What do you want it for?" she demanded abruptly.

"I'm leavin' the TT. I've bought Brady's Ranch down there where the horseshoe canyon opens out. I got an idea o' dammin' up, makin' a sort of lake for the dry season in there. Besides—" his voice was gentle, "I want to help you, Peg."

She flushed.

"Listen, Peg. I'll bring over the papers and a surveyor tomorrow—and the cash—"

"I'd take my time an' think over it, ma'am. The canyon's not goin' to run away," a soft voice drawled in behind.

They both turned. Slim Smith was standing lighting a cigarette.

"No one's asking your advice, cowboy," Ruck snapped out.

"No harm in offerin' it, cowboy."

Ruck flushed darkly.

"I reckon," Slim said slowly, looking at Peg, "when somethin's belonged to you for fifty years, done you good service, you owe it at least a few days thinkin' over before you hand it over to someone who don't know the value of one little dogie—"

"Listen, stranger!" Ruck's hands were clenched, "you keep your nose out of my business or next time you'll get it bust!"

"No, Ruck! Listen! He's right. I'd have to think over it. But—I will, I promise you. Give me—a week!"

"Sure I will, honey." Ruck came up, took Peg's hands between his. His eyes were eloquent but his lips, with Slim standing there smiling, were silent.

A WEEK later Peg Nolan rode down into the canyon for the first time since coming back. The herd had long since picked their way

down the steep trail, were browsing now in the lush grass among the wild flowers along the creek. Peg rode slowly. After a time she dismounted, sauntered on by foot. It was silent down here, walled in by the rough gray cliffs. The place was full of memories. For fifty years, ever since the first settlers came, it had been the favorite picnic ground. Nolan's Canyon. Peg could remember the crowds of youngsters chasing each other over the rocks, splashing in the creek, hiding in the numerous little caves, while the older ones played horse-shoes, sat yarning—

Peg sat down on a great flat rock. She tugged off her dusty boots, dabbled her feet in the clear cold water. She flung off her hat, ran her fingers back through her tawny hair. She took off her kerchief, opened her shirt wide, lay back, looking up at the bluest sky in the world. There was no sound down here but the babble of water, the buzz of bees, and the ring of Slim's hammer far down the canyon. She felt at peace with all the world.

She had come back to the Horse-shoe Ranch unhappy, filled with the desire for revenge. But somehow the old wound had healed almost this first week. Slim's quiet smile, his dark admiring eyes, had sort of steadied her up. She had found herself lying awake these past few nights, dreaming, not of her father's tragedy, but of the cowboy sleeping in the next room. Sometimes she had the feeling she had always known him. Sometimes when he was talking it was almost as though there was some magic spark flashed between them. Even Gramp had noticed it. And only this morning, after Slim had gone off on his fence-mending, Gramp, with true Nolan bluntness had said, "That young fellow likes you, Peg. An' you might do worse'n take him when he asks you."

How silly, Peg told herself as she lay now looking up at the sky. Slim Smith, a wandering cowboy with no money, only a heap of good talk, and

a soft touch with animals. *Silly* she told herself and closed her eyes and smiled. Then drew a long breath as she heard a slight sound behind. The next moment strong arms were around her, drawing her up and lips were crushing hard down on hers.

She opened her eyes to find herself looking up into Ruck Martin's gloating dark ones.

He laughed. "Too much of an invitation, Peg!" he said. "Looked like you were just lyin' there waitin' to be kissed." His grip tightened as she began to struggle. "Whoa there, now! Whoa! Might as well quit strugglin', give in, sweetheart! You ought to know Ruck Martin by now. He never lets anythin' stand in the way when he wants somethin'. And he wants you, Peg Nolan. Come on—let's stop playin', Peg—you're roped fast—you—silly—little—heifer—" He was laughing, trying to fend off her blows.

"I'll kill you for this, Ruck—Martin—" she gasped out then stopped short for something had struck Ruck full in the face. He let go, went reeling back into the creek.

FOR A MOMENT there was silence then Ruck pulled himself up, got groggily to his feet. He shook the water from him, wiped at the blood

streaming from his mouth. But his eyes were alive, full of murder. Slim Smith stood opposite, pale under his tan, but a slight smile on his lips. Ruck's hand went round to his hip. Slim darted forward, yanked up a gun from the creek bed. He emptied out the bullets, all the while keeping his eyes on Ruck. He tossed the empty gun across. Then his hand went round to his own hip, and he drew his gun.

"Thanks!" Ruck said thickly, "I'll return the favor sometime—soon."

"I'll give you just five minutes to get up that trail there off this property, Martin!" There was a new hard note in Slim's voice.

There was a sardonic smile in Ruck's eyes. "Fair enough, cowboy," he said. "I don't suppose you'll object to me takin' my property along with me though?"

Peg was on her feet now. She stood, flushed, lovely, dishevelled, staring inquiringly from the one man to the other.

Ruck laughed. He pointed across to the cattle. Peg's eyes widened in horror when she saw half a dozen of the TT white Brahmas grazing in amongst them. Their white flanks, unmarked yet by any brand, stood out clear against the Nolan's common



A Powerful Feature Novel
of Romance That Waited

DON'T CUT MY SIGN!

by DON GARTON

It's but one of the top-
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**DOUBLE • ACTION
WESTERN**

herd. "Tisn't the first time," Ruck said sarcastically, "that the Nolans have run cattle down here in this canyon—tried to brand 'em—"

Peg's hands were clenched. She touched her tongue to dry lips but no sound came.

Ruck's tone became bullying as he went on, "I been missin' some o' my herd. Found my wires new-cut up there yesterday. All I need now is to bring the sheriff down here and—what with the Nolan record—"

"All depends on who cut that wire, Martin," Slim drawled. "This canyon's got lots o' eyes."

Ruck's face darkened. "It would be your word 'gainst mine, stranger, Ruck Martin's a pretty big man round here."

"Okay!" Slim said quietly. "You go 'long. Bring your sheriff on down. We'll keep the cattle here—"

"No!" Ruck's tone changed abruptly. "I'm not holdin' Peg here responsible. I'm lettin' it pass. I'll get the cattle back up this time—"

"You'll leave 'em here. Now—you—git!"

Ruck's fingers twitched on his empty gun. "For a newcomer round these parts," he said, "you got a heap o' gall. An' we have a way in these parts with dealin' with folks with too much gall." Ruck stumbled up from the creek, strode off through the canyon.

Slim's eyes, hard as steel, followed till Ruck got on his pony, started up the trail on the Winters' side.

"I don't like that fellow," he said slowly. "You know I was wonderin' what he was doin' in this canyon. Saw him down here a couple o' times. I saw the cattle too. Reckon he was hangin' round waitin' for this to happen."

"But Slim—" Peg's face was pale now, her voice unsteady. "Slim! If he calls the sheriff—Slim!" Her voice broke, "Slim! I'm—scared!"

HE WAS across then, beside her. "Don't be scared—Peg! You

don't need to be scared!" His voice was gentle.

Suddenly his arms were around her, his lips on hers. "I'm here, little gal!" he whispered. She stood quiet, as he went on, "I been wantin' to do just that ever since first time I looked into your blue eyes—back there up on the highway. It was like a bit o' blue heaven lookin' out at me from all that dust. I wanted to take you in my arms—you—tryin' to be a tough o' cowboy when all the time you were just a little soft gal. I wanted to tell you a heap o' things that were in my heart all this week. Could scarcely keep 'em from spillin' out when I was sittin' there lookin' at you, with Gramp wanderin' on there around in the '90's."

She laughed then, said, "Oh, Slim!"

He drew her closer. "But tonight—we'll get Gramp to bed and we'll sit in the moonlight an' I'll say—*Peg!*"

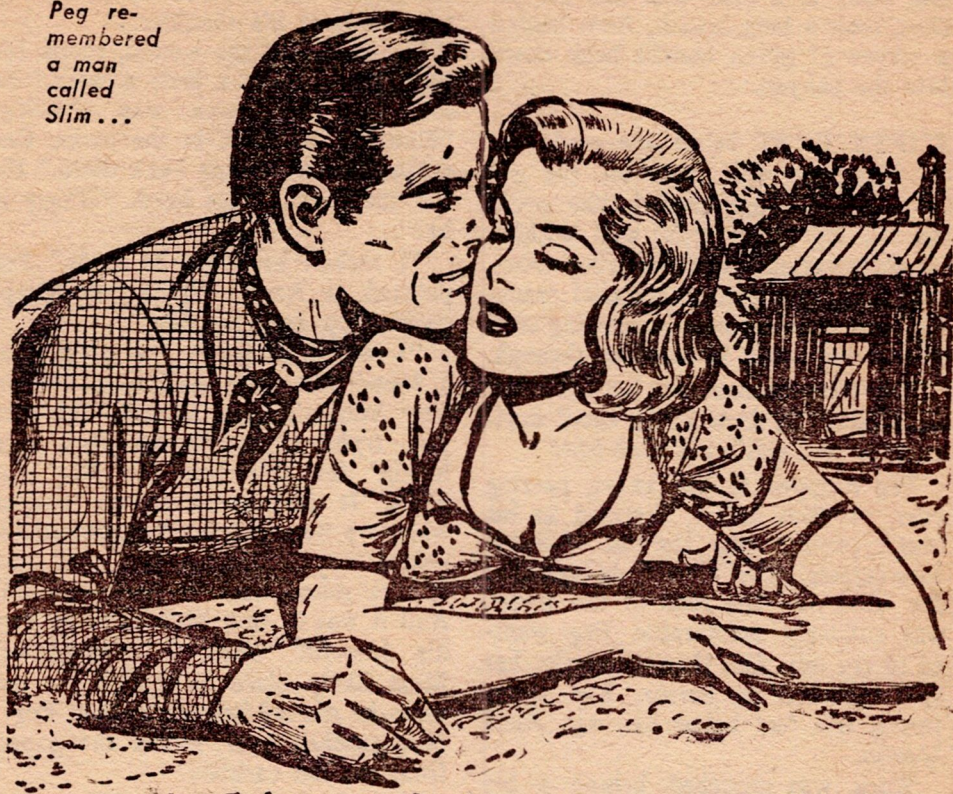
She lifted her lips then to his.

He held her close for a moment, then broke out, "Remember, Peg—remember how we used to play down here in this canyon—I was Robinson Crusoe and you were my man Friday—and we used to hide up there in the horseshoe ground—in that little cave—crawl in through that narrow opening—remember—" He stopped short, gave a dismayed laugh.

Peg had drawn sharply away from him. She was staring at him with wide startled eyes. Then she spoke, hard, slowly. "Now I know who you are," she said. "You're that boy who was down here at the Winters Ranch that summer—ten years ago—you're—old man Winters' grandson. You're *not—Slim Smith. You're—Shelby—Wayne.*"

Slim's face had gone deep red. There was just the flicker of a smile in his dark eyes. "I reckon I might as well own up. But the name is still Slim Smith, ma'am. Shelby Smith Wayne is what they christened me. But I shed the Shelby when I took to bronco-bustin' up in Wyomin'. Just

Peg re-
membered
a man
called
Slim...



didn't seem to fit somehow. Then I shed the Wayne when I come down here on purpose. Just for the time."

Her eyes were scornful. "And the TT belongs to you!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I reckon it does, Ma'am, if I want it. Fact is, I don't know if I do or not. You see, I never did get to know much about it because my grandad ordered my mom, his daughter, to git out, when she married my dad who was just a poor but good-lookin', hard-ridin' cowboy from Wyomin'. He sent for me once to come back, that summer, grandad did, but I reckoned he didn't take to me because he never asked me back. But when he died he left me the TT, said I wasn't to come into it till I was twenty-five an' then I could decide whether or not I wanted to sell."

He paused, glanced up towards the trail, but Ruck was nowhere in sight. "I kept gettin' reports from the man-

ager all the time, that crook Ruck Martin. He said the land was all washed up, the place no good. Said I'd be smart to sell at any price. Fact is, he wrote me such a bad picture of the place I began to smell a rat. Reckon he thought a small ranch cowboy from Wyomin' wouldn't have much savvy. So I just come down here to look things over for myself. I went cow punchin' up at the O4 Bar. Then I moved on to get a closer look from your place. And then, somehow—well I just lost interest an' didn't care whether I ever got to the Table Top or not. For I got corralled by the little girl I been dreamin' of ever since I was a kid—dreamin' of how I was alone with her—"

But Peg had turned, was running up the canyon. No, no, *No* her heart was shouting as she got on her pony, headed for the nearest trail up. She rode, hard, fast, till the pony was winded and suddenly she realized she

had come to a dead end. She got off then, took a long breath, from behind a screen of pinon looked back down into the canyon.

FIFTY FEET below she could see Slim. He was back on the old horseshoe playing ground. She could see the big rusted spike still sticking up, a cluster of horseshoes lying about. And Slim was over at the cliff reaching back into the narrow-opening cave where they used to squeeze through.

The next moment she let out a little gasp as he drew out a small dust-covered box. *Dad's old cash-box!*

Peg dropped to her knees, peering over, as Slim, below, dropped to his began prying open the lid with his wire-cutters. The silence, in spite of the wind and the rush of the water, was suddenly unbearable. Peg wanted to cry out. And then, suddenly, her eyes widened in horror. For there, just a few feet below her was *Ruck Martin*.

Ruck was crouched behind a big boulder. He had his gun, reloaded now, was taking careful aim.

Peg's hand flashed back to her hip. The next moment two shots rang out down through the canyon.

Below her Ruck staggered to his feet. His gun dropped from mangled fingers. Further down on the flats Slim Smith lay, to all appearance, dead.

Ruck took one look up the hill. Peg was standing very still, eyes blazing, her gun levelled straight at him. He turned then, stumbled back up through the pinon. A moment later Peg heard his pony clattering on up the trail. She raced back to her pony then, started back down into the canyon.

Five minutes later she was kneeling over Slim. "Slim! Slim—darling!" she cried frantically.

Slim opened dazed eyes then, shook his head, sat up. "Must have been hit by a thunderbolt—" he muttered.

"Ruck shot you. You're hurt bad,"

she jerked out. She tore at the bloody torn cloth at his shoulder.

He groped at the wound, shook his head again. "Just a little scratch," he said and his voice was clearing. "Knocked me back in the rocks. Got a lump big as an egg back there." He felt the back of his head. "Where is he?"

"I reckon he won't be back." Peg pointed to Ruck's figure just disappearing up over the rim.

"I reckon he won't. Not after what I found just now. And now I know why Martin's been hauntin' the canyon, tryin' to buy it up. He's been lookin' for this box for five long years. It just come to me sudden while we were talkin', Peg. Horseshoe—that was what your Dad said. And it was down here he was brandin'. And it was in that little cave he kept his brandin' irons, I remembered. Most likely place he'd stick his box when he started brandin'. Look, Peg!" Slim reached over, pulled the papers from the old cashbox.

She shook her head. "You read it," she said faintly.

"Okay. Here it is. Received from Timothy Nolan of the Horseshoe Ranch the sum of one thousand dollars for fifty head white Brahma cattle, June 24, 1895. Witnessed by—Robert (Ruck) Martin, foreman TT Ranch, and Jose Marinez, cowboy TT Ranch." Slim put the paper back in the box.

"Ruck Martin." Peg whispered.

"Marinez was shot in a cafe three months later," Slim said quietly.

"I reckon I have to thank you, Slim—" Peg's voice trembled slightly.

He came on across. "I reckon you haven't got any grudge proper 'gainst any of the Winters now. An'—was I off my head when I took that tumble, but did I hear someone say 'Slim, darling!'"

She lifted her lips then, trembling, inviting. "Slim, darling!" she said again.

THE END

Sidesaddle Sweetheart

By Elmer Kelton



"The man who tries to kiss me gets a taste of this whip!"

JAY LOCKABY was uneasy from the moment he started circling the big, loose-herded bunch of Longhorn steers. This was the sorriest looking trail outfit he had ever seen.

It wasn't so much the steers. The cattle looked good enough as they grazed contentedly on the thick turf of grama grass already half cured by the summer sun. But one thing struck

★ They'd told Jay in town that a girl was going on this ★
★ trail-drive, but he didn't believe it. Who ever heard ★
★ of a woman going up the trail? ★

★ ★ ★ **Thrilling Novelet** ★ ★ ★

him as strange—they bore no trail brands.

It was the cowpunchers who worried Jay most. Of the four he had ridden by so far, three had been just kids. From the looks of their rigs and their clothes, they were farm boys and run-away youngsters just starting on their first riding job. The fourth was a grown man, but he didn't look like much of a cowboy. Jay had seen plenty of his kind hanging around saloons and swamping out stables.

Up ahead another kid cowboy sat slouched over in the saddle, watching a steer graze farther and farther out from the bunch. The youngster slowly circled around the Longhorn. Suddenly he spurred his horse and yelled like a wild Indian. He plunged after the frightened steer and drove the animal deep into the herd. The other steers scattered like a covey of quail. The young puncher trotted back out through the settling dust, happy as a hound dog chasing house cats.

If it had been Jay's own herd he would have ridden over and given the kid a good dressing-down... When he had had his own herds he had done it. But those days were gone.

Maybe a Kansas City businessman like Claude Nickle, having his first experience with a trail herd, wouldn't know how important it was to be able to depend on his men. What Jay had seen so far didn't make him want to sign on here. But a man down to his last dollar, with hunger already gnawing under his belt buckle, didn't have much choice.

He started to ride on by, but reined up as he saw a slender rider spurring toward the youngster. It was a girl on a sidesaddle. A cowboy trailed her.

The girl pulled up in front of the youngster and bawled him out. As the shamefaced boy hung his head, she angrily turned back to the redhaired cowboy who followed her.

"Have you got to tag along behind me everywhere I go?"

The puncher grinned. "I got orders to look out for you."

She tossed her curls angrily, swung around, and rode off. The redhead followed her. Jay watched them a minute, then rode up to the redfaced boy. "Which way's the wagon?"

The youngster pointed off in the general direction which the girl had taken. "Over yonder a ways, other side of the thicket. You starting up to Kansas with us tomorrow?"

Jay eyed the cheap saddle, the boy's brogan shoes, and a limber rope coiled haphazardly against the saddlehorn. But he couldn't say much about it. He had had to swap his own good saddle for an old one to get a little "boot" money to eat on.

"Don't know yet. Got to ask them for a job first. Who's the girl?"

"She's Audrey Nickle. Her pa bought these steers. She don't stand for any foolishness."

Jay pondered. He had heard in town that a girl was to go on the trail drive. He hadn't believed it. Who had ever heard of a woman going up the trail?

"I guess Claude Nickle's doing his own hiring," he said finally.

The youngster shook his head. "Oh, no, he's turned that over to his trail boss. Name's Logan Sartain. He's real choosey about the men he hires, Sartain is."

SARTAIN! Jay stiffened. He breathed the word and felt a sour taste in his mouth. For a moment he thought about turning back. But a man had to eat. He doubled his big fist and rubbed rough knuckles in futile anger across his square jaw.

Jay turned his bay half around and spurred a little harder than he intended to. A real come-down for a man who had once had his own herds. Of all the people in Texas, he had to ask *Sartain* for a job.

Half a mile beyond the thicket Jay could see the ranch headquarters. Babb's Lazy B.

He had been hearing about this drive back in town, and it looked like the only thing lazy about husky old

Wylie Babb was his brand. Claude Nickle was pretty much of a tenderfoot, they were saying in town. But they were adding that Babb was going to give him an education, the hard way.

Talk was that Nickle hoped to make a fortune buying Texas steers and driving them up to Kansas. Town people had heard that for three days Babb had worn out buckboard teams taking Nickle around to neighboring outfits and showing him their cattle.

The way the town crowd had it, Babb had been careful to show Nickle only those cattle which weren't so good as his own. Naturally Nickle had decided Babb's cattle were the best he could find. He had paid Babb twenty dollars a head, three dollars more than anyone else had gotten.

Ahead Jay saw mesquite smoke curling upward from the far side of a chuckwagon. With the sun already low in the west, a slouchy wagon cook was putting a big coffee pot on the fire. Jay dismounted a safe distance from the wagon and tied his horse to a mesquite. The bay quickly reached up and got a mouthful of the brown mesquite beans. The cook stood by the chuckbox lid, silently watching Jay walk in, spurs jingling.

"I'm lookin' for Sartain."

The cook eyed him irritably. "If he hires any more punchers, I'm going to have to have me three wagons just to haul the grub. Dang kids eat up a can of syrup ever time they come by."

Mesquite brush popped. Jay looked around as three men and the girl rode out of the thicket. He recognized Sartain and felt an old hatred start to work within him. Hard to believe Sartain would be doing honest work. His preference ran to soft jobs, easy money, and painted dancehall women.

Jay glanced at the Nickle girl. She was easy to look at. Her waist didn't look as big around as the crown of a man's hat, the way she sat in her side-saddle. The little man riding next to her Jay judged to be her father.

The four reined up fifty yards from the wagon to keep from stirring up dust around the cook fire. The red-haired cowhand was quick to swing to the ground and step over to help the girl down. Jay caught the annoyed look on the girl's face when the man kept hold of her waist a moment after she was out of the saddle. She pulled away, and Jay gritted his teeth as he saw the man grin slyly.

SARTAIN was twenty feet from the wagon when he recognized Jay. He stopped short. His hand dropped toward his gun, then halted abruptly. For a second Jay wished he *would* try to draw.

"Jay Lockaby!" Sartain breathed. "What do *you* want?"

Jay managed to keep his voice flat. "I came to sign on with you. If I'd known you was trail boss I wouldn't've come. But I'm here, and I need a job."

Sartain moved up closer. Tobacco-stained teeth bit uncertainly at his lips. Then a hard smile broke over his wide mouth. "You looking for a job from me. That's funny. But we got all the help we need."

Claude Nickle stepped up and studied Jay's face a minute. Jay instinctively liked the man. Green as a mesquite limb, maybe, but he had an earnest look.

"Now, Sartain," Nickle said, "we should be able to use one more. He looks competent."

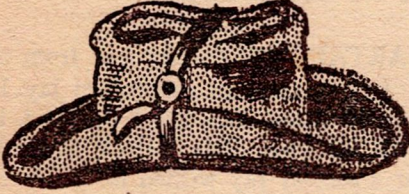
Sartain spoke up quickly. "You had to watch your expenses when you was engineering, Mister Nickle. It's the same way with cattle. If we go to hiring every run-down cowhand who comes up, you're liable to lose your margin."

Nickle studiously rubbed his chin. "I suppose you're right. But somehow he looks better than the men you've hired for me."

Jay fought down the disappointment. He took off his hat and ad-

dressed Nickle directly. "Thanks anyway. It's kind of late. Would it be all right with you—and the lady—if I stayed here tonight, at the wagon?"

Behind Nickle's back the redhaired cowboy was still pestering the girl. Jay saw her angrily pull away and step up beside her father. Jay wanted to haul off and wallop the cowboy, but he kept still.



"Be glad to have you with us, sir," Nickle said. "With the drive starting in the morning, Wylie Babb is riding out tonight to help the crew celebrate."

Jay caught the silent anger that shone from Sartain's eyes and felt a grim satisfaction.

In the next couple of hours Jay saw every rider who had been hired. Most of them were kids like those he had seen. There were only three grown men. Two looked like harmless rummies. The third was the redhaired one.

Wylie Babb finally came out in his buckboard, with half a case of whiskey to start the hands off on. Jay frowned. If it had been Babb's own herd, Jay knew the ranchman would not have allowed a bottle of whiskey within ten miles of it. In no time at all the two rummies had seen the bottom end of their bottle and were at peace with the world.

Jay took one good look at Babb and decided he didn't like him. The stout ranchman stood there bold as a banty rooster, with his pants legs shoved into shiny black boottops and a cigar clamped jauntily between his teeth. He talked easily and laughed aloud. Jay got the idea Babb was the kind who could sell a wagonload of sheep shears to a cow outfit.

Claude Nickle was as excited about the trip as any one of his kid cowboys.

For what Jay suspected was the twentieth time, Nickle went over with Babb everything that might conceivably come up on the trail.

Jay felt his uneasiness increase when he found that Sartain was actually working for Babb. The ranchman had merely lent him to Nickle for the trip. And the woman-chasing puncher, probably the only real cowboy in the crew, was also a Babb man.

The cook took a fiddle out of his chuckbox and struck up a tune. A youngster pulled a battered harmonica from his pocket, slapped it across his knee, and pitched in.

IN A LITTLE while Audrey Nickle quietly got up and walked out beyond the hoodlum wagon, where a couple of youngsters had put up a small pyramid tent for her. In a minute the red-haired cowboy stood up and walked out away from the wagon in another direction. But Jay knew where he was going.

Slowly Jay stood up and walked out after the cowboy. Once beyond the range of the flickering campfire, he turned back toward the girl's tent. He heard her angry voice above the sound of the music.

"If you don't keep away from me I'll have you horsewhipped!"

The puncher stood facing her, grinning. "Now, little 'un, most girls take it as a compliment when Red Finley starts paying them attention. Most girls don't mind it at all when I..."

He grabbed her. "...kiss 'em." Finley held her tight and forced his lips against hers while she beat futilely at his arms with her small fists and tried to stomp his toes with her bootheels.

Fire fanned up in Jay as he stepped behind the cowboy. He grabbed the puncher's chin and jerked back. Gasping for breath, Finley turned loose of the girl and lost his balance. Jay stepped in front of the cowboy and drove a hard fist into the man's jaw.

Finley sat down hard and shook his head. He growled angrily and sprang

up again, fists swinging. Jay stepped in close and drove a left, then a right, into Finley's stomach. Finley grunted as part of the breath went out of him. He kept swinging, but not so hard now.

Jay tied into him, his fists slashing, pounding into the redhead's face, ribs, and belly. When Finley went down, Jay caught him by the collar and jerked him up again. At last the puncher sagged to the ground, beaten. Jay stood over him, big fists doubled, and fought hard for breath.

The fiddling went on by the campfire. No one had heard the fight. Jay wiped the sweat from his face, picked up his hat, and licked dry lips.

"All right, Finley," he gritted. "Come on over to the wagon and wash your face. You're quitting."

The girl wasn't nearly so nervous as Jay thought she had a right to be. "If I could have gotten my hands on a mesquite club..." she said. "I want to thank you, Mister Lockaby. I wish there was some way..."

"I'll have all the thanks I need if I can get Finley's job," Jay said flatly. He helped the weakened Finley to his feet. He took out a washbasin and dipped water into it. He made Finley wash the dirt and blood from his face.

"Now you go over there and tell Sartain you're quitting. Don't give him any reasons. Just quit and get out."

Sartain roared angrily at Finley. But the redhead silently pitched his bedroll and saddle into Babb's buckboard and sat down in the darkness to wait for the ranchman to get ready to leave camp.

Jay got a deep satisfaction from the helpless anger in Sartain's face. He walked by Sartain and spoke to Nickle.

"Since you've lost a man, there ought to be room for me, don't you reckon?"

Nickle nodded. "Of course, of course. I see no reason why we shouldn't take him on, do you, Sartain?"

Raw hatred looked out of Sartain's eyes. He hesitated, glaring at Jay. "No, I reckon not." He turned on his heel and tromped off into the darkness.

Chapter Two

THE COOK yelled for breakfast long before daylight next morning. Jay threw back his blanket and rubbed his eyes. Sartain had made him stand a double guard during the night to make up for one of the sleeping rummies.

Boyish excitement ran through the young punchers as they wolfed down their breakfast. Claude Nickle's hands trembled, and Jay knew the little man was as excited as his boys. Audrey Nickle seemed the calmest of the lot, except for Sartain and the sour old cook. Jay wondered idly if perhaps she wouldn't prove to be the top hand of the trip.

"I'm a good point man, Sartain," Jay offered as the crew saddled up. "You know I took some of my own herds up north before..."

Sartain glared. "Before what?"

Jay eyed him coldly. "You know what, better than I do. You putting me on the point, like you was going to do with Finley?"

Sartain's eyes glowed with triumph, and a hard grin broke on his wide mouth. "You're going to ride drag, Lockaby. You're going to stay back there and tail up the weak ones. You'll chew dust till you'll wish you'd really killed me, that day in Kansas."

Jay clenched his teeth and felt the veins on his temples strain from anger. "I already wish I'd killed you, Sartain. I've wished it a hundred times."

He swung quietly into the saddle and spurred to the far end of the herd.

With a group of inexperienced riders, it took quite a while to get the herd strung out on the trail. But finally the steers were on their way. Far ahead Sartain put a couple of raw kids on the point. One was on each side of

the herd, near the lead. If the cattle were to be turned a little to the left, the rider on the left would pull back and give plenty of room, while the rider on the right pulled in close to the steers and shoved them over. The way the young punchers worked it, the trail looked something like the winding track of a rattlesnake.

Most outfits with which Jay had ridden pushed their cattle hard the first few days to get them off their home range and get them trail-broken. Sartain wasn't pushing at all. Jay wondered, and he didn't like it.

It didn't take long for the dust to start choking. Stirred up by the hoofs of the steers in the lead, the dust stayed aloft and steadily grew thicker as more and more cattle walked through it. The rummy supposed to help with the drags soon pulled away from the dust, leaving Jay to handle the end of the herd alone.

Audrey Nickle dropped back to the drags and pulled her horse in beside Jay. The sight of her stirred him. He noticed the stock of a carbine in the scabbard which hung beneath her side-saddle. She choked in the dust, but she didn't try to get out of it.

"There's something wrong between you and Sartain," she said bluntly. "Anybody can tell you're a real cowman. You belong on the point instead of back here. Now, what's the trouble?"

Jay looked straight ahead. "It's something personal. I'd just as soon we didn't talk about it."

SHE RODE along beside him a good ten minutes before she spoke up again. "Do you know any reason why this herd shouldn't be trail branded?"

Jay shook his head. "Every trail herd I ever saw was."

She looked at him worriedly. "That's what I thought. But Babb talked Dad out of it. Said brands at this time of the year might get wormy, and he said extra brands ruined part

of the hide and kept the steers from being worth much."

The uneasiness he had felt began working through him again. "Babb said that? But he even brands his own range cattle at this time of year."

A look of deep concern settled on the girl's face. Jay wondered if she was thinking the same things that flashed through his mind—a worthless crew, a dishonest trail boss, and steers that didn't bear their new owner's brand. Something was in the wind, and Jay didn't like the smell of it.

"Dad's put everything we own into this herd," Audrey said. "We can't let anything happen to it."

About midafternoon Sartain rode back to the drags. "Lockaby," he said angrily, "I think we're short some steers. You've fooled around and let some drop out."

Jay's temper flared. "I haven't lost a head and you know it."

Audrey Nickle had stayed close to the drags all day. Now she pulled in and started arguing. "I've been back here almost the whole way, Sartain, and no steers have gotten out."

Sartain flashed her an annoyed look. "Then they were left at the bed-grounds. Lockaby, you go back and get them."

Jay glared at Sartain through a red haze and fought down a desire to knock him out of the saddle. He knew the trail boss just wanted to get him away from the herd. He wheeled his horse around and struck out over the back trail. As he rode off he heard Sartain suggest that Audrey go up to where her father rode, near the lead.

Jay spurred the lazy horse into a brisk trot. He cursed Sartain for giving him the sorriest mounts in the remuda and for sending him off on a fool's errand. He cursed himself for getting tied up with Sartain again.

Half an hour later he heard horse's hoofs behind him and reined up. Caution sent his hand quickly to his gunbelt as he wheeled around. He felt

relieved when he recognized Audrey Nickle loping to catch up.

"You ought not to've come after me," he scolded. "It's bad enough for a girl to be with a trail herd in the first place. And when she starts riding off with a cowboy, people are going to talk."

"I didn't like the way Sartain sent you off," she answered quickly. "He's up to something, and I want to find out what it is."

Jay wanted to grin. Nothing dumb about this girl. "Have you told your dad what you think?"

"I've tried to, but he laughs at me. He's so excited about this trip that he's like a little boy."

Jay liked the earnest look in the girl's blue eyes. "Whatever Sartain's up to, you'll be better off staying close to your dad," he told her flatly. "Now you hightail it back to the herd."

"This herd belongs to my dad, not you," she spoke quickly. "I want to see that it gets to Kansas."

He looked at her and grinned. "You're a regular little fire-eater. But if you get in Sartain's way he's liable to hurt you."

"Do you think he would hurt a woman?"

Jay wasn't grinning now. "You're not his kind of a woman. He wouldn't mind hurting you, if he thought it was necessary."

She stared at him, "What kind of woman *am* I?"

That one he couldn't answer. He looked into her pretty face, her clear blue eyes, and groped for words. His heartbeat quickened. A strong urge moved within him. He reached out, gathered her into his arms, and kissed her. She looked surprised, but she didn't resist him.

He turned her loose, his blood warm. She pulled away a little. "You whipped a man for trying that."

Jay looked down at his saddlehorn, ashamed. "Yes, and now I feel like

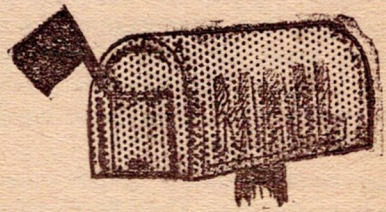
whipping myself. You better go back to the herd."

JAY SAT there and watched her ride away, a strange tingle spreading through him. He rubbed his rough hands across his mouth and remembered the warmth of her lips. Suddenly he was glad he had joined this outfit. Whatever Sartain was up to, Jay was determined to scotch it.

It was just as he knew it would be. There wasn't a sign of a lost steer anywhere along the back trail. A slow west wind got up as he started making a wide circle of the bedground. The last place to look would be the thicket where the chuckwagon had stood. Jay rode up to it carelessly, knowing there wouldn't be a steer in it.

A rifle crashed in the thicket, and a bullet zipped past Jay. Panic seized him for an instant as he realized he was caught in the open. He jerked out his six-gun and spurred for the cover of the brush. He snapped off a couple of quick shots in the direction of the rifleman to the east of him. But he knew he couldn't hit anything.

The rifle cracked again. There was a sudden thump, then a groan from Jay's horse as the animal plunged headlong to the ground. Jay desperately kicked his feet out of the stirrups and rolled free. Another bullet searched for him.



Now he was really caught. He was afoot, and it was still thirty yards to the protection of the brush. He bellied down behind the dead horse for cover and wished the ambusher would show himself. But even if he did, Jay knew

he was too far away for an accurate shot with the pistol.

The dry grass was like a mat beneath him. It was brittle between his fingers, like tinder.

Tinder. Jay thought a minute, then grinned without humor. The wind was blowing straight from him toward the man with the rifle. If he could start a fire far enough ahead of him to keep himself from being burned. . .

Keeping low, he struck a match on his saddle and pitched it over. The wind snuffed it out before it hit the ground. He tried again, but the same thing happened. This time a bullet creased the cantle of the old saddle. Jay felt in his pockets for a piece of paper and finally found one. He crushed and twisted it into a long wad. He lighted it and let the fire get a good start. Then he rose up a little, hurled the paper forward, and dropped flat. The rifle roared again.

Holding his breath, Jay could hear a faint crackle. Gradually it became louder, and the dry, pungent odor of grass smoke drifted to him. Fanned by the wind, the flames spread out and quickly moved in toward the thicket. Jay eased himself upward and looked over the dead horse's shoulder. Any minute now the fire should flush the ambusher.

FINALLY he heard a curse and saw a figure jump up and dash for a new place beyond the billowing grey smoke. Jay took advantage of the moment to break for cover of the brush. As he hit the thicket the rifle crashed. But smoke must have been burning the rifleman's eyes.

Jay squatted down under cover a couple of minutes. Then brush rustled as the unknown gunman began to move.

Fire's scorching his hip pockets again, Jay thought. And this time he doesn't know where I'm at.

The crackle of flames and the billowing smoke kept moving in. Jay

blinked away the sting. The palm of his hand was sticky on the gun.

Suddenly the gunman jumped up with a yelp of pain and plunged forward through the brush. Jay rose up. The ambusher pumped a bullet at him. Jay brought his pistol up and triggered off two quick shots. The man dropped the rifle. He slumped over into the forks of a mesquite, and his hat tumbled from his head.

Jay glimpsed the red hair and knew immediately the identity of the dead man. He knew too who had arranged this. Hatred rose in him anew. Then he heard the frightened snorting of a horse. Finley's mount was tied back there in the brush, and the flames were crowding him, Jay knew. He ran back through the thicket to search for the horse. Finding him, he swung into the saddle and skirted out around the flames.

The sun was almost down. Jay knew it wouldn't be long until some of Babb's riders would be out to investigate the fire. Finley's saddle was much better than the old rig he had swapped for, so he didn't go back to get his own.

Darkness caught him before he got back to the herd. Nervousness rubbed him as he rode. But it left him suddenly as he approached the wagon and saw Sartain squatting on his heels beside the flickering campfire, a tin plate of food in his hands. Grim resolve replaced Jay's nervousness. This was the place to settle it—here and now.

He swung quietly out of the saddle and tied Finley's sorrel to a mesquite. Sartain was lifting a steaming cup of coffee to his lips as Jay stepped up into the circle of the firelight. The trail boss's eyes widened. He spilled much of the coffee.

"What's the matter, Sartain? See a ghost?" Jay asked dryly.

Sartain stammered. "Why. . . why, I thought you had quit us."

Jay kicked the plate out of Sartain's hands. "You mean you thought

I was dead!" he thundered as the boss jumped to his feet.

Sartain's hand dipped toward his gun, then stopped abruptly as he thought better of it.

"Go ahead, Satain," Jay taunted. "I passed up the chance once before. Try now and see if I do."

Claude Nickle had excitedly dropped his own plate of food. Now he ventured a step forward, his face a shade lighter than it ought to be. "Now hold on here. What's all the ruckus for?"

Jay answered without taking his eyes off Sartain. "Your trail boss has got some idea for robbing you, Mister Nickle, the same way he once did me. He tried to get me killed today because he knew I was wise to him."

"Don't listen to him," Sartain spoke quickly. "He's covering up. I sent him back today to find some missing steers. He's just now getting back. He's been letting your cattle drop out of the drive so he can steal them."

RAGE ROARED through Jay. He lunged at Sartain and drove a hard right at the stubby jaw. Sartain turned his head in time for the blow to glance off. Then he jabbed his own left into Jay's ribs. Jay grunted as some of the breath left him. Slowed a minute, he gritted his teeth and closed in with Sartain. They pounded short rabbit punches into each other's stomachs and ribs. Sartain managed to pull back a little and drive a hard fist into Jay's face.

The cowboy went off balance and fell backward. In a second Sartain was on him. The boss grabbed hold of Jay's throat. The cowboy quickly brought up his fists against Sartain's straightened elbows. The boss grunted in pain and turned loose. Jay took advantage of the man's numbness to drive a fist at the side of his face.

Sartain swayed to one side. Jay pushed him over, swung up, and in a second was on top. He started driving his fists into the boss's face.

He stopped numb as he heard a gun click behind him and felt something jab into his back.

"Now hold it right there, cowboy," Claude Nickle's voice said grimly. "You just joined us yesterday, a total stranger. Wiley Babb himself recommended Sartain to me. If you don't let him up I'll blow a hole in you."

Slowly Jay rose to his feet, breathing hard. On the ground Sartain rubbed the back of his hand over his sore lips. He swayed to his feet.

Suddenly the boss's gun was in his hand. The cowboys started ducking for cover. "You've had your last chance, Lockaby," he snarled, shoving the gun forward.

A gun roared, but it wasn't Sartain's. The range boss dropped the pistol. He swayed forward, grabbing at an ugly red streak on his right hand and biting his lower lip painfully with yellow teeth.

"Audrey!" Nickle roared. "Drop that gun!"

She held the smoking carbine steady. "No, Dad. You've got to give Lockaby a chance."

Sartain glared sullenly at her. "Girl, you're going to be sorry you done this."

Jay knew how that sounded to the others; and knew Sartain's meaning was much deeper.

Claude Nickle started moving toward Audrey. "I don't want to have to take that gun away from you, Audrey. Now drop it."

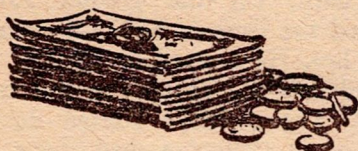
Audrey stood her ground a moment, then started backing up. "Dad, stop it." Then to Jay, "Get out of here, Jay, while you still can."

Jay trotted back into the darkness toward the sorrel horse. As he swung into the saddle he saw Nickle wrest the carbine from Audrey's hands. The man fired quickly and wildly in Jay's direction. A couple of excited kids joined him. Jay leaned low over the horn and spurred out into the darkness.

The sudden movement of hoofs to

his right told him the shots had frightened the herd. The cattle hadn't stampeded, but they were ready to.

The men at the campfire knew it too. The firing suddenly stopped. Moments later Jay was out of sight of the campfire. He reined up and listened. There was no pursuit. Apparently the cowboys had lost interest in him and gone to quiet the cattle.



Jay swung down to rest awhile. Hunger stirred within him. With it came helpless anger, and a renewed hatred of Sartain.

"Might as well stake you right here, Sorrel," he said to Finley's horse. "This is as far away as I'm getting till I square up with Sartain."

ALL THE next morning Jay kept far to the left of the herd. By noon his belt was buckled as tight as it would go, and he was weak from hunger. He knew he would have to take a chance and visit the chuckwagon.

After noon he pulled in closer. Luckily the wagon was well out to one side. He waited until a rise hid the herd, then loped in. He kept his hand on his gun as he reined up.

"Don't you go clawing for a gun," he told the grumpy-looking cook. "All I want is a little chuck."

The cook grunted. "Matter of fact, I been looking for you. Knew you couldn't get nothing to eat off out yonder, and you sure wouldn't leave till you got even with Sartain. I figured you'd be back, and I'm glad you are."

Jay looked at him quizzically.

"That girl told me what she's been thinking," the cook went on. "And I think she's right. I been around lots of cow outfits, and I know this one ain't on the up-and-up. What's more

I got a hunch Sartain's about to spring whatever he's got hatching."

"Keep talking."

"He's getting rid of the riders for one thing. He sent three of the kids out over the back trail on an errand any halfwit would know was a put-up job. And now them two rummies have got drunk and are plumb out of commission.

"Sartain must have given it to them. They didn't have any. Yesterday I searched through their stuff and emptied all their liquor. Fixed it so it would leak out in their bedroll and look like an accident."

Jay grinned. Sartain had hired *one* good man, whether he had intended to or not.

The cook spat tobacco juice over the wagon wheel, wiped his moustache, and rubbed his hand on his pants leg. "Sartain don't aim to be out long, either. I went through *his* stuff this morning. He ain't got enough tobacco to last him a week. And he smokes all the time."

Jay ate a quick, cold meal and loaded his saddlebags with whatever he could find for later on. Then he pulled out again. But he didn't get far from the herd this time.

Chapter Three

THE RAID came at sundown, quickly and without any warning. It happened just as the cattle were bunched to be bedded down for the night. Watching from a distance, Jay had noticed that the outfit was still short five hands.

Suddenly shots began rattling on the far side of the herd. Even from the distance, Jay heard Sartain's voice bawl: "A raid, boys! Run for your lives!"

Twenty riders swept down on the herd from the far side, firing as they rode. Trail weariness was gone from the cattle in a second. Panic rippled through the herd like flood water. Then they were on the run, coming at Jay.

He pulled his horse around and spurred to get out of the way. Through the dust he saw Sartain fire a couple of careless shots at the oncoming riders, then topple from his saddle as if hit.

Three frightened kid cowboys were fleeing over the back trail, spurring hard. A couple of the braver youngsters were still shooting at the raiders but were too busy trying to keep up with the herd to do much good.

It was a picture Jay had seen before—dust boiling up to the frenzied thunder of thousands of pounding hoofs—the clatter of horns, excited shouts, and the rattle of gunfire.

Jay managed to pull out of the path of the stampede just as the first wild-eyed steers went past him. There wasn't any heading them now, he knew, not till they had run down a little. Anger swept through him, roaring anger that made him grip his gun with all the strength in his big hand. He could see the whole scheme now.

Sartain had hand-picked a crew that would give him the least trouble when Babb's riders came to stampede the herd. Nor had Sartain died before the guns of the renegades. Jay knew his supposed death had been meant to take the heart out of any of the crew that might have wanted to fight. Still close to home, these steers would soon find their way back into their familiar thickets on Babb range. There would be no trail brands to prove they had ever left, or that Nickle's herd had not been driven out of the country by outlaws.

A couple of the raiders were loping toward Jay now, firing their guns and yelling at the steers to keep the big run going. Jay held his boogered sorrel as still as he could. When the first rider neared him, Jay brought up his gun and fired. The outlaw snapped a quick shot at Jay but missed. Jay triggered another that spilled the man from the saddle.

From the corner of his eye Jay saw the rider get up and hobble off out

of the steers' way, holding a wounded shoulder. Jay went after the next rider now. But the cowboy had seen his intention. He began firing first. Jay ducked low and snapped off a couple of quick shots. The outlaw's horse plunged to the ground. The man rolled into the path of the stampeding steers. He jumped up terrified and started running for safety. A steer brushed him and rolled him over. When he got to his knees another steer hit him.

As Jay turned his back on the cowboy he saw him scramble to safety, half on his hands and knees.

MINUTES later the panicked herd had passed. Jay hauled up on his reins and searched through the choking dust for sign of some of the Nickle cowboys. He could still hear sporadic shots. Fear tugged at him. Maybe some of those kids were still trying to shoot it out with the rustlers. But Nickle's force was already cut half in two. It wouldn't stand a chance now.

Where was Audrey? Fear squeezed him tighter as he pushed on through the dust. She must have been with the herd when the raiders struck.

Suddenly Jay got the answer to one of his questions. Claude Nickle and two young punchers materialized from out of the dust. Seeing Jay, they drew their guns and trained them on him. Claude Nickle pushed out a little in the lead. Black hatred showed in his eyes. Sweat rolled down and left tiny lines in the dust that lay thick on his face.

"Jay Lockaby! I knew it was you the minute the raiders came down on us. What have you done with Audrey? Tell me or I'll blast you to Kingdom Come!"

Audrey missing! Jay's breath came short, and his heartbeat picked up. He tried to explain, but he made no headway. One of the young cowboys said:

"You pull back out of the way,

Mister Nickle. Jeff and I'll give him what he's coming."

Nickle's voice almost broke. "First I've got to know where he's got Audrey."

He thrust the gun forward and said wildly: "Tell me. Tell me or I'll kill you right where you sit!"

Beads of sweat popped out on Jay's forehead, and his tense hand gripped the bridle reins. Far away he could hear the herd still running. He could hear Nickle's anguished breathing and almost thought he could hear his own heart beating. Then a new sound broke in, the clatter of the chuckwagon. The cook's voice was calling out:

"Nickle! Nickle! Where are you?"

One of the cowboys answered. Moments later the wagon hauled up. The cook sawed on the lines to stop the frightened team. Fear looked out of his own eyes as he pulled up beside the men.

"Miss Audrey's went after Sartain!" he declared, breathing rapidly.

Nickle's mouth dropped open. "You're crazy. Sartain's dead."

"No he ain't. He acted like it to scare your cowboys. I came along with the wagon just in time to see one of the raiders bring him a horse. Miss Audrey seen them too. She went spurring off after Sartain. I yelled at her to come back, but I couldn't catch her in this kindling heap."

Jay felt the color drain out of his face. "Sartain'll kill her if she crowds him!"

Nickle lowered his gun. His hands were shaking. "You don't know how close I came to killing *you*, Lockaby."

"We haven't got time to worry about that. Come on!"

Their horses were tired, but the four men's spurs kept the animals going in a long lope after the herd. They spread out so they would miss nothing in the gathering darkness.

DUST STILL hung thick in the air and choked Jay as he galloped along. He blinked to relieve the sting-

ing of his eyes. Audrey's face kept coming to him, and he remembered her lips. If Sartain did anything to her...

A cowboy's shout pulled him quickly to the right. Through the dust he could see the youngster grab the reins of a loose horse.

"Mister Nickle! Mister Lockaby! Here's her horse!"

Panic grabbed hold of Jay. He slid his sorrel to a stop and looked anxiously at the riderless horse. As the other two riders pulled in, Jay saw the spot on the sidesaddle. He touched it. It was red and sticky.

"Blood! He's shot her!"

They started an even more desperate search then, pushing on through the gloom, scanning the ground ahead of them, afraid of what they would find. It was Jay who found her, or perhaps she found him. He heard her voice calling him weakly. Then he saw her on the ground just ahead of him, trying to push herself up on one elbow.

He tried to call the others, but fear clamped his throat tight. He pulled out his gun and fired three times into the air. Then he swung to the ground and ran to her.

The breath went out of him as he saw the splotch of blood low on her left shoulder. The bullet had gone close to her heart, he realized instantly. Dangerously close.

He gripped her hand tightly, fighting back the dread that rose like a flood within him.

"Dad," she murmured. "Where's Dad?"

"He's all right," Jay answered softly. "He'll be along in a minute."

The three others came riding in from all directions. Claude Nickle jumped out of the saddle and almost fell. His voice broke as he called his daughter's name. Jay yelled at one of the boys.

"Go find that chuckwagon and get it here quick."

The boy hesitated. "What about the herd?"

Jay's lips were tight. "We'll have to let the cattle go. We've got to get her back to town, to a doctor."

The cook dumped his supplies and spread out four cowboys' bedrolls in the wagon to make a soft bed for Audrey. Then started a weary but anxious all-night ride to town.

On the way Jay told his own story. He told Nickle how he had once driven his own herds to Kansas railroad markets. One day a Kansas businessman offered to lend him the extra money he would need to bring an even larger herd than he had ever brought before. Buying Texas cattle with his own money and money he had borrowed, he got together a big herd and trailed it to Kansas.

Sartain had been one of the cowboys on that drive. He had been a troublemaker all the way up the trail. But he had been a good cowhand, and Jay, shorthanded, had kept him on.

The herd sold all right. Jay banked his own money but withdrew enough to repay his backer and give him a good profit to boot. On his way he was held up and robbed by two masked men. He was positive one was Sartain.

He trailed Sartain all over Kansas, from one saloon and dance hall to another. Finally he had found him in the room of a dancehall girl. The money had all been spent. There was no proof that Sartain had taken it. Still, Jay had known. He had drawn his gun to shoot the outlaw. But somehow he had never been able to pull the trigger.

Paying his debts cost him practically everything he had left, and Jay came back to Texas broke. Since then he had worked for cowboy wages, when he could find work.

Looking at Audrey's ash-grey face in the wagon bed in the light of dawn, Jay wished again that he had killed Sartain that day long ago. He knew that now, no matter what happened, he had that one job to do.

IN THE front room of the doctor's office, Jay nervously paced the floor. He glanced at the big clock in the corner. Half past two. More than an hour since the doctor had taken the unconscious Audrey into the back room, with Claude Nickle close behind.

A clatter of horses' hoofs on the street outside brought Jay's gaze to the window. His breath came short as he recognized the riders. In the lead was stout Wiley Babb, with a cigar clamped between his teeth and looking like he was about to foreclose the mortgage on the state of Texas.

Jay unconsciously dropped his hand to his gunbutt as he spotted the man riding close behind Babb. Sartain! Jay clenched his teeth and fought down the impulse to shoot Sartain right then, through the window.

A little way down the street Babb dropped out. He tied his horse in front of the bank and went in. Jay watched Sartain and a couple of other riders go on down to a saloon.

One of the youngsters had stepped behind Jay. "Babb's got him an office in the bank. He's a big shot there. Probably gone to count the money he's swindled Mister Nickle out of."

Jay walked to the door and paused, his hand on the ornate doorknob. "Stay here in case Nickle needs you," he said. "I'm going to help Babb count that money."

He quickly stepped down onto the plank sidewalk and angled across the dirt street. He stopped a moment in front of the bank, wiped his sweaty palms on his pants leg, and pushed through the bank door. He looked around for Babb but didn't see him. He walked up to a slender teller.

"Where's Babb?"

The teller pointed his chin at a closed door. "In his office, but he can't be disturbed now. Say there, I said he can't be disturbed!"

Jay shoved the door open and quickly stepped through. Babb, seated at a desk, almost let the cigar drop

out of his mouth. Jay shoved the door shut.

"What do you want?" Babb asked, plainly a little shaken.

Jay purposely dropped his hand to his gun. "I want the money Nickle paid you for the steers your men ran off last night."

Babb stood up quickly, his face red as a ripe apple. "Now you look here..."

Jay pulled out the six-gun and leveled it at Babb's belly. "Your man Sartain shot Audrey Nickle. She may not live. Maybe you'd like to hang for getting her shot."



Some of the color drained from Babb's face. He took the cigar from his mouth and put it in a tray on the desk, his hand shaking. "He told me there wouldn't be any killing," he said weakly.

Jay eyed him levelly, hating the man. "Nickle paid you twenty dollars a head for twelve hundred cattle. That's \$24,000. I want it now, to take to Nickle. Add another thousand to help pay for his trouble. That'll make it twenty-five."

Babb stared at him unbelievably. "Why, you...that's robbery!"

Jay slipped his gun back into its holster. "I'm not holding a gun on you. Maybe you'd rather hang."

Babb seemed to wilt. Jay kept talking.

"You were bound to 've promised Sartain a good cut out of this deal. I'll just take that myself, to pay back a little of what he stole from me one time in Kansas. Say \$5,000."

Babb sat down weakly in his chair, near collapse. He called for someone

in the bank. A moment later the slender teller came in.

"Get me \$30,000 in cash, Roger."

The teller's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Go on and get it," Babb said sharply.

A FEW MINUTES later Babb was counting out the money for Jay. Satisfied, Jay shoved it down in his pocket. Then he leaned threateningly toward Babb.

"If you're thinking about trying to get this money back, just remember what I said about that hanging.

"Now then, I saw Sartain go to the saloon while ago. How long does he usually stay there?"

Babb answered weakly: "All afternoon. He'll stay down stairs and drink a little while. He's got a dance-hall girl upstairs. They call her Prairie Lou. He'll be going up to see her directly."

Jay pulled out his gun again and checked it. "You stay right here, Babb. Move a finger to warn Sartain, and I'll be coming back."

He shoved the gun into the holster, backed out, and closed the door. A moment later he was on the plank sidewalk again. Reaching the saloon, he stopped and looked at the outside stairs which led up to the second floor. He hesitated a moment, then started up. Cautiously he pushed open the door and stepped inside the upstairs hall.

A door opened and a girl stepped out of a room. She stopped and looked at Jay. The smell of her perfume repulsed him. There was too much rough on her cheeks, and her dance-hall dress was too low in front.

"Where's Prairie Lou's room?" he asked her.

She pointed to a door on down the hall. "That's it, but you better keep away from Lou today. Sartain's in town. He beat one man to a bloody pulp on account of her last week. He

said he'd kill the next man he caught with her."

A grin broke on Jay's lips, but there was no humor in it. "He did? Well, Sartain's downstairs. You go down and tell him there's somebody with his girl right now."

Her painted mouth dropped open. "You must be crazy!"

"Never mind. Just go on down and tell him."

He watched the girl walk rapidly down the hall and start down the stairs. He moved quickly to Prairie Lou's door, pushed it open, and stepped into the room.

The heavy odor of cheap perfume was thick enough to cut with a knife. A girl sat at a bureau, brushing her hair as she watched herself in an oval mirror. She put down the brush and stared at Jay.

"I don't know who you are, but if you're smart you'll get out. There's a man downstairs who'll be trying for your ears."

Jay grinned. "I know. I've already sent him word."

He backed away from the door and turned to face it, never letting the girl out of his sight. She watched with eyes opened wide.

"Say here, what are you up to? What do you think you're doing?"

"Just sit down and be quiet," he told her sharply.

Outside heavy boots came clumping down the hall. Jay's heartbeat quickened. Sweat popped out on his forehead and the palms of his hands. He gripped the gunbutt tightly. He held his breath as he saw the doorknob turn.

The door pushed open and Sartain stood there. There was a scowl on his ugly face as he grunted, "What the..."

Then the scowl turned suddenly to a look of amazement as he recognized Jay across the room. For a moment he stood there staring, his wide mouth open. Then his hand dipped toward his gun.

But even as Sartain's gun cleared

leather, Jay was squeezing the trigger. He knew with grim satisfaction that he had won—that he had finished his job.

THE TWO young cowboys met him almost at the saloon door. Claude Nickle and the cook were standing at the door of the doctor's office, waiting for him.

"That shooting," Nickle said. "We were afraid it was you."

"It was." Jay told the group briefly that Sartain was dead. He reached deep down in his pocket and took out the money Babb had given him. He counted off \$5,000 and handed the rest to Nickle.

"There's your herd, all twelve hundred head, plus a few extra to boot."

A broad smile broke out on Nickle's face as he took the money. He blinked quickly and stammered.

"It...it looks like my luck's come back to me. Just a little bit ago Audrey came to. The doctor says she's going to be all right."

He paused. "She wants to see you, Jay."

Joy flooded through Jay Lockaby as he stood there. Dumbly he wadded the greenbacks in his hand and thrust them deep into his pocket. He started unsteadily for the door to the back room. He stopped as he felt Claude Nickle's hand on his shoulder.

"Jay, I'm going to get to Kansas yet. I'll buy more cattle and start again. I'll need you. So will Audrey."

Jay smiled. "I'll stay with you as long as you need me."

His steps stronger now, Jay went on through the door, into the room where Audrey was waiting for him....

THE END





*"Now if
you was
me, you'd
have a
reason to
cry!"*

**There was a law of nature that no one could beat—
not even the Diamond S!**

CRY-TIME FOR KITTY

By Clyde Harper

SHERIFF BILL TUCKER brought the warning while they were still at breakfast. Cooney and Hap had wanted to start early, so they had gotten up before daybreak. Kitty cooked breakfast while the men fed livestock and chickens.

Kitty saw the young sheriff was weary. She offered him a cup of hot coffee, and fixed more food for his breakfast. Gratefully the Sheriff drank the coffee, then asked to use their party line 'phone. He called his wife to ask if anyone had called for him. No one had. The Sheriff said he would call her back later, and keep on with his search. Then he hung up and returned to the kitchen.

He told them about it as they ate: "Some fellow robbed a place up north, killed two men, headed this way. They 'phoned me about three this morning, asked me to head him off. Nothing much to go on except he's riding a black horse, totes a pretty fast gun."

Kitty said: "Cooney and Hap are moving the horses again today. If they see anything we'll let you know."

Bill Tucker nodded, a frown now on his young face. He was a good neighbor, tried to be a friend to all. It troubled him to bring bad news.

"Saw Judge Thompson, Kitty. He says Skinner's within his rights. Nothing you can do about that fence."

"Can tear it down!" declared Hap, Cooney agreeing with a vigorous nod. They were wiry, middle-aged men, of unquestionable Double D loyalty.

"No," said Kitty, "we won't tear it down. I just can't understand Mr. Skinner, though. He seems so nice and courteous."

Cooney grunted. "Them extra nice ones is the kind to watch. They stab you deeper in the back."

The meal was finished, so the Sheriff arose. He had to be on his way. There were still several places to ask if a stranger riding southward on a black horse had been seen.

Cooney and Hap went out with him. Kitty cleared away the dishes. The blush of dawn spread over the sky.

From the kitchen window she saw the Sheriff leave, and Hap and Cooney roping their horses. When saddled, they mounted and left, waving good-bye to her through the window. They rode for the northwest hills, in which were the Double D horses.

It was cooler up there for the herd. The dew at nights was heavier. This had been their main source of water,

since Ed Skinner had built his fence. Once each week Cooney and Hap shifted the herd about, combing the hills for pockets of water.

Kitty hoped they would be successful in their quest today. From experience she knew why they wouldn't. The hills were as dry as the flats, and the rains were yet weeks away.

SHE WONDERED what her Dad would have done. Probably he would have gotten his gun, told Hap and Cooney to get theirs. Then they'd ridden for a showdown with the fence-building Diamond S. More than likely that would have been a mistake, if the Diamond S men decided to fight. Ed Skinner had a four-man crew, ramrodded by unfriendly Frank Packard.

The Diamond S came into the flats about two years ago when Skinner bought the adjacent ranch. Skinner brought in good cattle, soon showed he knew his business. A tall, big-boned man in his early sixties, Skinner had a warm manner that quickly gained him friends. It was learned that his wife had died about five years before he came to the flats.

Packard was considered the opposite of genial Mr. Skinner. The big foreman seldom spoke unless spoken to first. Men said Packard was mean with horses, that he broke them with chain bit and filed spur rowels. Folks often wondered how kindly, courteous Mr. Skinner tolerated surly Frank Packard, much less retain him as foreman.

Kitty often wondered herself, so strangely dislike were the two men. She supposed it was because Packard knew his job. Then when the fence was built, she wondered if she'd overrated Mr. Skinner; if that, underneath, he and Packard were both harsh, grasping, greedy.

For the fence had enclosed Antelope Wells. True, it was on the Diamond S range. But as long as folks could recall, the Wells had been open water. Now the Diamond S had it fenced in, at the expense of the rest of the flats.

When she had found out about the fence, Kitty had appealed to young Sheriff Tucker. The Sheriff had promised to contact Judge Thompson, who would know if Skinner was within his rights. Today, Kitty had received her answer.

It made Kitty just mad to think about it. Mad enough to ride for a showdown herself. But that would gain nothing, except arrest by the Sheriff. Bill Tucker might be in sympathy with her, but he was an uncompromising officer when it came to defending anyone's rights. Ed Skinner was within the law. So Bill Tucker would uphold the Diamond S, regardless of his personal sympathies.

"I've got to do something," Kitty thought. "I just can't let the Double D go. But what am I going to do?"

She decided to go to her thinking place, try to figure out some plan. So she hurried through the dishes, straightened the kitchen a bit, and blew out the lamp. She caught up a wrap against the crisp coolness of the early day, and went into the yard. The golden flush of dawn bathed the sky, the sun about to emerge from its sleepy lair in the east.

Kitty hurried to the barn and quickly scrambled into the loft. She went to her accustomed "place"—the front loft opening that faced the south. Since a child, Kitty had often sat there, watching shadows of night give way to the flurry of dawn, or the beauty of a thousand-hued sky as the sun slipped to its night-time abode.

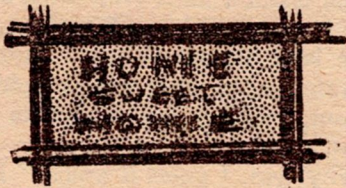
Kitty's mother had died when Kitty was a little tot, leaving big Dave Dale the job of rearing her. He secured a Mexican woman as housekeeper to take care of Kitty when she was yet so young. As Kitty grew older, he taught her books, and to ride, to rope and shoot. The housekeeper taught her to cook, to sew, and the art of keeping house.

But there were times in her younger years when the love of a busy Father

and the kindness of a Housekeeper-Mother just wasn't enough. There were "play-like" stories, or secret exultations, or occasional momentous tragedies. These Kitty experienced alone in her "secret place." It was where she had carried her grief when her first pony was injured and had to be shot. Again, when a favorite dolly had fallen and broken its head. And, a year ago when Daddy Dave had died. He had been caught in a surprise flash flood, and both he and his horse were drowned. Today, from habit of most twenty years, Kitty returned to her secret place where she had always gone when she had grave problems to solve.

As she watched dawn give way to day, her eyes warmly swept the place—the house, the corral, her pinto munching at the corral hayrack. It looked up at her, whinnied, then went on with its munching.

The red rocks clucked industriously in their wire-enclosed run-around, busy with crushed grain Hap had scattered as he came in for breakfast. Beside the barn in their wolf-proof pen, two span of fat porkers grunted contentedly over food supplied them by Cooney while Hap was feeding the chickens. Kitty's Dad had liked pork chops and cured hams, always raised a few hogs.



To Kitty it was a happy melody—the grunts, the clucks, the whinny. The sounds were as beautiful, she thought, as the color of awakening day. And, darn it, she was about to lose it—the herd, the ranch, her home.

"I'm so mad I could just cry!" she fiercely declared aloud, to the sky and the world at large.

From behind her was a rustle in the hay. Then a voice spoke. It was a friendly, tolerant, masculine voice. "You could cry? Ha! Now if you was

me, you'd really have a reason to cry."

FOR A moment Kitty was stunned. A man in the hay behind her! Then she leaped to her feet, whirled around.

He was propped on an elbow, regarded her quizzically. He had been asleep in the hay, partly burrowed down in it. That, and the faint light of dawn, had completely concealed him from her. She had walked right past him.

"Oh!" said Kitty uncertainly. She usually could command most any situation. But this was her first experience in a barn hayloft with a strange man. Inanely, she said, "Who're you?"

"A man with sore feet, which now are mostly blisters. Look."

He raised one foot from the hay, held it for her to see. It appeared a bit swollen, and seemed sore when he wriggled the toes. Then Kitty had to stifle a giggle. There was a hole in his sock. His big toe peeked out like a turtle's head from its shell.

"Musta walked a thousand miles last night," he remarked. "My horse broke his leg in the hills. I had to shoot him and walk from way back up in the hills. Try it sometime in a pair of boots!" He glared at her as if she was the cause of his unhappy plight. "Sore feet, dead horse, don't know where th' heck I'm at. And you think you've got troubles. Ha!"

He sat up, bringing the other foot from beneath the hay. It, too, had a hole in the sock, the big toe thrust woefully out. Kitty knew she must turn away, else she would laugh right in his face. But suddenly he began to grin.

"Go ahead and laugh. A mess, ain't it?"

Kitty did laugh. A bright, merry outburst that swept worry from her mind. This laughter, suddenly, was the release valve for the tumult which had plagued her since the Diamond S fence had taken all water from the flats.

He did evoke one's mirth as he sat

rubbing his feet. He had laid his hat aside when he went to sleep, and a few whisks of hay were in his tousled hair. This added to his comical appearance.

Gradually her laughter subsided, and Kitty was apologetic.

"Oh, I'm really sorry."

"Don't be. I reckon I'll laugh too, if my feet ever quit hurting." He fixed her with a crisp stare. "A man with sore feet can't chop wood, can he?"

Kitty was puzzled. "Why no, I suppose not."

"That means I'll have to bum you for breakfast. In addition to everything else that's wrong, I'm flat broke—and hungry as two big bears."

Kitty smiled. "I can take care of that, if you can get to the house."

"I'll make it if I have to crawl."

He managed to hobble along, carrying his boots in his hand. While Kitty fixed ham and eggs, coffee, and biscuits, he washed up at the back porch basin. He laughed at the hay in his hair, as he combed it at the mirror.

Kitty had a dishpan of hot water in which to soak his feet while he ate. She took a cup of coffee, sat across from him. There was no doubt of his ravenous hunger from the way he consumed the food. Finished, he rolled a cigarette.

"Peck Martin is the name," he said. "Got tired of winters up north, headed for the sunny southwest. Buster I guess you'd call me, though I can also work cattle. Could, that is," he frowned wryly, "when I had a horse."

"I'm Kitty Dale," she told him, watching him deeply inhale. He was slender, sinewy, supple, probably a year or two older than she. Kitty liked the laugh lines around his mouth, and the friendly, easy-going look in his eyes. She reckoned, though, he could adequately take care of himself. The Colt he wore showed signs of usage. It was the first thing he reached for when they started from the hayloft, even before he put on his hat.

"You said you was mad enough to cry," Peck recalled. "Like to tell me

about it?"

SHE HESITATED, reluctant to discuss her trouble with a person she had just met.

"Might as well," said Peck. "May do you good. Besides, maybe I can help you find the answer. Two heads are better'n one, they say, even if one ain't got no sense. That's me, of course, you savvy."

Slowly, at first, Kitty began. She told him about the flats, the Double D horse herd, Cooney and Hap and her Dad, and how hard he had worked. She told how she hated to lose it all, just because of lack of water. Then she told about the Diamond S, and the fence they'd put around the Antelope Wells.

Peck studied her as she talked. She was a cute little trick, her levis and shirt emphasizing the curves of her slender, neat figure. She needed help, had her back to the wall. But she still had fire, was far from licked.

When she had finished, Peck said: "This Antelope Wells—is it sort of a natural pond?"

"That's it exactly. Some think it is fed by an underground stream. It's never been known to go dry."

"How far is it from the boundary edge of your ranch?"

"Oh, about a mile. Now what's . . ."

He interrupted her. "What's the lay of the land around there? I mean, if the water in the pond was to suddenly bust out, would it flow down onto your ranch?"

"Why, yes, I guess it would." Kitty thought she understood what he was getting at. She shook her head. "If you're thinking of digging a ditch from the Wells to our ranch, you'll just have to forget it. To do that you'd have to go onto Diamond S. Bill Tucker wouldn't stand for that, even if Mr. Skinner did. It would be breaking the law just the same as tearing down the fence. I'm afraid I wouldn't stand for it, either. Double D doesn't break the law."

"Ain't going to break no law,"

grinned Peck Martin, "not even the law of nature. Gimme a towel to dry my feet. I want to show you something."

Wondering, she brought a towel and a pair of her father's socks. Peck thanked her, pulled them on, made an attempt at donning his boots. His feet were yet too sore, still slightly swollen. So he went to the back porch in sock feet, carrying the dishpan of water.

He set the pan on the edge of the porch, brought over a tub he'd noticed when combing his hair. Then he stepped into the yard, scraped up a mound of earth. He poured water onto the earth, formed a ball of thick mud. He placed this mud in one side of the tub, then fashioned a depression in the center of the mud, like a kid making a mud-pie dish. He propped the tub on a stone, so the mud-pie-dish was on the higher side. Then, into the depression he carefully poured water, small amounts at the time so that the contour and structure of the mud-pie dish was not disturbed. He filled it almost level, then looked at Kitty and grinned.

"Let's go have another cup of coffee, talk about the weather or something. After a while, I'll show you what I mean."

THEY HAD the coffee and talked,

Kitty wondering what it was he planned. She told him about herself, and he sketched his early life. Born in Montana, orphaned at the age of twelve, he'd gone to live with an uncle. He'd learned to read, figure and write, and worked for his keep until past sixteen. His uncle had died, so he'd taken to the cattle trails. He liked to handle horses, gradually became a buster. But the cold winters got on his nerves, so he headed south.

Yesterday, he'd gotten lost in the hills, rode into a blind canyon or two. Darkness had caught him, still lost. He realized now he should have stopped for the night even though hungry and thirsty. His horse had been weary, in

no shape to follow a strange trail in the dark. But foolishly, Peck pushed on, hoping to find food and shelter for them both for the night. Instead, his horse had slipped on a rock, tumbled and broken a foreleg. So, regretfully, he had shot the suffering animal, cached saddle and bridle, and went on afoot. Hours later he broke through the hills, caught the reflection of moonlight from the barn roof. Doggedly he had stumbled on, each step like walking through fire to his throbbing feet. Finally he'd reached their place. It had been far past midnight, too late to arouse anyone.

So he'd tugged off his boots, burrowed into the hay, and slept like a man who'd been drugged. He'd only awakened when she'd entered the loft.

"So that's it. Broke, no horse, no job." He cast a coy glance at her. "You've got horses. Roundup time is near. How about a job?" He grinned. "I'd be good for laughs if nothing else. You could just look at me and remember today, and always have a good laugh."

Kitty smiled, but didn't laugh. "I may not have a ranch nor anything else, if we don't get water."

"That reminds me," said Peck, arising. "Come on, and meet Mama Nature."

He led the way outside, stooped over the tub. He glanced up, grinned triumphantly.

"See? That's a law of nature which nobody can beat, not even th' Diamond S."

Kitty peered into the tub. Down in the lower part was a small puddle of muddy water. It had seeped from the depression of the mud-like dish, flowed downward, seeking a lower level.

"We can do that with Antelope Wells," said Peck. "We'll need some shovels and things to dig, some way to get 'em there. You got a buckboard and team?"

"No..." Kitty didn't comprehend. Surely water couldn't come this easily to the Diamond D. If it could, why

hadn't it done so before? Why wasn't there a second pond. On their land, just below the one on Diamond S? Then Kitty decided there might be if Peck handled things. Just like he'd handled the mud and tub and water.

She said, hope creeping into her voice. "No, we haven't a rig or team. But I think I can borrow them."

Kitty got on the party 'phone line. Soon her number answered. Guardedly Kitty explained. She couldn't give many details. Others might be listening in. Even Diamond S was on the party line.

"That was Mrs. Blanding, our nearest neighbor, who owns a rig. Her men-folk are out on the range. But she'll hitch up and bring the rig over herself," Kitty explained as she turned away from the wall 'phone.

WHILE waiting, Kitty found a pair of her Daddy's old boots, still serviceable, well broken in. They fitted Peck without too much discomfort to his sore feet. Then they rummaged about the buildings, found shovels, a grubbing hoe, and other things with which to dig. Peck discovered a small keg to carry drinking water.

By the time they had assembled the things, Mrs. Blanding drove up in the rig. Peck hitched the team while Mrs. Blanding clambered from the buckboard.

She said, after introduction to Peck, "What's this about water?"

"I'll show you," said Kitty, and escorted her to the back porch. She showed Mrs. Blanding the tub, explained the law of nature governing water seeking a lower level. By now, more water had seeped from the mud-pie dish, gathered in the lower portion of the tub.

Mrs. Blanding observed and listened in silence. Once she cast a sharp glance at Peck Martin.

"All right," she said at length. "I'll do anything I can to help. How do we start?"

It was Peck who replied. They would dig a big hole on the Double D

a sort of man-made pond. It would be below the land level of Antelope Wells. The law of nature would take it from there. In a few days, Double D would have water.

"We've got everything we'll need. I'll get the rig so I can load the stuff."

Kitty said: "I'll bring it around."

Peck went toward the windmill reservoir tank, where he had already placed the keg. Mrs. Blanding walked along beside him. She was small, darkly-tanned, pert.

She said, abruptly: "That mud in the tub is soft and porous. Not at all like the hardpan flats."

Peck glanced at her. "Know how to play stud poker?"

"Do I look like a gambler?" she said tartly.

"Nope. But you look like you'd know a little about anything. I'll bet that you just about do."

It was a compliment, the way Peck said it. Mrs. Blanding accepted it, smiling.

"I know how the game is played. But what's that got to do with your law of nature?"

"Your hole card is your strongest in a stud poker game. Bet it strong, and you appear strong to the fellows you're trying to beat. Bet it weak and you're liable to get beat. The other fellows will try to draw out on you. Well, all this is my hole card."

PECK INDICATED the keg, the digging tools, the approaching team and buckboard.

"I'm going to bet it strong," said Peck, "just like it was a big ace."

"You mean it's bluff, to make Diamond S take down the fence?"

"Bluff? I wouldn't say that exactly. There's no denying that water does seek a lower level. You don't think it'll work. But...do you positively know it won't? Even if it don't the first day or two, can you be absolutely sure it won't later? I ask you, Ma'am, can you?"

Mrs. Blanding slowly shook her

head. An excited tingle began within her. It could be fruitless bluff. Then, it could become reality. Antelope Wells might be drained through seepage into the lower-level, man-made pond on Double D. It didn't seem probable, she thought. But it certainly couldn't be declared impossible. For water did seek a lower level.

Kitty halted the team. Mrs. Blanding grabbed up the keg. "Get loaded, Boy, get loaded. Get out there and get to digging. I'd like to see Ed Skinner's face when he learns what you're trying to do. I'll bet it'll make Frank Packard talk, though I don't reckon what he'll say will be nice. Boy, I'm with you to the limit!"



After they were loaded, she said, "You'll need Hap and Cooney to help you. So I'll stay here and send them on."

"But you'll need your rig," protested Kitty. "What about things you've got to do at home?"

"Everything's in good shape, so I'll just take a sort of holiday. Now you two get along. I'll make out all right." A question suddenly struck her. Twice she refrained from speaking. But as Peck gathered the reins, Mrs. Blanding restrained herself no longer.

She said: "Peck, what color was your horse?"

"Black," said Peck. "Why?"

"Uh...no reason. Just wondered." Mrs. Blanding's glance went to Kitty. They stared at each other for a moment, same thought in their minds.

"Be seeing you," said Peck, as they drove away.

Mrs. Blanding regretted she had asked the question. Peck's answer left only one thing to do. She owed it to Sheriff Bill Tucker, and families of

the two men who had been robbed and killed.

With a sigh, she walked resolutely into the house. The party line was not in use. She rang a number. It was young Sheriff Tucker who answered.

"Bill, this is Mrs. Blanding. That stranger you wanted... Well, the black horse is dead, but you'll find the fellow with Kitty Dale about a mile southwest of Antelope Wells."

She hung up the receiver, shuffled back to the kitchen. She put the coffee pot on to warm and stood glaring at the big wood range.

"I feel like a dad-burned traitor!" she angrily declared.

KITTY DALE said little on the ride that took them near Antelope Wells. She had forgotten the warning Sheriff Tucker had brought until reminded by Mrs. Blanding's question. Since then, she had been trying to make a decision. Her thoughts were widely divided. Some said Peck was just what he had first appeared—a hungry, sore-footed stranger, riding from northern winters. Other thoughts pointed out that he rode a black horse, that he carried a gun with easy assurance, and that he had come from the direction where two men had been killed.

Kitty found it a decision that was hard to make. One way, she would term him a friend whom she could wholly trust. The other way would declare him a killer, hunted by the law. So Kitty kept silent counsel, unable just yet to decide.

If Peck Martin wondered at her silence, he gave no outward sign. At the Double D boundary near the Wells, he halted the team. Then he stood in the buckboard, carefully studied the terrain. He selected a site and drove the team there. They unloaded the digging tools.

He unhitched and picketed the team, removing bridles so they could nibble at grama tufts. Then he picked up the grubbing hoe, and dug a circular trench. The circle was about

thirty feet in diameter, marked the size of his intended pool.

In the center, he grubbed up a space about five feet across. Then he laid the grubbing-hoe aside, picked up one of the spades.

"We'll make a test hole for benefit of visitors," he said. "That'll show 'em we really mean business."

Methodically, he toiled away, alternately grubbing and shoveling. Kitty took one of the smaller shovels and helped move some of the dirt. In a couple of hours they were three feet down. Peck called a halt for a drink and rest.

He fingered the last spadeful he'd lifted from the hole.

"See," he said to Kitty, "it's sort of spongy, not packed like the top hardpan. Just the right kind of earth for water seepage. After five or six feet down we might find dampness."

Kitty wanted to join his hopeful elation. She knew he was doing it all for her. She did force a smile, tried to think of something appropriate to say. But the words just would not come. She still wrestled with her thoughts.

Peck eyed her sharply, wondered why she looked away. He frowned, tossed away the handful of dirt. He picked up his shovel, started back to the hole he was digging.

He stopped short, stared across the flats.

"Who's that?" he asked.

Kitty recognized the rider on the big, rangy roan. Swiftly, then she made her decision. It was that she liked Peck Martin. She trusted and needed him. Never would she do anything to hurt him.

She made little gestures as if she would whisk him away and hide him. She tried to warn him to flee. Her lips twitched as she struggled to put her anxiety into words.

Peck was looking at her, at her mouth, into her eyes. What he read brought a gentle smile to his lips. For a moment he held her hand. His touch was tender and strong, matched the

resolute strength of his face.

"In addition to the laughs you'd get," he said, "I'd be handy around the house. Tell you more about it sometime."

He released her hand with a final squeeze, and they both turned to greet the Sheriff.

Bill Tucker dismounted, curtly returned their greeting. Kitty made the men acquainted, supposing that was the thing to do. The sheriff glanced quickly about, immediately understood Peck's plan.

Covertly the Sheriff studied Peck, tried to analyze his relaxed, amiable coolness. Peck Martin didn't seem like a killer, didn't act like a man on the dodge.

The Sheriff said: "Mind if I ask you some questions?"

"Ain't going to stop us, are you?" Peck indicated the circular trench. "We're on Double D land, you know."

"Nope. Ain't trying to stop you. Kitty's got as much right to dig a hole on the Double D, as Skinner has to build a fence on his land."

"Then go ahead with your questions," said Peck.

But Kitty prevented any questions, motioning off to their right.

"We're having visitors," she said. "Here comes the Diamond S."

Five men loped toward them. Ed Skinner and Frank Packard rode in front, the Diamond S hands close behind.

ED SKINNER courteously lifted his hat to Kitty. Then his glance went on to Sheriff Tucker and Peck. Packard didn't speak. He stared at the hole, at the circular trench. The hands also remained silent. They assumed impersonal attitudes, awaiting some order from one of their bosses.

It was Skinner who spoke. "What are you doing, Miss Kitty?"

She flung a quick glance at Peck. She wanted him to handle things. Obliging he accepted her commission.

"Hunting water for Double D," he

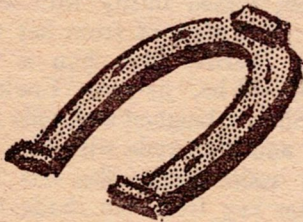
said. He moved away from Kitty and Tucker, pointed about to draw attention of the mounted men. "That little test hole is only three feet deep, but already we've found soft, spongy dirt. We might find water the next foot or two. If not, we'll go deeper."

Now he was away from the Sheriff and Kitty. From where he stood he could watch both Skinner and Packard, and the men behind them.

Peck stopped pointing about. He kept his eyes on them, particularly on scowling Frank Packard. The big foreman had closely inspected the hole, the tools, the circular trench. Then his eyes lifted to Peck Martin, and never left his face.

Peck Martin said: "The circle is the size of the pond we'll dig when Kitty's men get here. May take us a few days to get deep enough. Then again we might have a pond full of water after digging just a few feet."

Frank Packard shifted in the saddle, and said: "Stop digging."



Peck Martin met the other's hard stare. This is it, he thought, and grinned.

He said: "Why? We're on Double D land." Then a derisive note crept into his voice. "We've got just as much right to dig, as Diamond S has to build a fence."

"That's right," said Ed Skinner gently, as if apologizing.

But Packard repeated, harshly: "I said stop digging. You ain't trying to find no underground stream. You're trying to start seepage from Antelope Wells. Stop digging, I'm telling you, or..."

"Or what?" Peck Martin invited, laughing up at the other.

For an instant Frank Packard was

taut. Sheriff Tucker knew it was coming, tried to get between the men. With an oath, Packard forestalled him.

"This!" he snarled down at Peck. His hand was a blur, drawing, firing. He tried to spur his horse onto Peck.

NONE OF them saw Peck Martin draw. Not even Bill Tucker, who yelled for them to stop. One instant Peck Martin was laughing, hand dangling loosely. Then the next instant he was firing upward, stepping aside from Packard's lunging horse. Martin did not look around. He knew he had not missed.

Ten feet past, Packard sagged in the saddle, then toppled to the ground. He was dead before he started to fall. With pressure on the reins released, the horse came to a stop.

Peck Martin stared at Skinner and the men behind him. None made a move to draw. With a quick, deft thrust, Peck holstered his gun.

"Let's get it over now," he addressed them all, "if there's going to be any more trouble."

Ed Skinner stared at the dead man. Slowly, he shook his head. "There won't be any more trouble. I suppose I should be upset about Frank, but I just can't feel too bad." He brought his gaze to them then, went on in his solemn voice. "He was my wife's twin brother. Always a big favorite with her, but always a thorn in my side. For her sake I'd get him out of one scrape, just to have him get in another. On her death bed she made me promise I'd look after him, always see that he had a home. I've done the best I could, so I feel like I've kept my promise to her."

He sighed, deeply, then spoke to his men. "Load him across his saddle. We'll bury him at the ranch. I guess Helen would like it that way." He started to ride away, but turned back to Kitty. "The fence was Frank's idea. I figured there'd be water enough for all, since the Wells has never gone dry. But Frank wanted it all for us.

So, like I usually did, I finally gave in to him. Go ahead with your digging if you wish. But there really ain't no need. The fence comes down today. I think the Wells has enough for all."

•

Cooney and Hap rode up as the Diamond S crew was leaving. They had been near enough to see what had happened. Admiration was in their regard of Peck, and the gun he had drawn so fast. So intently did they think about what they'd seen that they forgot the message they brought.

Bill Tucker remembered the questions he had been about to ask. He said to Peck: "Pretty fast with a gun, ain't you?"

Peck Martin grinned. "Have to be when you deal with Montana wolves at night. Miss your first shot and Mister Wolf is gone. Next night he comes back again, maybe kills a dozen sheep."

"Sheep!" Kitty and the Sheriff exclaimed almost together. Born and reared in the short grass country, they regarded sheep with distaste. Sheep nibbled the grass too close to its roots, made it vulnerable to the hot, parching sun. Almost invariably, in this manner, sheep ruined any short grass country where they were put to graze.

"Yeah," Peck Martin spoke to both but looked mostly at Kitty. "My uncle ran a sheep ranch. I didn't like it, but it was the best I could do as a kid. That's why, when he died, I got away as soon as I could, took up breaking horses. Got tired of the winters and headed south. If my horse hadn't broke his leg last night, I'd probably be riding yet. And look at the fun I'd missed."

Kitty knew he didn't mean digging in the hardpan, nor having had to kill a man. His eyes told her what he meant. It brought rosiness to her cheeks and a gladness within her.

Bill Tucker tried not to see what was happening. He hated to fight Dan Cupid. But he still had a killer to find.

He said: "Where were you yesterday morning, Peck?"

That reminded the mounted men they had a message for Bill Tucker. Cooney called to the Sheriff.

"Bill, Mrs. Blanding said to tell you your wife had been calling. They found that man in Rawhide this morning."

"Mrs. Blanding is killing one of Kitty's chickens," Hap told them, "she says quit digging early enough to get in for a good hot meal."

"I reckon we're through digging right now," said Peck, "so we'll just load up and get moving."

Bill Tucker said he would get along, shook hands and mounted his roan. He looked down at Kitty and Peck, a roguish glint in his eyes.

"Come over sometimes and see our baby. He's just beginning to crawl. Me and Lucy'll tell you all about raising 'em. You might find it handy someday."

Kitty swiftly turned to hide her confusion, fussed busily with loading the rig. Peck glanced from her to the grinning Sheriff, gave him a broad wink. "Could be," he said. "Could be."

The Sheriff laughed and rode away. Cooney and Hap rode with him. Peck went to assist Kitty. She was lifting the water keg from the shade to put it into the buckboard. Peck's hands closed over hers, held both them and the keg.

"Could be," he said. "Now, couldn't it?"

For a moment she evaded his searching gaze. Then laughing, she met his stare. A soft smile curved her lips.

"Could be," she agreed. "Could be!"



THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

That Rafter-L Girl

By Roberta M.
Pate



L OAFERS along San Pablo's main street turned to gaze as Linda Lanier came down the board sidewalk, spurs jingling. She was headed straight for the county jail. A trim little figure in new levis, tan shirt and hat, she appeared cool and serene as the April afternoon.

But Linda could feel the eyes knifing into her, and imagine the talk going on behind her back: "There goes that Rafter L girl to the sheriff's office. Still caught in his loop!"

"Yeah, after him jiltin' her too!"

"Wonder if she's keepin' her weddin' veil in moth balls—"

Linda's rose petal lips tightened, and her brown eyes sparkled. Soon these gossips would get a surprise! Now that desperado Chuck Waller had been killed, young Sheriff Bannion could keep the promise he'd made her months ago. "Soon as I catch Waller, honey, I'm turnin' in my badge. Then we'll get on with the weddin'."

But why hadn't he brought her news of Waller's death? The desperado had been lying in Boothill a month. So far, Linda had been patient. Now, she meant to find out what was keeping the lawman.

Last year, while Steve Bannion—Brick to his friends—was ramrodding the Diamond D spread adjoining Rafter L, he and Linda had fallen in love.

"So I'm too young for a sheriff's wife!" Linda flared. "Too rapt and giddy! Well, let me go, and I'll save my kisses for another man!"

He'd had time for courting then. Time to kiss her in a way she couldn't forget. But Tragedy had broken into their lives, almost on the eve of their wedding. Jim Roberts, sheriff of the outlaw-infested county, and Brick's close friend, was shot down by a lone bandit he'd been trailing after a stage holdup.

The sheriff had lived long enough to reveal his killer, one Chuck Waller. In the same breath, Roberts, had recommended that Brick, once his deputy, fill out the term as sheriff. Dying, Roberts had gasped: "Tell Brick—to get—Chuck Waller—"

To Linda's despair, Brick had accepted the dangerous mission. The wedding had to be postponed. A sheriff would have to be in the saddle day and night, chasing outlaws. For this was Texas-Mexico border country, rugged and vast. Brick explained he would have no time to establish a home. No time for her. Blinded by tears, she had laid away her wedding dress.

Now, as she neared the jail, Linda remembered how often she had excused Brick's neglect this past winter. He'd been doing a fine job ridding the county of outlaws. Only Waller eluded him—by hiding out. But Linda hadn't seen the lawman half-a-dozen times since he took office. She'd led a lonely miserable life—until three weeks ago when curly-haired Jerry Coulter had come to Rafter L.

A SUDDEN flurry of wind and sand lifted Linda's hat, whipping bronze-gold curls across her face. She lurched blindly—straight into a pair of supporting arms. Her eyes opened on a smiling, familiar face—the face of a rangy, good-looking red-head. Brick Bannion had stepped out the door just in time to catch both her and hat. Grabbing her up in a one-armed hug, he whisked her into his office.

"Br-ick—put me d-down! The whole town's watch—"

His lips, hard and demanding,

smothered her words. A delicious instant, and she was past breathing. Fire streaked along her veins as her heart thudded wildly against his. It had been a long time since she had felt the heady sweetness of his kiss. Something Brick realized too, for he kept her cradled in his arms, whispering between kisses: "Got to—make up—lost time."

When they got back to sanity, Brick deposited Linda in his swivel chair, lounged back against his desk and asked: "What brings you to town, Cowgirl?"

What but this? thought Linda. But she answered evasively. "There's to be a box supper in Lipan City Saturday night. I rode in for crepe paper and ribbon." She shot him a teasing glance. "Lavender and silver blend well, don't you think?" After that hint he should recognize her box—if only he would be there to buy it.

His gray eyes twinkled. "I'll bid on that box, if I'm not off on some man-hunt."

"But aren't you quitting office?" she blurted. "I read in *The Courier* a month ago that you lawmen had killed Chuck Waller in a running gunfight."

Brick's tanned face sobered. "Yeah, but—" He glanced quickly down the corridor leading to the cell block and lowered his voice. "Sorry, honey—but I can't quit office yet."

"But Waller's finished! And you said—" Linda was on her feet, bewildered, trembling. Did she have to remind Brick Bannion of his promise to marry her?

"I remember." He caught her to him fiercely. "Listen, do you think it's been easy for me—going weeks, months without seeing you? Always dreamin' of your lips?" He kissed her hungrily. "Aw, Linda—"

Her arms slid up around his neck. "Then we're getting married right away. You can keep on sheriffing. And guess what—" She dimpled up at him. "—I've got a new wedding dress made. The other was winter serge.

This one's white organdy, with a lace berth here, a corsage on this side—" Small hands fluttering like butterflies, she indicated the gown's attractive points.

"Linda, sweet!" Brick husked. He cupped her chin in his big palm. "Like I told you before, it won't work out. Bein' a Border sheriff's wife would be hard on any woman, *even the strong, settled pioneer sort. I can't let an eighteen-year-old girl in for that.*"

An eighteen-year-old girl! Linda's anger flared like a prairie fire. Brick would never let her forget she was seven years his junior. "So I'm too young for a Sheriff's wife! Too soft and giddy!" she flamed, writhing in his embrace. "Let me go! I'll save my kisses for another man."

"For that new rider of your dad's?" Brick rasped, but he held her fast.

"SO YOU'VE heard I was going places with Jerry Coulter? Well, maybe he's the man for me."

"Linda!" Brick actually shook her. "Can you look me in the eye and say that?"

"Can you give me one sane reason why you can't turn in your badge?"

"Not without givin' away official secrets. Other lawmen's secrets, as well as mine. Soon, I hope to—"

"Quit stalling!" Linda choked. A red mist swam before her eyes and before she knew it, she was pummeling his hard-muscled chest with her fists. "Let me go, you forked-tongue cheat!"

He stepped back, face tight, eyes smoky. "When you get over your mad—"

"Don't count on that!" She jammed on her hat, and vented her bitterness on him from the door. "I've been a dumb Dora, Sheriff. I've got two wedding dresses on my hands to prove it. When I make another, I'll wear it. But not for you, Brick Bannion. We're through!"

"We're through! We're through!" The words beat a maddening tattoo in Linda's brain as she stumbled up

back alleys to the livery stable where she'd left her mount. She wanted to get out of San Pablo—fast. Away from prying eyes and wagging tongues. Away from the sound of Brick's deceitful voice. Once aboard her little pinto, she fogged out of town as if the devil were after her.

It could have been a wonderful ride. Spring had painted the valley floor with the lavender of wild verbena and crimson of Indian paintbrush. Quail scurried across the road, and prairie dogs chattered. But Linda was dead to everything except the ache in her heart. She had lost Brick. Nothing else mattered. Finally, she slumped in the saddle and let the tears come.

WHEN she reached Logan's Ford, the stage crossing on the Lipan, Linda dismounted and bathed her swollen face in the cool, willow-shaded water. Rising from the river's brink, she looked right up into a man's darkly handsome face. "Jerry Coulter! You catfooted Indian!" she laughed nervously. She glimpsed his black gelding then, half-hidden in the live-oaks. The cowboy had ridden four miles to meet her.

"Been waitin' for you, Linda girl." He bared his head, ran a smoothing hand over black curly hair. Even in his dusty range garb, Coulter was a dashing, attractive figure. And he had a way with women. Linda had realized that the day he'd ridden up to Rafter L and cajoled her into getting him on the payroll—over sputtered protests of her dad and his grumpy old bachelor foreman, John Nash. Right off Jerry had fallen for her. But, with her heart full of Brick, she had fended off the newcomer's love-making. Now, as she met his eager black eyes, she wondered what his kiss would be like. "See Bannion?" he asked.

She nodded. One night when Jerry had tried to kiss her, she'd told him exactly how matters stood between her and Brick. "We—we're quits," she

grated. "He refuses—to turn in his badge."

"Why? What was his excuse?"

"None—now that Waller's dead. So—he tried stalling—" Her voice broke.

Jerry's arms swept around her. "Forget him, sugar! I've never met your lawdog, but from what I hear, he's nothin' but a man-huntin' bloodhound." Then, through clenched teeth, "I'd like to catch the son without his irons. I'd pistol-whip him for jiltin' you!"

Linda shivered. "No, no, Jerry! I can't have any trouble between you two."

"Then, let's talk about you and me." His arms tightened, and his lips took hers in a long, half-savage kiss that sent a highly disturbing tingle through her flesh. She felt strangely thrilled—elated. It was wonderful to know she was loved and wanted, though Brick had cast her aside. She could learn to love Jerry—easily. His breath hot against her cheek, he said huskily: "Some dark night we'll slip out to a preacher, then ride on across the Rio. Whatta you say, sweet?"

Linda stiffened in his arms. Would marrying Jerry make her forget Brick? Maybe. They'd have to elope, though. Her father would never welcome Jerry as a son-in-law. Both Dad and John Nash were prejudiced against the new rider, contemptuously referring to him as "Purty Boy" and "Curly Locks". It galled them to watch him squiring her to dances. They thought she should stay home and mope over Brick!

But now Brick was lost to her, and Jerry was repeating, "Whatta you say, sugar?"

"I—I'll—think it over," she quavered.

LINDA thought it over plenty the next few days. Wondering what it would be like married to Jerry. Knowing his impatience would force an answer soon. Finally, she promised to let him know after the box supper.

He coaxed her for a peek at the box, so he'd know which one to buy, but she put him off with excuses. Why, she didn't know. Certainly, she couldn't expect Brick to buy it now.

Saturday was a busy day for Linda. Five o'clock that afternoon found her tying the big lavender bow on the pretty box she'd just packed. She shoved it hastily into a paper sack on the kitchen shelf. Soon the Rafter L crew would be riding in to sleek up for the social.

Suddenly, her heart lurched wildly. Booted feet were crossing the front porch in easy, measured tread. A familiar tread. And there was the old resounding triple knock! Pulses humming, she tore off her apron. Brick had come to make up. Wonderful! But this time she was going to play "hard to get".

She found him spur-jingling up and down the porch. At her curt nod the eager light in his eyes died, and his smile with it.

"Hate bargain' in this way, Linda," he began. "But it's part of my job. Matt around?"

Linda's heart sank. "No, Dad went to El Paso this morning. Got a warrant for him?" she giped.

"Not for him. But my two deputies are at your corral now, inspectin' that black horse."

"But why?" she demanded incredulously.

"Stage hold-up at Logan's Ford two hours ago," he began. "Old Banker Mason, only passenger aboard, had to turn loose five thousand in greenbacks. Coupla masked hombres. After they'd backed to their ponies bushed up beside the road, the stage-driver cut down with his Winchester. That started the bandits' horses pitchin', and they could be seen. One was a bay, the other a black—" Brick looked down at the Stetson in his hands. "Well, the bay piled his rider and bolted. The other jasper high-tailed it with the money pouch, leavin' his pal afoot—"

"He ought to have been easy caught—afoot." Linda put in.

"He wasn't. Us lawmen happened to be down river lookin' for stolen stock when we heard the shootin'. We got there pronto, but the hombre must've caught his horse, and holed up in one of them hundred cliff caves. The other feller got away, too—" Brick shrugged. "May as well tell you, Linda. Mort Mason claims he saw a brand on the pitchin' black. Rafter L."

"What?" she cried, shocked. Then angrily: "Are you taking his word? An old coot that hasn't changed his specs in twenty years?"

Brick let that pass. "How many blacks you got here?"

"Two. That's John Nash's mount in the corral. And John's been puttering around here all afternoon."

"Can you alibi the rider of the other black?"

Flushing, she shook her head. "No, Jerry's been alone, mending fence. But I can vouch for him."

"OH, YEAH? Lucky hombre!" he mocked. Eyes going bleak, he wheeled, started down the porch. "Think I hear your crew ridin' in. Sorry, but I've got to—"

Suddenly, he leaped into the yard, gun drawn, and disappeared around the house. "Hold it, feller," Linda heard him call. "You Coulter? What're you sneakin' 'round that side door for? How did you get by my deputies at the corral?"

"Rode in through the East gate," came Jerry's cool reply. "Just started inside for a drink of water. What's eatin' you, badge-toter?"

Brick explained, Linda angrily listening. She couldn't join them. From their talk she realized poor Jerry was being searched to the skin, and all that bunkhouse commotion must mean that the other waddies were getting the same treatment. She clenched her hands. This was an insult to Rafter L! Mentally she flayed Mort Mason; Brick too, for believing him. If they

dared arrest Jerry—

Presently, the curly-haired puncher rounded the porch steps. "Let's get ready for that box supper, sugar!"

But Brick was close behind him. "Not so fast, Cowboy. You're ridin' back with us."

"What?" Jerry wheeled on him, dark face paling. "No, no—wait—" he croaked. "You searched me. *Did I have the five thousand on me? No! Only a few dollars.* And I carry that saddle carbine just for rattlers— Listen, you can't—"

He broke off as the two deputies rode up to the hitchrail, leading his black mount, and Linda looked at the puncher curiously. Jerry was innocent, of course, but anxiety of some sort was riding him hard. He seemed half frantic as he suddenly blazed at Brick:

"You dirty lawdog! You're doing this to keep me from buying Linda's box tonight!"

Brick reddened, shot Linda a probing glance, and got a brown scorcher in return.

"Shut up Coulter!" he snapped. "Mason and the driver are goin' to get a chance to identify you and your horse—"

"You bully!" Linda flounced down the steps furiously. "Listen, Brick Bannion, if you dare jail my—friend—" She linked her arm in Jerry's, "We'll sue you for false arrest! And I'll bail him out tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow?" cried Jerry. "I want out tonight—to buy your box!" He slipped an arm around her and went on: "If the sheriff's not a jealous sidewinder, he'll see I get to make that box supper."

"That's right!" Linda rapped out.

"I'll try arrangin' it, Cowboy." Taking Jerry's free arm, Brick slanted Linda a wry, infuriating grin and drawled: "Now, if you two will kindly let go of each other, Coulter'n me will be ridin' on."

THE BOX sale was held in the town hall of Lipan City, a village ten

miles down river from Rafter L. Since the proceeds would be used for a new rodeo grandstand, every ranch for miles around was represented in the crowd. The long hall buzzed with rangeland gossip. Excitement was in the air as everybody speculated about the boxes heaped in colorful array upon the platform table.

Linda, looking her loveliest in pink muslin, sat among girl friends, but she scarcely heard their chatter. Her mind was on Jerry. Would the cowboy come to the social a free man, or in Brick's custody? She soon found out. Jerry came in alone and seated himself by the window opposite her. So he must have been exonerated. As for Brick—she'd been a fool to think he'd come, or spend a dime on her box!

Presently, the box sale got under way. Big, barrel-chested Art Collins, caller at square dances, was made auctioneer. It was a happy choice. Along with a lusty voice, he had a flare for rhyme-making, and he gave each box a send-off in verse. The bidding waxed fast and furious. . . .

At last, Linda's lavender and silver box came up for sale. It was a beautiful box, but the ribbon bow seemed badly crushed, half the loops untied. "That big ox John Nash!" Linda fumed to herself. The foreman had brought her here, and carried the box, still in its sack, to and from the buggy. Now, the box looked like he'd hung his spurs in it.

Art clumsily retied the ribbon streamers, and lumbered down the platform, bearing the box aloft. "Start 'em high, Amigos!" he boomed.

"Two dollars!" called John Nash.

Linda smiled behind her fan. John had peeked into that sack, and now he'd make the Rafter L box come high. Range loyalty! When the Rafter L wrangler upped the bid fifty cents, Jerry chimed in with "Three-fifty". By now everybody had guessed the ownership of the box, and bids popped up from others admirers of Linda's.

Then, Jerry snapped with finality: "Seven-fifty!"

But the auctioneer wasn't ready to voice from the back of the room. "I bid eight bucks."

Linda's heart somersaulted. Turning slightly, she caught sight of Brick's red head. He'd come to buy her box! But her joy was short-lived. Jerry came back with "Eight-fifty!"

His voice sounded oddly strained, a little wild, and there was a determined glitter in his eye. Linda knew he wouldn't give up that box without a struggle. Would Brick—?

THE AFFAIR became a tug of war between the two men. Linda stirred uncomfortably. Both were bidding more than they could afford, and everybody was gazing at her. The room buzzed like a beehive. Now, there was actual panic in Jerry's eyes. He must be running short of cash!

"Twelve dollars!" called Brick.

Silence—with Jerry glaring wildly at Brick. Linda held her breath.

"Going three times!" boomed the auctioneer. "And sold!"

As Brick went up to claim the box, Linda thought she saw a man's hand touch Jerry's shoulder through the open window. But she scarcely noticed the signal, or Jerry's quietly leaving the room. Her happy thoughts were spinning around Brick.

Some five minutes later the sale was over. Most of the couples carried their boxes out to rustic benches in the moonlit yard, but Brick and Linda sought the privacy of a tiny nearby park which he had discovered earlier.

They found the place deserted. It was a beautiful spot with its moon-glossed shrubbery and big stone fountain. Passing a flowering huisache, they paused a second to sniff its fragrance, then Brick led the way to a cane seat in a vine-shrouded arbor.

It was an ideal trysting place, screened on one side by a salt cedar motte, on the other by clumps of

densely-growing cactus. Some thirty yards behind them ran an alley, but it was walled off by a high juniper quit. Sniffing at the box, he broke into rhyme:

*"Bid 'em up, hombres! Fe Fi Fo
Fum!
I smell fried chicken—and some-
thing like rum!
Chow to pack 'neath your solar
plexus—
Box of the prettiest girl in
Texas!"*

A hubub of excited mumbling followed. Through it came a drawling hedge. As they stepped into the arbor, a pony's plaintive nicker reached them.

"Coulter and me hitched our mounts over there by a waterin' trough," Brick explained. "We—"

"Wait—" Linda interrupted heedlessly. "It's too dark to eat in here."

"But not too dark for this—"

His arms caught her so close she could feel the wild rhythm of his heart. She lifted her lips to his, and the warm pressure of his mouth fired her blood with the old glad thrill.

"Linda, sweet—" he breathed against her cheek. "I just couldn't let that scoundrel buy your box—"

She lifted her head from his shoulder. "Scoundrel? Didn't Jerry clear himself of that stage-robbery?"

"No. *Coulter don't know it*, but both Mason and the driver identified him by his build and walk. They're sure about his horse, too. Reckon that's why Coulter come to Rafter L—convenient to the stage line. Plenty dinero goes over it." At Linda's horrified gasp, he added. "Don't worry. He's unarmed, and a deputy's watchin' him right now."

"But why did you let him go free?"

"So that pard of his will try contactin' him for a cut of the five thousand Coulter's got hid somewhere. Then, we'll nab 'em both. If the other man is Waller, like we think—"

"Waller? But Waller's dead."

"Yeah," Brick lowered his voice. "*Hank Waller is. Us lawmen identified his body as that of his brother Chuck—they favor a lot—so Chuck would come outa hidin'.* We knew he'd start operatin' again when he thought we wasn't settin' traps for him any longer. We had got a tip he'd teamed up with a young punk, Curly Bates—I'm tellin' you this, honey, cause I need your help."

"What can I do?" she offered, dazed by what she had learned.

"WHEN A saddle-bum rides up to Rafter L tomorrow, hire him. He'll be an officer sent to watch Coulter." Abruptly, he handed her the supper box, picked up the light seat: "Let's eat over by the fountain. More light there."

He moved off with the seat and Linda, holding the box, had started after him, when a sudden rustling in the tall shrubbery beside her jerked her to a halt. Instantly, an arm shot out around her waist, clamping the box to her, and scaring her out of her wits. "Brick!" she screamed.

Brick dropped the seat and whirled, hands streaking for his guns.

"Reach, Tin-star! Fire, and you'll kill this girl!" The voice, wild and strained, grated almost in Linda's ear, and as Brick lifted his hands, she caught the bluish sheen of a gun-barrel trained on him across her shoulder. "That's better, Lawdog!" snapped the man. Then, to Linda: "Hold tight to that box, sugar! We're takin' a long trip, and we'll need grub."

Linda's fright gave way to fury. "Jerry Coulter, you duncel!" she blazed. "Let me go, or I'll yell so loud—"

His grip about her tightened. "You do, and I'll drill Bannion! You an' me are ridin' outa here on his horse—fastest in the country."

Brick kept his hands up, but started toward them. "Let her go, Coulter. You can't get away. Every road out of the county's blocked."

Jerry backed toward the hitchrail, holding Linda before him as a shield, while Brick edged forward, ignoring the commands to "stay back!"

But Linda had heard the gun snap to full cock, and cried frantically: "Stop, Brick! He means it!"

"Hold it, Lawdog!" Brick froze in his tracks, as a beefy, masked fellow burst from the salt cedars with a leveled gun. He lumbered up, panting.

Jerry stammered: "Why, Chu—, Podner! Took you a spell to tie up that deputy. I thought—"

"Thought you could pull it off alone, huh? So you give me wrong directions to this park while ago. Now, stand still, you rat, and keep Bannion covered."

Linda's blood turned icy. This was killer Chuck Waller speaking. Back at the hall, it must have been his hand she'd seen signalling Jerry. They'd met outside, managed, some way, to dispose of the deputy supposed to be watching Jerry.

Brick was saying coolly: "You turned up sooner'n I expected, hombre. How'd you know Curly would be in Lipan City tonight?"

HE TOLD me this mornin' he was bringin' his girl here tonight. So—easy now—" he warned, reaching for one of Brick's guns. "Don't expect help from that deputy. He got keerless and we put him to sleep with a black-jack. That's his gun Curly's got trained on you. And mine's on the gal—remember."

Linda's flesh crawled. And Brick? She could sense his desperation. From the town hall two blocks away came the faint echo of laughter. Somewhere a serenader plunked his guitar, and footsteps padded far down the alley. Comforting sounds—if they hadn't been so far away.

Jerry was raging at his pal: "What in blazes you stoppin' us for? Didn't we agree while ago to take the girl along to shield us from posse bullets? Her an' me could've been gone."

"Yeah!" sneered the big bandit, pocketing Brick's other gun. "Like you run out on me at the ford. Nope, your holdin' Bannion at gun-point till I—tie him up. Then, we'll go, you with the gal, but me on the sheriff's horse, since mine's went lame. And I'm takin' the box."

"The hell you are!" shrilled Jerry. "I'm keepin' this box!"

The Box? Puzzled, Linda glanced down at the crushed bow and memories began to pelt her. Jerry, at the side door while she talked to Brick. Jerry's wild insistence on attending the social tonight, then bidding his last dime on the box. And now—maybe she held a loaded weapon in her hand, if she dared use it!

Carefully she weighed her chances. Jerry, shaking with rage, had slackened his grip on her, but his gun was squarely on Brick. Waller's gun was still on her, but it shifted a bit as he took a backward step. It dawned on her that the killer meant to use a black-jack on Brick, not tie him up. That instant she acted.

Digging both elbows hard into Jerry's stomach, she lurched to the right, knocking the gun aside. As it went off with a deafening roar, she lunged free. Waller's bullet whined over her head, smashing into a Yucca trunk. She had a glimpse of Brick leaping on Waller, then she was off like a startled deer. Box clutched in one hand, skirts in the other, she started around the cactus jungle, Jerry in close pursuit.

Fearing another bullet, she ran a zig-zag course. But Jerry had dropped his gun. He wanted nothing but the box—something she had counted on—and Waller had his hands full, with Brick. Linda could hear their crashing blows above the blood drumming in her ears. Heedless of thorns, she darted through clumps of agarita—

JERRY POUNDED after her, panting, swearing. "Wait, Linda—you damn little fool—"

So close he got, she could feel the

brushing of his finger-tips on her arm, but she jumped nimbly aside and he plunged into a bristling Spanish Dagger plant. He screeched in pain. "Oo-ee! You she-devil!"

But Linda was streaking for the juniper hedge. She beat Jerry there, and flung the box over into the alley. Whirling, she stuck out her foot as he dashed up to leap the hedge. The ruse worked. Down he went on his face, the breath whooshing out of him.

Before he could get up, Brick was on him. "Shut up, Curly Bates," he snapped, as Jerry gasped out an oath, "or I'll put you to sleep like I did Chuck Waller over there." After tying Jerry's hands tightly behind him with a bandana, he grinned up at Linda. "That was some risk you took, Cowgirl. But it give me a chance to charge into Waller. Now, I want to see inside that box—"

Linda's knees were about to buckle under her, but she put out a hand for his gun. "Let me—guard—the prisoner," she panted, "while you—get the box. I guess Mason's five thousand's in it."

LINDA had guessed right. The roll of greenbacks was in the box, folded in a napkin which was plastered in cherry pie. The box was a sodden mess. But who cared? Chuck Waller had been caught. In the alley three mounted men—two handcuffed prisoners, guarded by the revived

deputy—awaited the sheriff who was talking with Linda beside her buggy.

"When I nabbed Curly at your side door this afternoon, he was comin' out, not goin' in," Brick explained. "He says he didn't know us lawmen were there until he'd slipped inside for a peek at your box. When he heard you and me talkin', he untied the box—"

"But why?" Linda asked. "The house was full of hiding places."

"He expected us to search the house, him, too. Figgered I wouldn't be suspicious about the box, or bother you to untie it. Course he meant to buy it later, slip out the money."

In the town-hall yard the crowd was breaking up. Brick drew Linda into the shadow of a big cottonwood. "Honey, I'm keepin' my badge," he said, "at least till Waller's convicted. But I see now a *sheriff needs a wife—bad.*"

"Well, the county's full of *rugged pioneer women*. A bit gaunt and elderly maybe, but—"

"You little minx!" Brick shook her, then caught her close. "Nope, this sheriff needs a *young* wife. A cute little gal who's able to outsmart bandits, and spry enough to outrun 'em. I'm dabblin' my loop on her right now."

And he tightened the loop with a kiss.

THE END

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“I WANT TO buy your ticket on the *Last Chance*! Name your price!”

Quincy Merrill blinked, unbending his long length, big hands holding the sheepskin vest above the half-packed carpetbag. In a corner of the cabin the Franklin stove glowed cherry red, fighting the creeping frost line on the window. Outside, boots made a harsh crunch on the icy snow, where men hurried with the desperate urgency of the closing down of winter. Freeze-up impended, here at the head of navigation on the upper Missouri.

“I beg your pardon,” Merrill said mechanically. “But are you real? I mean, actually?”

Only an instant before there had come a knock at the door, quick and impetuous as a stolen kiss. Before he could move or call out, the door had burst open and *she* had swept in. He knew now that this was not part of the summer-long dream which had been with him, sleeping or waking. Here, in the vibrant flesh, was the woman who had somehow managed to entangle herself in his every thought, ever since that day when he had first set eyes upon her at Virginia City.

She had closed the door and was smiling now, apologetically. Today she wore a furred hood which framed her face as becomingly as had the bonnet-like creation of that other day. That bonnet, like its wearer, had been rare and exotic, something seldom encountered above St. Louis. Though the hood, unlike the bonnet, hid the



“I must take this boat!”

cherry-ripe glory of her hair.

“Really, it’s I who should beg your pardon, Mr. Merrill, bursting in on you this way—and without warning,” the girl said breathlessly. She cast a quick glance at the frosted window, and it came to him that her entrance had been so precipitate to escape being seen by someone else. She poised like a frightened, hunted creature.

“And I—I’ve never even thanked you for last summer, for what you did then!” she went on. “Why, I don’t believe we’ve ever spoken to each other until now, have we? But I assure you that I was grateful for your kindness.” Her eyes, meeting his, held a mute appeal.

“I came here in this fashion because I really am desperate. The *Last Chance* is due to cast off this after-

It would make a lot of difference if the summer’s gossip had all been a bunch of lies!

noon, and I really must secure passage on her to St. Louis. It's dreadfully important. I know that you have a ticket. And of course you planned to use it. But I will make it worth your while to let me have it. Please name your price."

She was beautiful, her cheeks flushed with the cold, frightened and imperious and beseeching in the same instant. Merrill felt his blood quicken, pounding in his ears as from a hard run. For an instant he was strongly tempted to yield to her persuasion. All through the summer and fall he had wanted, hungered, to know her better. Often he had wished that he might find a way to serve her, and that in despite of the ugly rumors connected with her name.

HERE WAS a chance to make a chivalrous gesture, truly so in that it would be without hope of reward. She needed help, and it was in his power to give it. Almost he yielded. Then reason asserted itself as a fresh blast of wind shook the cabin, screeching down across a thousand artic-gripped miles, and he shook his head. It had been only the day before that Dr. Sidney Holbart had examined him, then, shaking his head gravely, had delivered his verdict.

"Get out of here!" The doctor had made it an order. "I'm warning you, Quincy, that it's not a question of the profits to be made if you stay on here in Montana for a few years longer. Report has it that you've done well for yourself, so well that even the Vigilantes have wondered if you'd made all your money by straight buying and selling. Though I know you well enough to have no doubts.

"But it's not a question of profits to be made, my boy. With you, it's a matter of life and death—*your life!* Another winter here would kill you. You've survived a siege of pneumonia, thanks to the grace of God and the little that I was able to do. But your lungs are still weak. Before another winter was over, you'd be sure to get it again. And the next time it would

get *you*. You need to winter in the balmy air of the south—down around Memphis, for instance. I understand that you've engaged passage for St. Louis on the *Last Chance*? Well, don't let anyone get that ticket away from you. Plenty of folks will try, of course, this being the last boat from Benton before the freeze-up. They'll offer you five prices or a gun in your face, or hard luck stories to melt a stone. Don't listen. This is literally *your* last chance."

All tickets on the river boat had long since been sold. Merrill had put his own order in three weeks before, giving a handful of nuggets for payment, though not sure then whether he'd go or not. Now he had to go, as did plenty of others, or so they thought. When it came to the point where getting out of the country was all but impossible, then it was the thing to do.

But the doctor had been positive in his orders. Merrill's voice held regret.

"I'm mighty sorry not to be able to accomodate you, Miss McCormick. But I'm afraid I can't."

"But you must!" She came close, placing both hands on his arms. Her eyes looked into his, impelling, pleading. Again he saw the stark shadow of fear in them, while some other strange urgency drove her. "I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't desperate! But I've tried every other way. I'll give you a thousand dollars for your ticket—three times what you paid for it!" Then, as she saw the refusal in his eyes, she shook him frantically. "Two thousand!" Her voice rose wildly. "Name your price!"

"It isn't a question of price," he said gently. "Believe me, I'd like nothing better than to oblige you. But my need of it is greater than yours, whatever you think."

"It can't be," she wailed, but the fire had gone out of her. "I've got to go—no matter what I have to do to pay my passage!"

Before he could even reply she turned and stumbled blindly out of

the room. The door closed with a finality like the closing down of winter.

Merrill stared after her, the despair and desperation of her voice echoing in his ears. Memory of their first meeting came back in sharp torment.

IT HAD been a warm bright day, day, there in Virginia City, with only a thin haze of dust stirred by jerk-line wagons. She had been standing near the stage station, beside a pile of luggage—a figure at once exotic and forlorn, but with an unyielding spirit looking out at the world. Instantly he had sensed that she was not of this land, nor common clay like ordinary mortals. In him had flowed quickening excitement—a feeling, stronger than reason, that this was the one great meeting for which he had been waiting all his life. It was as though rivers of destiny had reached to join at his feet.

Seeing her, he felt drawn to her, like those same rivers to the sea. Then, as he had started to approach, doffing his hat, Rinda Tooley had driven smartly up with his spanking team of sorrels, his shiny new carriage with the fringed top.

An odd name, Rinda Tooley, for an unusual man. He was handsome, reckless, demanding, known and feared across a thousand miles of border. Debonarily sure of himself, he had swung lightly down beside her, offering to take her luggage and herself wherever she might wish to go.

Merrill had watched with oddly beating heart. A stranger, she probably wouldn't know of Rinda Tooley or his reputation. But apparently she had heard of him. Her refusal was polite, but cold. Then biting and scornful, as Tooley persisted. When he had tried to load her stuff regardless, Merrill had knocked him down.

He remembered the gratitude in her eyes, coupled with the apprehension. Men who valued their health did not go out of their way to antagonize Rinda Tooley. But an unlooked-for interruption had occurred, as fire

broke out in the town. Both of them had turned to help fight the blaze. Afterward, there had been urgent business calls for each of them.

Merrill had seen Rinda Tooley just once since then, driving his high-stepping team, and with Shirley—as he'd learned her name was—on the seat beside him. She had chanced to meet his eyes, and recognition had flashed in them, then color had washed across her face in a scarlet wave. That had been at mid-summer, in Alder Gulch.

He'd seen her again, as autumn was turning the leaves to gold, at Last Chance Gulch. A glimpse of her among a hurrying throng. Her name, by then, had been increasingly coupled with that of Rinda Tooley.

Each time he saw her his blood had rioted. After the second encounter, he had thought wildly of seeking Rinda Tooley out, of renewing their quarrel and shooting him.

That had been a wild romantic, hair-brained notion. One which she would not be likely to thank him for, and doubly foolish, considering that Rinda Tooley was a dead shot, and fast as a striking rattler. Merrill's common-sense had prevailed.

Now it was hard to think in terms of common sense, with the faint intangible perfume of her presence lingering in the room. The pleading and despair in her eyes seemed still to pierce him. She had turned to him for help in her hour of need—and he had refused her.

His reflection came back to him from the mirror above the washstand, the crack giving a rakish cast to his countenance. For a moment he looked at himself as at a stranger.

HE WAS six feet and two inches, which would amaze the folks back home, for he had grown three full inches since leaving there a couple of years before. Three inches, after everyone had supposed that, at twenty, he was done with growing.

Dark eyes smouldered back at him from under dark hair which had a

tendency to curl. His face was tanned, smooth-shaven save for the sideburns, by contrast with the fuller beards which most men wore.

"I look husky enough," he grunted. "Nobody would ever think that I wasn't man enough to stand a Montana winter."

I've got to go—no matter what I have to do to pay my passage!

Which meant that all the summer's gossip had been a pack of lies! Already he knew that he had made up his mind, and what he was going to do. Recklessly he slipped on his heavy coat, plunged outside. The wind, whistling down from the low hills to the north, hit him like a blow, the cold racked a cough from him. The medico had been right enough there, that his lungs were weak.

For a moment, scanning the street, thronged now and despite the weather because of the imminence of sailing, he was fearful that he was too late, that he had lost her. Everywhere were hurrying men and a few women, with mittened hands and coat collars turned high against the unseemly chill. Excitement beat like the wind, increasing in violence, as the hour of departure drew near. A thousand men now wanted passage on the packet, where only a third that many could be accommodated.

These were men from the four corners of the earth, drawn here in part by the keening winds of adventure which blew strong in their faces, but mostly by the lure of gold. A Chinese hurried, clad half in raiment native to his own land, half in miner's regalia. Vikings of the north shouldered darker skinned men of Spain and Italy. An English milord moved toward the boat, blandly aloof from all the rest, followed by half a dozen retainers.

Here was a Yankee, straight out from Boston; there a man black as ebony, new-freed from slavery. Blanket-wrapped Indians who in their own youth had claimed this land where the fort stood. Front Street was crowd-

ed with life, raw and turbulent. That was the way he'd come to like it. He'd miss it when he left—if he left!

Momentarily the wind lulled, and in the calm there sounded the honk of wild geese flying south. For them too, it was go south—or die.

The *Last Chance*, a stern-wheeler designed for the Missouri trade, was tied up at the dock. A skim of ice was on the river today, in the more protected reaches. At dawn, that had shown only near the shore. Now it reached in ever widening grasp from either bank. Men were rushing the loading, so that the packet could cast off during the afternoon. Even then it would be a race against time for a thousand miles down-river, against the threatening freeze-up.

Ordinarily, men who missed the boat would build mackinaws and provide their own passage. But this year such a course, always risky, would be suicidal. Old timers shook their heads as the geese wedged south, and prophesied not only an early winter but a hard one. Added to the hazard of the ice, the Sioux were on the rampage all the way to the Niobrara. So too, it was said, were the always uncertain 'Rees. Holbart had been right. It was the *Last Chance*—or none.

MERRILL saw her then, down by the dock, with Rinda Tooley beside her. And again, as on that occasion in Virginia City, Rinda Tooley was laughing, demanding, reaching out to grab at her wrist as she backed away.

No matter what I have to do!

Abruptly, from under her cloak, Shirley's arm shot out, and she slashed Rinda Tooley sharply across the face with a whip.

Men, hurrying and intent on their own business up to that moment, paused to watch. A white welt sprang from ear to ear. It changed to an angry red which grew to suffuse all his face, flaring in his eyes as he started forward.

"Your precious brother's dead!" he

shouted. "And I know how you've played me for a sucker, just to learn about him! But I have a price for everything—and I'll have my pay!"

Apprehension was in Shirley's face. She turned and darted away, among the pushing crowd. Rinda Tooley tried to follow, but Merrill, breathless, was in his way then. He knew that he was being a fool, but this time he was glad of it. That blow of the whip, the unguarded phrase which Rinda Tooley had spat at her, had wiped all doubt and hesitation from his mind. The lash was a complete refutation of half-truths and lies.

The whip-lash was etched in vivid contrast on Rinda Tooley's face as it lost color to match the snow at the river's edge. With vicious abruptness his fingers worked—those of one hand jerking the glove off the other. Then, free and limber, his hand went plumbing toward his holstered gun like a falcon to its stoop, and just as dead-ly.

"This time I'll make sure that you don't run out on me!" he spat, and already the gun was clearing leather.

SOMEONE screamed. It was a sound which seemed to tear the throat, but Merrill scarcely heard. He carried no gun, and most men on the border knew it. Rinda Tooley would long since have made sure of that, but it made no difference now—or perhaps it did. In that moment Tooley was revealed for the coward he was, but a coward could be twice as dangerous as the brave.

The tip of the gun barrel was starting to life when Merrill hit him. Perhaps it was the rage, building up to an explosive force in him through the long months. In any case it wasn't half so bad as he had expected. The gun went off, the bullet hammering toward the sound of the departing geese, but he twisted it away and let it drop then. Rinda Tooley fought wildly, but other marks were being multiplied on his disfigured face, and the bite of the

wind no longer seemed cold as Merrill's blood stirred pleasantly.

Then all at once Rinda Tooley, blood streaming from a broken nose, was turning, slinking away, losing himself in the crowd. Merrill blinked and shook his head as if to clear it, and it was Shirley who was beside him then, a light in her eyes as though the brief sun of that day had crowded all its glory there.

Elation was in him. To every man his moment. This was his. He fumbled in his pocket and found the ticket, and pressed it into her hand. "I've changed my mind," he said gruffly. "I hope you have a pleasant journey."



The hoarse, cold-chilled blast of the *Last Chance's* warning whistle wailed through the town. Half an hour! And then he saw that the light was still in her eyes, saw Sid Holbart beside her. She was pushing the ticket back to him.

"Thank you—but I couldn't take it," she said. "Sid was just telling me—about you. You said that your need was greater than mine. I didn't believe you, then. You see—I just got word, that my mother can't last—beyond Christmas. Also, I'd found out what I came up to discover, about what happened to my brother. But I can't take your ticket. It wouldn't be right."

Again the whistle wailed. No half-hour, with the ice getting its grip. This was the final warning to get on board. Merrill looked at her, and what he saw in her eyes decided him.

"Let's get on board," he said. "Both of us. It's a state-room ticket, for two. And the captain can perform a marriage."

"You—you mean—?" And then looking into his eyes, she colored and laughed, all in a moment, and her hand caught his own. "Let's run," she said. "We've just got time to get our things."

THE END

Honor At Stake

By Barbara Bonham



"There will be gun-play over this hussy — you'll see!"

"I'm not a Jezebel," Honor wept to the good-looking sheriff, "and I won't be treated like one!"

HONOR TOMPKINS' brown eyes flashed with rage. She stood at the foot of the outside stairway which led up to her room in Mrs. O'Brien's Boarding House. Facing her was a group of grim-faced, tight-lipped women.

"Look, Mrs. Calvin," Honor Tompkins said, addressing herself to the tall, stout woman who seemed to be the group's leader, "I'm not leaving this town. You can't make me. There's no reason why I *should* leave New Boston. I've done nothing wrong."

"Ha! Nothing wrong, she says," spluttered Mrs. Calvin, turning to the rest of the group to make certain they had heard and shared her righteous indignation. "Nothing except behave in such a disgraceful fashion that two men got into a drunken brawl and nearly killed each other over her." The rest of the women shook their heads in mutual horror and glared at Honor.

"Can I help it if two drunken fools get into a fight over me? I didn't even know they were fighting until I heard a shot. I was busy doing my number. If you think it's easy making yourself heard over a saloon full of stupid, drunken men, you ought to try it yourself and see." By this time Honor's soft, full mouth was trembling from anger and humiliation. "Besides," she added hotly, "you know as well as I do that Jed Williams and Lefty Summers would fight at the drop of a hat. They're the biggest trouble makers in town."

Mrs. Calvin didn't hear these last remarks. She hadn't heard a word after Honor's suggestion that she, Mrs. Calvin, try to make herself heard above a saloon full of noisy, drinking men. "Why, the ideal!" Mrs. Calvin choked. She wagged a stiff, uncompromising finger at Honor. "Either you get out of New Boston before Saturday night or we'll go to the sheriff and have him run you out. Won't we, girls?" she asked turning to the rest of the group. The other women nodded their heads in vigorous agreement.

"We'll see about that!" Flinging this remark over her shoulder, Honor ran up the steps to her room. Slamming the door behind her, she threw herself on the iron bed and gave vent to tears she could no longer control.

The horrid busybodies! Did they think she sang in the *Golden Arrow* saloon for her health? She had to eat just like everybody else, didn't she? And what could she do except sing? Nothing. Her voice wasn't even very good, but it had an intimate something

about it that men liked. This, coupled with her dark, vivacious good-looks, accounted for her popularity with the barroom crowd. She was friendly, but not too friendly. She always managed to remain aloof somehow.

"And if those old hens think that was easy, they're crazy," Honor stormed silently. It was a never ending fight to keep herself out of grasping hands and outstretched arms. Time after time she had wondered how much longer her supply of quick answers and evasions would hold out.

Now those two thick-headed bullies had gotten in a fight over her. She didn't even know why. She remembered passing their table while she was singing. She had side-stepped quickly to avoid his reaching arm. Maybe that had prompted the fight. She didn't know and didn't care. All she knew was she was being run out of town because of them and something had to be done about it. She wasn't going to take this lying down. She'd fight them every inch of the way. There wasn't much time. They'd given her until Saturday night. Today was Thursday.

She sat up and dried her tears. The first person to see would be the sheriff. Mrs. Calvin had warned her that they'd go to the sheriff if she wasn't out of town by Saturday night. Well, by Jingo, she'd beat them to the punch. She'd go to the sheriff and convince him she was absolutely innocent of any wrong.

Honor glanced in the mirror, ran a brush vigorously over her long, dark hair and washed her tear-stained cheeks. She was glad she had put on her plainest dress that morning. The dark material cut in the most modest fashion and the tiny white collar and cuffs were the picture of propriety. She looked as proper as a school teacher.

Hurrying down the dusty little street to the sheriff's office, Honor felt a dozen pairs of eyes focused on her from the windows and sidewalk. Evidently, word had spread rapidly that she had been ordered out of town.

Someone had probably seen the delegation of women marching up to the boarding house. Well, let them look. She'd show them. She'd show them all that she was as respectable as anybody.

THE DOOR of the sheriff's office was open. Inside, Wade Mitchell lolled in a swivel chair, his incredibly long legs propped up on the scarred desktop. The sheriff's badge which was pinned to his shirt looked ridiculously small on the huge expanse of chest. He glanced up as Honor entered, his gray eyes instantly wary in the young handsome face.

Honor didn't miss the sudden look of wariness. "Conceited fool!" she thought. "Doesn't want to get mixed in anything that might cost him that silver star he's so blamed proud of."

"Yes, miss. What can I do for you?"

Honor felt a tingle of satisfaction as she saw him rise respectfully to his feet.

"You can tell those old gossips here in town that I've done nothing wrong and that there is no reason for them to run me out of town," she replied sharply.

"Well now, miss, two men did shoot each other over you, you know," the sheriff drawled.

"Wade Mitchell, you know good and well I wasn't to blame for that! If Jed and Lefty hadn't fought over me, they'd have fought over something else." Her eyes were blazing and she trembled with rage.

The young sheriff looked uncomfortable. "Sure they would have. I know that as well as you do. But the fact remains that it *was* you they fought over. Any other time, it wouldn't have caused such a to-do, but since the women in town began this campaign to make New Boston clean and decent, *'the kind of town you want your children to grow up in'*, they've been making a fuss over nearly everything." He shook his head. "They'll really put the pressure on

me. Don't know whether I can help you or not."

"Why you weak, spineless—" Honor choked and had to stop and start over. "I'm as decent and respectable as any woman in town. Do you think I enjoy singing in a saloon for a living? If I had a home and family I could be as respectable as other girls but because I don't have any folks of my own and have to make my living the only way I know how, everyone thinks I'm a regular Jezebel. Well, I'm not and won't be treated like one." Her voice had risen almost to a shout and she was close to tears.

The possibility of having a weeping woman on his hands must have frightened the sheriff for he hurried over and placed an awkward hand on Honor's shoulder. "I know you aren't a— a Jezebel," he assured her hastily. "The other men know it too. But those women—" He shook his head hopelessly.

For a moment, looking up into his tanned, troubled face, Honor felt almost sorry for him. This was a touchy situation for an ambitious and conscientious young sheriff to be in. He must have sensed her sympathy because he glanced down into her face and met her eyes. In the same moment, Honor became aware of the strong, warm hand still resting on her shoulder. A flush started at her smooth white throat and rose slowly until it covered her face. She wanted to shrug the warm hand off her shoulder but she felt paralyzed. And try as she might, she couldn't tear her eyes away from his. He seemed to be having the same trouble. In fact, it was Honor who finally found the strength to pull away first.

Wade Mitchell's arm dropped heavily to his side. "I'll do what I can," he said slowly.

Honor turned and left the office, her mind a whirling mass of confusion. She had almost forgotten her initial purpose in going to Wade Mitchell. All she could think of now was the wonderful feeling of nearness she

had experienced as she stood gazing up into his eyes. It had been such a long time since she had felt close to anyone. She had been alone for years. But—she had no business thinking such thoughts at a time like this. She had a battle to fight. Her honor was at stake!

THAT NIGHT she found it hard to keep her mind on her work. The *Golden Arrow* was jammed with rough noisy men. However, they quieted down when she began singing and their generous applause was sprinkled with encouraging remarks.

"Don't let 'em scare you, gall!"

"Tell those old hens to mind their own business."

"If you need any help, just yell."

This last remark came from Luke Snider. Luke was a huge, burly man with the strength of an ox and a heart as big as a house. But for all his strength and courage, Honor couldn't quite see him standing up to Mrs. Calvin. One icy stare from her and he'd run like the rest.

But it was a pleasant feeling to know she had so many people on her side. Even if they were all men of the barroom crowd. Just because they talked rough didn't mean their hearts weren't soft. Honor began to see them in a different light.

She heard nothing from the sheriff until the next evening. She was coming down the outside stairway of the boarding house when she saw Wade Mitchell approaching. He stopped at the foot of the steps and looked up. She was on her way to work and was wearing one of her costumes. The boarding house was just across the street from the *Golden Arrow* so she did all of her changing in her own room.

The costume was gaudy and Honor was thankful that it was nearly dark. She had never thought much about her costumes before. But with the humiliation still burning inside her from Mrs. Calvin's outspoken contempt, Honor was conscious for the first time

of the low-neckline of her dress.

"Evening, miss." Was there a new note in his voice or was she only imagining it?

"Hello, sheriff. I hope you have good news for me," Honor said. She had stopped on the bottom step but even then she had to look up at him.

"I do." He smiled slightly. "I've persuaded Mrs. Calvin and the other ladies that you weren't responsible for the trouble at the *Golden Arrow* the other night. I've promised them it won't happen again."

Honor felt a surge of relief. "You mean I can stay? I won't have to leave New Boston?"

Wade Mitchell nodded and grinned. "That's right, miss. You can stay as long as there aren't any more fights in the *Golden Arrow* over you."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Honor cried. "And you're very kind. I can't thank you enough."

Her voice throbbed with sincerity and gratitude. Looking up at him, she felt once again that unfamiliar feeling of closeness and understanding which she had felt the previous day in his office. A strange warmth and quiet happiness stole through her and her eyes shone as she continued gazing at him.

His face had suddenly become serious and he seemed to have stopped breathing. Honor heard his sharp intake of breath and realized she had swayed toward him. The next thing she knew his arms had gone around her and his mouth was coming down on hers.

THE TREMBLING started in her lips and spread through her body. Her arms, which had crept up around his neck in an effort to pull him even closer, simply locked behind his head and hung there weakly. Wade's arms around her waist were like iron hands. She couldn't breathe, but she didn't care. Never before had she known anything like this. Never before had she known such a rushing tide of joy and



Honor was regarded as a bar-room "lady" . . .

happiness as was sweeping through her now.

When the kiss finally ended, her hands still clung weakly to him. It wasn't until she heard a gasp and an outraged, "Why, I never!" that she

pulled away from Wade. Still dazed, she glanced over Wade's left shoulder. There in the dusk, looking like a vengeful goddess was Amanda Bell, one of Mrs. Calvin's most faithful followers.

"So," the shocked woman said expelling her breath in a long horrified whisper, "this is why you didn't want us to run that, that hussy out of town. Well, we'll see about that. Wait until the other decent folk in town hear about this!" She flounced off, her figure bristling, her bonnet bouncing angrily, in the direction of Mrs. Calvin's house.

"Wait! Please. Let me explain!" Honor shouted and started to run after the retreating woman.

"It's no use," Wade said, catching her arm. "She won't listen."

"But I must explain," Honor insisted.

"Explain what?" asked Wade quietly.

Honor looked up. "Why, that—" She stopped hotly. "That I practically threw myself at your head. That I'm to blame for that kiss."

Wade met her eyes steadily. "Are you? Don't you give me credit for having a mind of my own?"

For a moment Honor couldn't speak. She couldn't remember exactly what had brought about the kiss but she did remember that she had swayed toward him. She hadn't meant to but that didn't alter the fact that she had. She was willing to take the entire blame for what had followed, but here was Wade telling her in so many words that he wanted to kiss her.

A surge of happiness raced through her and faded almost immediately. She knew that she had harmed him seriously and that suddenly he had become the one person in the world she would rather die than harm.

"I'll go and explain to Mrs. Calvin and her crowd," Wade was saying. "No, wait! I've got a better idea." He spun her around to face him. "We're going to get married. Now. This very night. Then let them try to run you out of town!" There was fire and steel in his voice.

Married! Honor was stunned. Marry Wade! She gazed up at him and the love and tenderness she saw there made her head whirl dizzily.

She wanted to cry out to him, to cling to his strong, hard body and admit her own love for him. But she couldn't. The town's sheriff marry a dance hall girl! It would ruin him! No, she couldn't do that to Wade. No matter what the cost to her, she couldn't do it.

"Marry you?" She attempted a laugh. It came out hard and brittle past the lump in her throat. It achieved just the effect she had hoped for. Wade's face tightened and turned pale.

"Marry a stuffy, hick-town sheriff?" She threw back her head, laughing and choking to hide the real reason for the tears that sprang to her eyes. "No thanks, chum. I prefer to wait for bigger and better things." With this she brushed past him and crossed the street to the *Golden Arrow*. She ran the last few steps for she felt sobs rising in her chest. She stumbled around to the back and opened the door that led into the office of Steve Simmons, owner of the *Golden Arrow*. Fortunately, it was empty and Honor sank down on a chair, sobbing into the huge silk handkerchief she carried as part of her costume.

She had done it! Wade wouldn't go to Mrs. Calvin to plead for her now. She wouldn't have to worry about his jeopardizing his job and reputation defending her. His face, white with fury and pain as she brushed past, had told her that.

As soon as the tearing sobs stopped, she went in search of Steve and told him she was leaving town on the early morning stage and that he'd have to find another singer. Then, drying her tears, she walked out on the tiny stage and began her first number. There was only one thing still to be done. She had to explain to Mrs. Calvin that it was she who had been kissing Wade when Amanda Bell surprised them and not Wade kissing her. But that would have to wait until morning.

JUST BEFORE her last number that night, Wade came to her. She

was sitting at a table with Big Luke Snider who was offering her some awkward, yet touching, words of comfort.

"I'd like to speak with you for a minute—alone," Wade said, staring at her with eyes cold as steel. His face was tight and unsmiling.

"Would you mind, Luke?" she asked the burly cow-puncher.

"Course not, miss," he said. Rising, he reached over and patted her hand shyly before leaving them alone.

Turning back to Wade, Honor said, "I suppose you've come to tell me I've got to leave town after all."

Wade nodded. "That's right. I've had pressure put on me to see that you're out of New Boston by tomorrow night."

"So, Mrs. Calvin and her cronies have decided I'd better leave town after all." The situation was really rather funny, but Honor didn't feel like laughing. She wanted to cry out and tell Wade she hadn't meant what

she'd said about marrying him. She wanted to tell him the truth and ease the tense lines in his lean face. It was breaking her heart to see him so hurt, so angry.

"Don't worry. I'll catch the morning stage. I'm as eager to get out of New Boston as Mrs. Calvin and her crowd are to have me leave." She didn't dare tell him the truth. She didn't dare tell him, she loved him more than anyone else in the world and that leaving him was like dying.

"I'm glad you're being sensible about it." He nodded curtly and walked away.

The sight of the cool hatred in his eyes was too much for Honor. She stumbled up from the table and searched out Steve. She made some excuse, explaining why she couldn't sing her last number, and escaped the noisy pushing crowd in the *Golden Arrow*.

In the privacy of her own room once more, she collapsed in bitter



An Engrossing
Novelet by

DORIS KNIGHT

FORGET OUR LOVE!

leads off the
April issue of

TODAY'S
LOVE
STORIES

tears. Wade. Oh, my darling. I love you so. Why must it be this way?

But she knew why. It would be disastrous for them to marry. Mrs. Calvin and her stiff-necked crowd would see to it that Wade was ruined politically. She loved him too much to see that happen to him. No, there was no other way.

Early next morning, Honor left her bag in front of the hotel where the stage would stop and made her way a few doors down the street to Calvin's General Store. Mrs. Calvin and her husband lived in the two small rooms at the rear of the building.

Honor went around to the back door and knocked. The look on Mrs. Calvin's face when she opened the door almost brought a laugh to Honor's trembling lips.

"What are you doing here?" Mrs. Calvin asked sternly.

"I've come to explain about—about the incident Amanda Bell saw the other night."

"There's no need to explain. It's all perfectly clear." Mrs. Calvin's chin jutted forward stubbornly.

"You're wrong. It wasn't at all as Mrs. Bell probably told you." Honor took a deep breath. "Wade Mitchell isn't at all to blame for what happened. He wasn't kissing me. I was kissing him. He had just finished telling me I could stay in New Boston. I was so grateful for his kindness. You see, it's been so long since any one was kind to me."

She saw Mrs. Calvin flinch as their eyes met, but her voice was still stern as she said, "Is that all you have to tell me, young woman?"

Honor nodded. "You do understand don't you? Wade Mitchell had nothing to do with what happened."

"You've made that perfectly clear. Is there anything else?" She stood looking down her nose at Honor.

"No, there's nothing else." Honor turned and went back toward the hotel. She heard the door close firmly

behind her back.

With an aching heart she picked up her bag and stood in the shade of the hotel porch. The morning sun was already growing hot. There were a few persons loitering about the sidewalks and in front of the General Store the Calvin's two-year-old granddaughter romped with her collie dog. But for the most part, the street was empty.

A cloud of dust far up the road heralded the approaching stagecoach. In a matter of minutes the pounding hoof beats of the team could be heard. With heavy heart Honor watched the swaying stage enter the upper end of Main Street. In another moment the driver would be yelling "Whoa" to the galloping horses and the stage would have arrived to take her away from New Boston and Wade.

In the next instant, all thought of her reluctant departure was swept from her mind as a horrifying sight met her eyes. The Calvin's granddaughter and her dog had tumbled off the board sidewalk in front of the General Store and were romping out in the street oblivious to the rapidly approaching stage. There was no chance for the driver to stop the stage in time to prevent a tragedy.

With a cry, Honor flung herself in the path of the stagecoach and at the same moment gave the child a vigorous push. She looked up just in time to see the wheels of the swerving stage bearing down on her. Mercifully, blackness closed down over her.

WHEN consciousness returned a few moments later, she saw the frightened face of the stage driver bending over her. Before she had a chance to speak another face appeared through the rapidly growing crowd. It was Wade. He pushed the driver aside and caught Honor up in his arms.

"You little fool!" he whispered hoarsely. "You precious little fool!" He buried his face in her hair, unable to go on. When he recovered he said sharply to the driver, "Get Dr. Waters. Hurry."

"I'm all right, I think," she said

weakly as the driver ran off in search of the doctor. "What happened to the child?"

"The rear wheel just grazed her, sheriff," a bystander explained referring to Honor. "Didn't run over her."

Wade appeared as if he hardly heard the encouraging news. "You might have been killed," he said slowly looking down with stricken eyes into her face.

Honor twisted and tried to sit up. "What happened to the little girl?"

"Let me through! Let me through, I said!" It was the voice of Mrs. Calvin, stern as always, but when she made her way through the path the crowd obligingly cleared for her, her face was pale and frightened.

When she reached the spot where Honor lay she stood for a moment as if for the first time in her life, she was unable to find the right words. "Young woman, you saved my granddaughter's life," she said finally.

"You mean the baby wasn't hurt?" Honor asked in relief.

"Merely bruised and shaken from the push you gave her." Mrs. Calvin continued to stand awkwardly and look down at the ground where Honor lay but without meeting her eyes squarely, "I thank you." The words seemed forced and stiff. Then more words came rushing out, no longer

stiff. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart." The woman's voice rang with gratitude and sincerity. "I'm sure we—I—was mistaken about you. You're the kind of citizen New Boston needs. I'm sure I speak for everyone when I say we'd like you to stay on with us."

"Why, I—" Honor stammered.

"Darned tootin' she's staying. As my wife too," Wade declared. "And no argument either," he added as Honor made a move to speak.

"Who's arguing?" she murmured happily and pulled his face down to hers. His mouth took hers hungrily and her arms clung to him tightly.

"Where's the patient? Let me through." Dr. Waters broke through the grinning crowd and glanced down at the oblivious pair. "Is that her?" he asked pointing at Honor.

"That's her, doc," someone replied.

Dr. Waters shook his head. "Nothing wrong with her. Maybe a few cuts and bruises. Can't be anything wrong with a girl that can kiss like that."

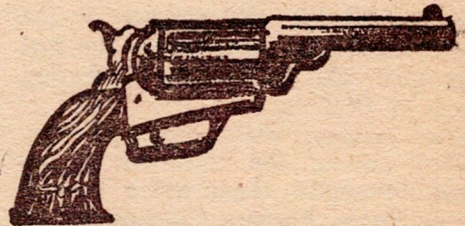
Wade raised his head for a moment and grinned. "You're absolutely right, doc. Nothing wrong with her. Not a thing in the world."

Honor smiled rapturously. What were a few scratches and bruises? She had never felt so wonderful in her life.

★ A Powerful, New, Romantic Book-Length Novel of the Old West ★

GUN-WOLVES' RANCH

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complete in the
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WESTERN ACTION



SHACKLED HEARTS

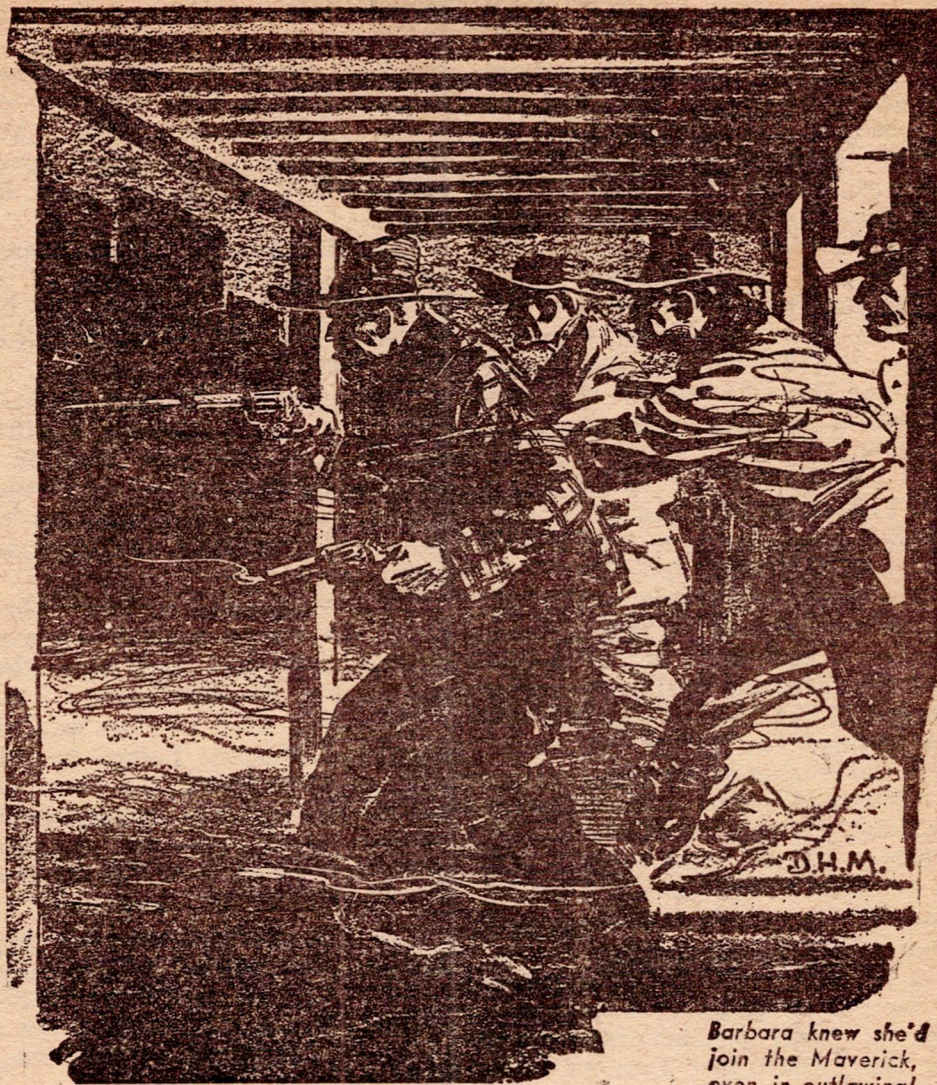
SUNDOWN'S last glow was sucked suddenly from the rim-rocks in one windy gust of the norther. All the wild menace of the night seemed to close in on the girl and man who sat in the flickering circle of firelight.

The scream, shrill, spine-tingling, knifed out of the blackness of the mesquite-tangled slope which slanted to the Pecos. Barbara Crockett leaped

to her feet, red lips parted, eyes wide and stormily blue. "Listen, Uncle Joe!" she exclaimed. "A woman in trouble!"

Joe Clampitt hunched his old shoulders over the fire, poked at the blaze with studied deliberation before he spoke. A slow grin spread across his flame-lighted, leathery face. "No such thing, Miss Barbara," he drawled. "That there was a panther. Yuh

● **COMPLETE NOVELET** ●



*Barbara knew she'd
join the Maverick,
even in outlawing!*

didn't hear 'em over at th' old ranch on th' Llano. All been trapped out. But yore dad will find plenty of 'em tryin' to pull down his yearlin's over here on th' new spread!"

"But it sounded just like a woman!" the girl insisted. She strode to the chuck-wagon standing in the rim of the lighted circle, and the flame

glinted on the blue steel barrel of a .30-30, propped against a wheel.

There was silence, now; the girl listened, then picked up the gun. The sinister click of its lever as she pumped a shell into the chamber aroused Clampitt. He climbed to his feet, squinting after her. "Hold on, Miss Barbara! Th' panther ain't hurt-

BY DONNA REECE

in' nothin', and it ain't likely to jump th' team. But if yuh was to wound one, it turns downright dangerous."

"I'm going to have a look," announced Barbara. She started to skirt the fire. The long-armed old cowboy barred her way. "Yore dad told me to take care of yuh. Stay here!"

She had a will of her own this girl did; there was a stubborn, defiant set to her proudly-tilted chin. Something of the rifle barrel's blue steel glistened in her eyes as she faced the firelight.

"I can shoot," she said. "And I won't shoot unless I can get a good bead. I'm just going to take a little walk up that way, and—"

The scream came again, cutting into the lazy softness of her Texas drawl, sending a chill along her spine. She had been born and bred to the rolling range and the high courage that was its heritage. The scream was Adventure, challenging in the night.

Barbara Crockett stepped firmly forward; Clampitt seized one of her wrists. "Yore dad told yuh to mind me!" he protested. "When Ed and th' boys come back to camp, we'll take a little *paesar* and look around. But jest now, yuh stay right here!"

She was as spoiled as an only child can be. "Dad wouldn't care! Turn me loose, Uncle Joel Turn me loose, or I'll scream, myself!"

"Git back by th' fire! Yuh ain't goin', I tell yuh!"

A flurry of hoofs drummed swiftly out of the blackness. The horse was a pinto—a straining streak of white and black flashing from the fringe of the ghostly mesquites. The rider was tall and broad of shoulder.

In one fleeting, confused second he was on them, leaning low over the pinto's neck, the firelight flickering on gun-steel in his hand. Joe Clampitt let out a startled yell, shoved Barbara aside, and clawed for his holster—

Baang!

The stranger's gun roared. Barbara saw the jet of powder-flame,

heard the scream she had threatened. Clampitt's hand was whipping upward, gun-filled. The rider's Colt came down in a smashing sweep, smoke still blowing away from the barrel.

Clampitt's battered Stetson dented, and the girl heard the thud of the blow that buckled his knees. He fell in his tracks, the .45 slipping from limp fingers.

"You—you—" screamed Barbara, and felt a sudden faintness engulfing her. Then, as the pinto came to a dust-flogging halt, the tall rider leaned farther from his saddle, shot his left arm around her waist, and lifted her with easy strength.

He drove spurs to his horse. Flung across the saddle, Barbara saw stars rocking overhead, and then they whirled, and all went black.

The night wind on her face revived her. Mesquite flashed by. The pinto galloped toward the river. She twisted and screamed, struggled with wild cat fury. "Let me go!" she cried, and hammered his face. "Let me down this instant! Do you hear me?"

The tall rider tightened his grip, drawing her curved softness close against him. She caught her breath, half in anger, half in bewilderment at the strange thrill that surged through her.

"Let me down! You must be crazy!"

His growl mingled impatience and disgust. "Set still, yuh little she-devil! Whoa, Five Spot! This here is what we get for hornin' in on a family squabble!"

With the pinto jolting to a stop, he let the girl slide, none too gently, to the ground. She lost her footing and collapsed in an undignified heap, blazing with anger that left her incoherent. He went on talking, in a soft, impersonal drawl, "Yes, sir, women are shore funny critters. All locoed. Yuh save 'em and they don't want to be saved. They beller for help, and they don't want help."



BARBARA CROCKETT pulled herself to her feet and stamped her boot so hard her spur jingled.

"What did you think you were doing? Who yelled for help? Why did you strike Uncle Joe? You—you're coming back to camp with me. If he's hurt, you'll go to jail!"

"Wait a minute!" There was a note of steel in his voice, now. "It's all right with me if yuh want to go back to him and be mistreated. But th' next time, don't beller like a heifer under a brandin' iron!"

"Bellow? I didn't!"

"Yuh screamed. Yuh screeched like a stuck pig! I heard yuh, and then as I was ridin' down that way, I seen th' fire and seen that hombre man-handlin' yuh!"

"Oh!" the girl gasped, remembering something. The panther! She wanted to laugh. "That was a panther you heard, Mr. Meddler. Uncle Joe didn't want me to leave the camp to hunt it, that's all; he wasn't man-handling me!"

The tall rider stared and swore under his breath. Then he swung to the ground. "Yuh shore?" he demanded. "Shucks! Well, I reckon it was all a mistake, then. I'm plumb sorry. Mebbe I'd better ride back up there and apologize to yore uncle. Yuh see, it looked mighty like—"

"I understand," Barbara nodded. "You've been reading about rescuing damsels in distress."

"No, ma'am. I don't read much. But if yuh'll ride back with me, I'll try and explain to yore uncle."

He helped her to the saddle, and swung up behind the cantle. Barbara suppressed a giggle as they started out, then said, a bit softly,

"He isn't really my uncle. He's the cook for the Bar O—my dad's outfit. Everybody calls him Uncle Joe Clampitt."

"Joe Clampitt?"

It was as if the name had electrified him. He gasped it, jerking rein on the pinto. The girl heard him breathing hard and felt the muscles of his arm grow taut as he pulled leather on Five Spot.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"No—that is, I don't know, Miss!" A strange tone crept into his tone. "I've been lookin' for an hombre by that name for a mighty long time. If he's th' right one, he can tell me some things that I mightily want to know."

He touched spurs to the pinto, and they rode up to the dying campfire unchallenged. The tall horseman leaped to the ground with an exclamation.

Joe Clampitt was still lying there, in a huddled heap, his .45 near his outstretched hand. The cowboy lifted him, carried him nearer the fire. "I shore didn't mean to hit him so hard!" he said contritely, kneeling beside the unconscious man. "I reckon—why—why, he's been shot. He's dead!"

TERROR tightened Barbara's throat. "Dead?" she heard herself repeating as she half-fell from the horse and stumbled across the ground that seemed to be wavering, whirling.

"Yes, ma'am! He's been murdered!"

Unbelieving, she dropped to her knees. The cowboy hastily pulled Clampitt's battered Stetson over his face, but not before the girl had glimpsed the bullet hole high in the center of his forehead. A sob wrenched her aching throat. Tears came in a rush, then dried in a fresh, hot fury.

She whirled on the tall rider. "You did it! You shot him, then clubbed him with your gun as he fell!"

"No, ma'am!" His jaw sagged as

he shook his head slowly. "Yuh see, that's a rifle wound. And even if I had hit him, a .45 bullet that close would have knocked him over complete, and I wouldn't have had a chance to club him with th' gun. Besides, I shot way high—I was afraid of hittin' you!"

It sounded logical, and his eyes were steady as he looked at her. He was taking off his hat in a reverence for the man on the ground; the fire-light gleamed on his tawny hair. His mouth was wide and firm.

But the girl shook her head. "We didn't hear any other shot. If you didn't kill him, who did?"

"I don't know."

Out of the darkness, hoofs slogged and a deep voice boomed; "Hey, *cocinero!* Rustle that grub, pronto! I'm as holler as a log!"

Barbara turned and ran to greet three men who were swinging from their horses. "Ed!" she cried. "Oh, Ed! Uncle Joe's been shot—he's dead!"

A big man was in the lead. He ripped out an oath and hurried toward the fire. The other two followed him. For a few seconds they looked at Joe Clampitt's body.

The big man swore again. "Who's this?" he demanded, jerking his chin toward the tall stranger. "He do it?"

"I—I don't know!" Barbara faltered. "That is, I don't know who he is. Maybe he did it; I guess he did!"

"Talk up!" growled the big man. His thumbs were hooked in his cartridge belt. Barbara saw the look of rebach in the tall rider's steady eyes. He turned from her, looked at the big hombre.

"They call me th' Maverick Kid," he said evenly. "Who're you?"

"Ed Reynolds—Bar O foreman!" snapped the other. The girl held her breath as she saw his hand dip and come up gun-filled. But the Maverick Kid made no move to draw. He shrugged his wide shoulders. "I didn't

shoot him," he said simply. "I *did* bust him over th' head, but that was a mistake."

Reynolds nodded, and gouged the muzzle of his .45 into the Kid's lean ribs. "Th' biggest mistake yuh ever made! Now, what's yore name?"

"All I know is th' Maverick Kid. Except Brand Maverick—that's a name I give myself to sign papers with."

"He heard a panther scream," Barbara put in. "He thought it was I, and when he saw Uncle Joe trying to pull me back into camp—I wanted to see if I could shoot the panther—why, he rode up and fired a shot and then hit Uncle Joe. Then he carried me out of camp, and when we came back, Uncle Joe was dead!"

"He fired a shot, eh?" Reynolds' jaw clicked savagely. Out of the corner of tight lips, he spoke to the cowboys: "Jake, hitch th' team. Slim, take this hombre's gun. We'll leave the herd under wire, and go on in to Tarantula tonight, so's we can turn him over to th' sheriff!"

The Maverick Kid scarcely seemed to hear. He was watching Barbara Crockett. Wide-eyed, she stared at the dead man, then lifted her hands with a little, hysterical gesture to pass them across her face as if to blot out the sight.

She glanced at the tall stranger, and he saw the cold, hard glint in eyes that were meant to be soft and shining with love. She was against him.

The Maverick Kid shrugged his shoulders again and turned from her. "Any authority to make an arrest?" he asked Reynolds. "Yuh might look at that bullet hole and see that it's—"

"This," said Reynolds, putting more pressure on the .45, "is authority enough. And in case it ain't, why here's my deputy sheriff's badge back in Menard county and here's these!"

He drew a pair of handcuffs from his hip pocket. They clanked and gleamed in the firelight.

"Kinda out of yore territory, ain't yuh?" asked the Maverick Kid.

"Never mind that. We brought a trail herd over here to th' Pecos, and I reckon we can bring th' law with us. Miss Barbara, I reckon yuh had better lead my hoss. I'll ride th' wagon seat with this hombre handcuffed to me. I'm kinda leery about him bein' a lone wolf in this killin'—I'll bet yuh he's got a pack around!"

"You mean you'd rather be in the saddle?" Barbara asked. "I'll drive; you can handcuff him to me—I'm not afraid."

"That's plumb white of yuh!" said the prisoner with sarcasm. "I shore will enjoy yore company."

"Cut out th' back talk and git up on that seat!" Reynolds broke in. "Jake, help Slim lift Joe's body into th' wagon."

SITTING on the wagon seat, the Maverick Kid extended his shackled right hand to help the girl aboard, but she ignored it. He felt her shudder when the two Bar O waddies hoisted Clampitt into the vehicle. Then Reynolds stepped on the wheel spokes and pulled the Kid's wrist over.

"Yore dad wouldn't like yuh bein' handcuffed to a killer, Miss Barbara," he said. "Maybe I'd better drive—"

"Nonsense!" she retorted, and thrust a shapely wrist alongside the Kid's sinewy arm. "I'm not afraid of him."

The cuffs clicked. Her hand touched his lightly. Each shot a startled glance at the other. Barbara looked away quickly; the Maverick Kid smiled into the darkness of the mesquites.

The girl's heart pounded, bringing a hot flush to her cheeks. This, she reasoned, was foolish, incredible—this madness that surged through her at the nearness of an unknown man, a roaming cowboy—a killer! Or was he? She started the team, driving expertly with one hand while Joe Reynolds rode ahead in the twisting trail, and she thought back over the

swift, tragic events of the evening.

Was he a murderer? There was logic in what he had said about a .45 slug knocking down anybody it hit. And why was he looking for Joe Clampitt?

She stole a sidelong glance at him. He was slouched in the seat as comfortably as possible, looking straight ahead; his jaw was set grimly. He looked like a man who was no stranger to misfortune.

The moon rose as the wagon rumbled and rattled down to the river. Now the trail turned into a fairly plain road that followed the twisting, treacherous river bank toward the south.

"Tell me why you were looking for Uncle Joel!" the girl said suddenly, without looking at him.

The Maverick Kid straightened. "To ask him some questions about myself. I reckon I'll never find out, now. Yuh see, I'm a stray—a maverick—but a branded maverick. I ain't had any folks since I was three or four. For all I know, Joe Clampitt might have been my dad. He left me with a family up in th' Indian Territory, when I was a button."

"Oh!" said Barbara. "I'm really sorry; I can understand, because I'm an orphan, too."

"But Reynolds mentioned yore dad!"

"Jim Crockett adopted me when I was a baby. He's still over on the Llano. I came over with the boys and a bunch of cowboys we hired to make the drive with the herd. I'm going to straighten up the Bar O for Daddy Jim—he bought it last month. I haven't even seen the house, yet. Ed got the herd in our north pasture, and let the extra hands go, and then got scared of rustlers. There's the Matt Jenkins gang across the river—a notorious bunch. So we've been camping near the herd."

The hills crowded down toward the river, shutting out the rising moon, and the trail climbed a rocky slant

where the wheels woke clattering echoes. Ed Reynolds dropped back closer to the wagon. The road was narrow and crooked, and now the right rut was inches from the sheer bluff that dropped down to the Pecos.

The Maverick Kid looked over the side. Part of the stream was in the moonlight, flowing lazily to the Rio Grande. It looked deep. "If you was me," he asked suddenly, "would yuh take a chance on standin' trial in a case where th' cards are stacked against yuh? Or would yuh run a sandy, and then come back with yore own deck?"

Barbara had to keep her eyes on the trail. Live oaks and cedars hung overhead, thickening the gloom. Ed Reynolds' horse was out of sight.

"I don't see how you can help yourself," she said.

"I'll show yuh!" drawled the Maverick Kid—and then it happened so quickly that the girl had neither time nor breath to call for help.

The Maverick Kid twisted suddenly, slipped his free left arm over across her knees, and lifted her in one swift movement that brought him to his feet.

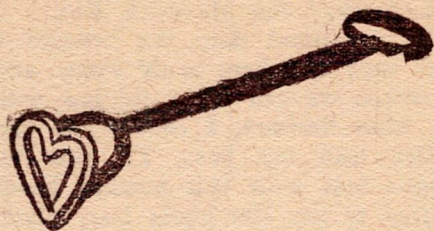
Then he leaped, and the moon-mottled water shot up to meet them.

Chapter Two

SHE WOULD never forget that breath-taking shock as the cold water cascaded high, closing over them. She screamed—then the alkaline Pecos choked her.

They went far under. The tall cowboy was swimming strongly with his free arm, and he thrust out with his manacled hand so that the girl's arm was jerked along with each thrust. After what seemed an age under water, their heads broke surface.

The girl sucked in a tortured breath. Ed Reynolds was shouting from the bank, "Yonder they are! No, yuh idiot, yuh can't shoot—they're still handcuffed together. Scatter, and find a way down this cliff!"



Hoofs clattered in the gloom. Barbara spat out a mouthful of bitter water, and tried to struggle. The Maverick Kid, tawny hair in his eyes, Stetson gone, chuckled.

"Better try swimmin', instead!" he advised. "I ain't goin' to drown yuh, but we're goin' my way!"

Any pity she had felt for him was washing down the whispering, moonlit stream. She hated him. That was it—hated him!

"You fool!" she spluttered. "Now they'll be after you for kidnaping, as well as murder!"

"They won't get me!" he retorted. "Save yore breath, now. Make for that pile o' rocks over there!"

The time of reckoning would come, Barbara promised herself. She struck out with her free right arm. As the hoofbeats of the Bar O horses died in the night, the handcuffed pair came to the jutting rocks. The Maverick Kid trod water, let his feet down cautiously, and reached a sandy bottom. Then he lifted the drenched girl awkwardly because of the handcuffs, and strode up the slanting western bank.

Salt cedar grew thick and wild along the shore, snagging at his boots and cowhide chaps. He had gone fifty feet from the water's edge before Barbara remembered to protest. "I can walk!" she said dryly.

The Maverick Kid shook his head. "Trail's too narrow. Yuh can't foller along behind me, with these bracelets on."

"Where are you going?"

"We," he answered significantly, "are goin' to build a fire and get dry, first. Then we'll look for my hoss, or some hoss. When it's daylight, I

want to have a look-see around that camp—for th' murderer's tracks. After that—"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. They were through the thick cedars, now, and at the edge of the chaparral. Somewhere far to the north, a shout floated faintly to reach their ears.

"They'll not give you a chance to look around," the girl said. "There'll be a posse out after us by morning!"

The Maverick Kid stood her on her own feet. "They won't find us; we're west of th' Pecos, now. There's only one kind of law here; gun-law. I'll get myself a gun—somehow."

THEY WANDERED through the mesquites, climbing a gradual slope that was gully-scarred by rains. Water sloshed in their boots. The night wind knifed their wet clothing. Barbara's teeth began to chatter, and the tall man pulled her toward a willow-fringed arroyo and picked a trail down to its pebbled bottom.

"Here's where we camp," he answered. "They can't see th' fire in this draw. Let's get some wood."

He produced a water-tight match box. The flame flickered in his cupped palm, lighted his strong, rugged face as he stooped low to touch it to the dry twigs. Barbara Crockett watched and wondered why she had stopped hating him again, why she felt that impulse to smooth back his tawny hair—

The fire leaped, climbing eagerly over the wood, blazing hot. The Maverick Kid rolled a rock near it, beckoned for her to sit down. "Empty yore boots!" he said. "Here—let me do it."

"I can take care of myself!" she answered. But he was already tugging with his free hand. He laughed as he poured water from the first boot, kneeling in front of her.

"Pint-size! Myself, I got a gallon in each!" His fingers were a caress on her ankle. He looked up suddenly

to see the firelight playing on her face, heightening the color in her cheeks, making mystery of her blue eyes—

"Know why I did it?" he asked huskily.

Barbara shook her head, not trusting speech above the sudden hammering of her heart.

"Because yuh thought I was guilty. I would have pulled my gun and shot it out with Reynolds, if it hadn't been for that. Because I want to prove to you—want to show you that I didn't kill Joe Clampitt!"

She thought to change the subject. "How can we get these handcuffs off?"

"I don't want 'em off!" The Maverick Kid caught her other hand. "I'd like to be handcuffed to yuh for life!"

He was drawing her toward his arms. Suddenly she saw the jagged tear in the right sleeve of his shirt, near the shoulder—a memento of their journey through the mesquites. The flames played on the ripple of muscles there, and on the livid welt of a scar—a strange sort of scar.

The Maverick Kid saw the direction of her gaze, and relaxed his hold. He got to his feet awkwardly. "I'm plumb sorry, Miss Barbara. I forgot!"

"Forgot what—Maverick?"

"I ain't got any right to be talkin' to yuh that-a-way. This—" he touched the scar—"this is th' only brand I got. And I don't know what it is, exactly. Old timers up on Red River said they used to see th' brand on th' Chisholm Trail now and then. Forked Lightnin', they called it. But me—I'm jest a stray!"

His wide mouth set in a grim, taut line, and his eyes were hard. He stooped to empty the water from his own boots. The fire was taking the chill from the wet clothes, warming Barbara's blood. She unbuckled her buckskin chaps and tossed them over a willow branch, then hugged the knees of her divided skirt and wrig-

gled her stockinged toes luxuriously in the heat.

"Names," she said, "aren't everything. Tell me about the brand. How'd you get it?"

The Maverick Kid shook his head. "There ain't much that I can tell. I reckon I was mighty young. I can remember guns bustin' loose all of a sudden, and hosses runnin'. It seems like they was runnin' toward me. Somebody yanked me out of th' way—and then there was th' burn on my shoulder. I don't know whether it was on purpose, or an accident. After that, a long ride—and th' hosses in muddy water. Sometimes I still dream about that muddy water!"

He sighed, and a shudder seemed to run through his lean body. "Things was kinda blank for a spell, then. Th' folks that raised me till I was big enough to fork a bronc told me that an hombre named Joe Clampitt left me with them. He thought I was dead, they said. Ever since they told me, I've been lookin' for him. Yuh know th' rest."

The girl nodded. Yes, she knew the rest—tragedy beside a camp fire on the other side of the Pecos. She took some pins from her jumper, and fastened the tear in his shirt.

"It'll come out all right, Maverick!" she whispered. "You'll find out who you are!"

His lean face lifted, and the grimness left his eyes. "And when I do—and when I've proved to yuh that I ain't a murderer—would yuh look at me twice?"

Barbara laughed happily. "A lot more time than twice!" she promised.

"Yuh—yuh better try to get some sleep!" stuttered the Maverick Kid. "We'll be movin' early!"

THE ASHES of the fire were dead and cold when he shook the girl's shoulder at dawn. She jumped up, startled, not remembering. It all came back to her.

"Mornin'!" smiled the Maverick Kid.

"Oh!" Barbara stretched. "I feel about sixty! I must look a fright."

"It's th' first time I've seen yuh in daylight. And—well, th' light ain't strong, yet. But I would figger yuh for about nineteen, and gettin' purtier every year. What'll yuh have for breakfast?"

He took in another notch in the belt circling his lean middle. The girl brushed back her water-tangled hair with her fingers.

"Let me see!" she said. "I'll have bacon and eggs, and flapjacks, and coffee, and—"

"You'll have beans!" he broke in. "I noticed a pot o' frioles in yore campfire last night. Reason I noticed 'em, I hadn't had supper. If I remember right, nobody bothered to take them beans along when we left. Come on!"

"Beans!" exclaimed Barbara; "that's what I wanted all the time. But it must be three or four miles!"

"And another swim across th' Pecos. It's th' nearest grub, though. And maybe there's somethin' around camp that we could use to knock off these handcuffs—an ax, maybe. Besides, my pinto, Five Spot, is over there."

She nodded, and they started out, climbing up the arroyo bank to see the tumbled stretch of rangeland sweeping before them. Down there, perhaps a mile, was the Pecos, almost invisible in its treeless banks with only the cliff from which the Maverick Kid had jumped to mark its twisting length.

He looked to the west. The first light was falling on ragged, rim-rocked hills that reared from the greasewood flats, five miles distant.

"The law is east of the Pecos!" the girl reminded him.

"We'll cross back over, if we don't find what we're lookin' for," he answered. "That is—I will. When I can

get th' handcuffs off of yuh, and give yuh my hoss."

Barbara didn't answer. Instead, she looked up at him as they strode along, cutting at a tangent toward the river, heading northeast. Sooner or later, she knew, the posse that Ed Reynolds would bring from Tarantula would be riding in on the camp where Joe Clampitt was killed—

The Maverick Kid halted on a little rise. Across the river, a windmill wheel caught the first rays of the sun. Barbara read his mind.

"We can't go there!" she said quickly. "That's the Bar O. We passed the road that turns up to it, last night."

"Then them cows over there would be yore dad's herd," he said, pointing. "Reynolds had better not leave 'em too long. We'll go to th' ranch if we can't get th' handcuffs off."

"I'm getting used to them, now," the girl answered.

He flashed her a quick look, dared not believe what he saw in her eyes, and started on. For an hour they walked, reaching the bank of the river and cutting north along it, following twisting cow trails and fighting the low brush.

Across the Pecos there was no sign of life. The Bar O herd was under wire up against the hills; a few scattered bawls drifted down to them. The Maverick Kid took his bearings from the canyon-scarred hills to the east, out of which he had ridden the evening before when he blundered into tragedy, and—he glanced at the girl who strode beside him—into love.

"Camp's over there!" he said suddenly. "Feel like a swim?"

"For a pot of beans," she laughed, "the answer is yes!"

THEY HUNTED a safe trail down the treacherously crumbling bank. And then the cowboy suddenly seized the girl and sprang behind the doubtful shelter of a clump of catclaw bushes.

"Down!" he whispered, and dropped with her to hug the ground.

Not until then did she hear the crash of horses' hoofs in the brush. Somebody was coming up the trail.

They pressed close against the friendly earth not daring to breathe. Two riders, at least, were headed their way. A quirt slapped against creaking saddle leather, and a man swore.

"Turn him, Tom!" he yelled.

The chaparral crashed in a spot near to the concealed pair. The Maverick Kid raised his head a few inches. A streak of red shot out of the tangle, struck the cow trail, and pounded up a swirl of dust along it.

"Aw, let th' little devil go!" another voice called. "He's branded. If he hangs around his maw, nobody'll find him till th' buzzards have picked her—then it'll be all right! This brush is too dang tough."

The red streak came on. It was a calf. A dogie, now, the Maverick Kid knew from the conversation. It hammered close to their hiding place, sniffed the human smell, and stopped suddenly on bunched, sliding hoofs. For an instant before it whirled to pop the mesquites and vanish, the fresh brand on its side was plainly visible.

The Maverick Kid gasped. Barbara Crockett, looking over his shoulder as she lay listening to the mad drumming of her heart, went wide eyed—

The calf's brand was the same queer, jagged symbol as she could see on the Maverick Kid's muscular shoulder—Forked Lightning!

Neither had time to speculate on this startling discovery. The two riders were nearing. Too late, the Maverick Kid realized that the men were following separate trails, that one would pass on each side of the clump of catclaw.

He got to his hands and knees, saw them looming in the brush, and tried desperately to pull the girl around out of sight.

"Hey!" a voice bellowed. "Put up yore hands!"

The Maverick Kid straightened, bringing Barbara to her feet with him. They saw a beefy, red-faced hombre who reined in his claybank cayuse and stared. His gun was out of leather, but he did not lift it to cover them. His narrow-set, slitted eyes had fallen on the handcuffs, and widened.

"Well, I'll be—!" he drawled, showing the .45 back into its holster. "Tom! Hey, Tom! Come here!"

THE MAVERICK KID spun Barbara around, into his arms. Her golden hair brushed intoxicatingly across his face; her soft sweetness was against him. She looked up at him, her face like a lovely flower, and in that one fleeting glance the past was sealed and all eternity promised.

The other rider crashed through brush to join his companion. He was swarthy, rawboned and powerfully framed. His black Stetson was slouched over thick brows as black as the hat itself, and his poker face betrayed neither interest nor surprise as he eyed the girl and the cowboy.

Then he clipped words out of lips that scarcely seemed to move, "Who are yuh? What's the idea?"

The Maverick Kid squeezed the girl's arm. There was no law west of the Pecos; these were not possemen. He wished, heartily, that they were. The danger now was hers, and not in anything that could happen to him—

"My name's Brand," he answered quietly. "This here's my wife!"

The black eyes of the swarthy man flitted to the girl's face, saw the color that swept to the roots of her blonde hair. He looked back at the tall cowboy, glanced around for horses. "Afoot, eh? What's th' idea?"

"Th' law, of course," said the Maverick Kid, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "We busted away from a deputy sheriff; there was a killin'. I reckon yuh'll want to turn us in."

"Ho-ho!" It was the beefy man who

found humor in the Maverick's words. "Yeah, Vasco—run to th' sheriff with 'em! Mebbe yuh would git a reward. Ho-ho!"

"Shut up!" clipped Tom Vasco. "On th' dodge, eh? For a killin'. Whose?"

The Maverick Kid stiffened. Vasco raised his hand and grinned. "Never mind. Want a job?"

Barbara shrank from the horseman's bold stare. The Maverick Kid patted her shoulder, remembered that Forked Lightning brand—

"If it means stayin' west of th' Pecos—yes!"

"It means goin' where th' boss says. Come on, Karnes—pile down from that cayuse. Let 'em ride. Yuh can climb up here with me."

THE MAVERICK KID'S grey eyes took in details of Vasco's rig, the silver conchos on his saddle and chaps; the black leather cuffs on his arms, his ornamented belt. There was a Winchester boot, with the rifle stock protruding from it. The Maverick would have given much for a look at that gun—because, somewhere back down the river, the red calf's mother had been left for the buzzards, and there had been no sound of a shot!

Karnes grumblingly dismounted. Vasco jerked his chin toward the claybank.

"Up!" he grunted. "And don't be such dang fools as to try and run out on me."

"I'd like to know where we're headed for this job," the Maverick Kid retorted, meeting his gaze levelly.

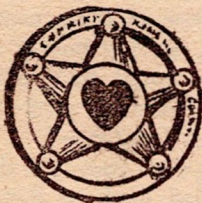
"Yuh should be choosy, with th' law on yore trail and a pair of bracelets handicappin' yuh! We're headin' for th' boss' place, and we'd better make time. They'll be after yuh."

He jerked his chin again. They rode, swinging on due west through greasewood and mesquite, climbing the gradual, gully-gashed slope toward the distant hills. The sun mounted high and warm. Barbara forgot the hunger

that had been gnawing inside her, remembering what the red-faced Karnes had said about a reward. She could feel the Maverick Kid's breath on the back of her neck; she squeezed his hand and was thrilled by an answering pressure.

This was the man she had thought she hated, only a few short hours before. This was the man she had been willing, even anxious, to turn over to the law!

"Don't worry, honey!" he whis-



pered as they ducked a mesquite limb. "We'll make out all right!"

Karnes, riding behind Vasco's cantle, kept turning his head to look back down toward the Pecos. Despite their double loads, the roan and the clay-bank went in a mile-eating trot.

Nobody spoke. For nearly an hour, the pace kept up steadily. The mesquites gave way to rocky foothills, carpeted between with stretches of broomweed and dusty, vivid golden-rod. Scrub cedar and wind-twisted live oaks dotted the high places, and the trail grew wilder.

The rimrocked hills were just ahead, now. Barbara was looking up at their forbidding grimness, when Karnes ripped out an oath:

"They're comin', Tom! We'd better leave this hombre and th' gal here, and ride single!"

Vasco twisted his head around. His poker face was as impassive as ever. Barbara and the Maverick Kid followed the direction of his glance.

From the fringe of chaparral they had left ten minutes before, a party of horsemen burst into view. Ten—twelve—perhaps fifteen of them.

Barbara's heart leaped. The Maverick Kid was suddenly holding her close, as if he feared to lose her.

"It's th' possel!" he breathed.

Chapter Three

VASCO raked spurs across the roan's flanks. "We can make it!" he growled. "Kick that hoss a little. There's a mile to go—all uphill!"

The Maverick Kid obeyed. For a short distance, the two horses went in a gallop, then slowed, ribs heaving with the effort. Vasco looked back again.

Ping! Zzzit!

Distance dulled, the crack of a rifle followed that glancing bullet. The Maverick Kid held Barbara close to him, shielding her with his own body. He had an idea that the shot was only meant for a warning. Surely the posse knew the girl was along—

Another shot rang out, nearer this time. Karnes yanked out his six-gun, put it back with a hopeless gesture. No .45 would carry across that distance, even downhill. Vasco pointed his roan straight up the rocky backbone of the hill, and Barbara, lifting her eyes, saw a cleft in the rimrocks.

A spent bullet dropped behind them. But now the posse was gaining. The thunder of horses' hooves rolled across the level, up the rocky slant. The girl looked behind, saw the riders stringing out, a plume of dust feathering back of them.

"Whip up!" ordered Vasco, curtly. "Karnes, let 'em know we're coming!"

The red-faced hombre jerked the six-gun skyward, yanked the trigger. One—two—three shots deliberately spaced, echoed from the rimrocks.

The Maverick Kid heard rifles crack in a scattering volley. Louder, now. It was going to be a close race to that split in the crown of the rocky hill. The posse was hammering up the slope—

Blue powder—smoke puffed from the rimrock above. Bullets sang overhead. The Maverick Kid pushed Barbara forward, making her lie low over

the saddle horn. He looked downhill.

The first of the possemen were clattering over the hump. One rider threw his hands high, pitched out of his saddle. More guns spat from the heights toward which the horses were laboring—

A slug zipped past Vasco's ear. He swore, and raced for the Winchester scabbard. But he did not pull the gun. Behind the fugitives, the clatter of hooves ceased; above them, guns still cracked.

Barbara straightened as much as the man behind her would allow, and glanced down the sun-shimmered rocks. The posse had halted, remaining scattered. None of them, as far as she could tell, was Ed Reynolds; nor could she identify Jake or Slim in the group—

"Th' posse must have split," said the Maverick Kid, reading her thoughts. "I got yuh into all of this. As soon as we can get these handcuffs off—"

"I'm staying with you!" she declared stubbornly. "You'll go back and face the law. Why can't we make a run for it now?"

He shook his head. The guns above might cut them down. There was mystery and menace behind the frowning citadel of the rimrock. From below, a voice faintly reached them:

"All right, Jenkins! All right, Vasco! Yuh win this heat. But we'll come back and smoke yuh out!"

Tom Vasco, turning his roan cayuse into the split in the rocks, smiled grimly as he looked to the rear.

"Come back and be damned!" he clipped from the corner of his slash mouth. Then, to the Maverick: "Remember that! We saved yuh from th' law. Now, git in here!"

Barbara's head was whirling at the significance of the name shouted from below. Jenkins—Matt Jenkins, worst of the rustlers and outlaws west of the Pecos!

Her boots almost scraped the sides of the narrow pass in the rock. The

gap turned, then opened fanwise into a small mesa, ringed with boulders and stunted trees. To the right was a bunch of saddle-horses, penned with stakes and riatas; to the left, bedding rolls and a smoking cook-fire under the trees showed that this was a camp of some permanence.

SHE SAW the Maverick Kid looking about him with understanding eyes. There were a dozen men up on the boulders that formed a natural parapet; some of them came climbing down, now, staring boldly at the girl.

"Six men could hold off an army, here!" the Maverick said aside to her. "If they have water—"

"Bring yore hoss to th' *tinaju!*" Karnes called back to them. As if he had overheard, he pointed to a rock waterhole under the trees. Most of the mesa drained here, and very probably it never ran dry. "If you get thirsty, there's plenty water," he added.

Vasco reined the roan near the water. He and Karnes slid to the ground. The Maverick Kid waited, watching the hombre who was coming toward them.

He was fifty or more, heavy-set and bull-necked. He walked with a swagger that slapped the twin gun holsters against his thighs. His chill blue eyes were frozen on Vasco; he scarcely seemed to notice the others—

"Well?" he demanded, halting with boots planted wide apart.

Vasco's mask-like face did not change. "It was a good job, chief," he said.

The heavy man nodded, and the semblance of a smile flashed over his coarse-featured face. Then his frosty glance shot toward Barbara and the Maverick Kid.

"Law was tailin' this hombre and his wife," Vasco said. "For murder. I thought you could use another hand—with this here reference!"

He lifted the manacle for Matt Jenkins to see. The outlaw chief

scratched a stubble of reddish-grey whiskers and regarded the handcuffs.

"It depends," he said. "We don't want no women around here. They cause trouble—specially when they're purty."

Barbara flushed under his leer. She felt the Maverick's wrist tauten as he clenched his knuckles, but his voice was even and cool, "Yuh don't think I'd leave her here, do you Jenkins? Not any longer than I can get her out safely. *Sabe?*"

Jenkins grinned outright at the hostility in the Maverick's words. He glanced back at the tall waddy, appraising his jaw, his shoulders and the panther-like strength that was suggested there.

"Full o' fight, eh? Come down off'n th' hoss and cut out th' argument. Yuh want to join up?"

"I want somethin' for us to eat, and I want to get this thing off our wrists. Th' law is after me. What do you think?"

Jenkins grinned again. "I think mebbe we'll git along!" He turned and shouted toward the trees: "Ellery! Oh, Ellery! Bring that there axe. Hurry up, now!"

BARBARA watched the man who detached himself from the group of idle curious, standing nearby. He was about the same age as the Maverick Kid—younger than the others in the hard-bitten pack. But, aside from yellowish hair and grey eyes, the resemblance to the Maverick Kid was slight. Ellery's chin was weak; he walked with a shamble.

The outlaw leader took the axe and motioned toward a boulder. "This seals th' deal!" he said. "Put yore hands down here. Don't be afraid—I ain't goin' to miss."

Barbara felt, rather than saw, the Maverick Kid's eyes on her. She met his gaze, and felt the shock of the axe on the steel that girdled her wrist. Jenkins grunted, swung again.

"There yuh are!" he grinned.

"Yore first separation, eh? Vasco tells me yore name is Brand. O K with me. Go to him; he'll fix yuh up with guns and a hoss. Remember, I'm trustin' yuh. But make a false play, and yuh won't have no use for anythin', guns or horse. *Sabe?*"

All the sentries but one were withdrawing from the parapet. Barbara knew the posse had headed homeward, and her heart sank.

Vasco took the Maverick Kid around the place, introducing him. Nobody asked questions; it was easy to see that all these were hunted men: Eph Baker, squat and long-armed like a gun-carrying gorilla; Jack Frane, wiry and hard, with a limp and a twisted nose; a saddle-colored Mexican named Vasquez, who was the wrangler, and a half dozen others. Then the girl and the lone rider ate warmed-over *frijoles* and camp bread sat apart under the trees while the afternoon dragged.

"I'll get yuh out of here!" the Maverick assured her once, when no one was within hearing. "I'll get yuh a hoss and a gun. Until I can start yuh home, I won't be ten feet from yuh."

"Not ever?" Barbara smiled. Then, more seriously: "But I won't go until you can go, too. You've got to square accounts with the law."

He was looking over at the group of outlaws who sat playing cards on a dirty tarp. She saw his knuckles clench. "I've got a job to do," he declared in a low, determined voice. "Yuh saw that brand on th' calf. I reckon there's somethin' to be found out about that. And I figger th' hombre that killed Joe Clampitt is in this outfit. Th' two things don't tie in with any sense, but I got a hunch—and if I have to run with th' wild bunch for a while to play it out, why I'll run with th' wild bunch!"

They heard Matt Jenkins' voice raised in anger, and looked over toward the gap in the rimrocks. The outlaw chief was remonstrating with the weak-chinned Ellery.

"Thought I told yuh to keep out o' sight!" ranted Jenkins, lifting his hand threateningly. "Now—git back over there, and lay low, or I'll slap a hot iron to yuh!"

The yellow-haired man cringed and obeyed. Jenkins was pacing up and down across the trail from the cleft, pausing now and then to look down through the split. A few minutes later, the girl and the Maverick knew that the person he expected had arrived.

They heard hooves on the rocky slope below. A tall rider loomed in the pass. He entered the stronghold, leading another horse behind his own. The riderless animal wore a saddle, and was a pinto—

"Five Spot!" gasped the Maverick Kid.

MATT JENKINS swaggered to meet the newcomer, and Barbara saw the rider leap to the ground and confer with the outlaw chief in hurried, gesticulatory speech. There was something vaguely familiar about the man as she watched him. Vasquez went to take the horses, and as he led them toward the *tinaja*, the rider called, "Leave my cayuse saddled, Vasquez!"

Things happened swiftly, then. Jenkins and the rider walked toward the group of card-players. The outlaw leader glanced at the lowering sun. It was already behind the rimrock.

"Git ready to ride—all of yuh!" he ordered. "Crockett's due at th' ranch any time—tonight, most likely!"

"Crockett?" gasped the Maverick Kid. He looked at the girl. She was staring at the new arrival in camp, and as she saw him remove his Stetson and wipe perspiration from his forehead, she gave a little, involuntary cry and hurriedly turned her head.

"That man will recognize me, Maverick!" she whispered. "He was one of the extra hands Ed Reynolds hired to move the cattle—his name's Tom Boyle."

Maverick's lean jaw tightened, and he rested his hands on the butts of the twin six-guns Vasco had given him. "We got to make a break!" he gritted. "They're figgerin' on movin' in on yore dad's cattle—before he gets here. That means they'll ride tonight. Come with me. Take Five Spot—he looks fresher than th' other hoss. I'll ride th' sorrell!"

The girl shook her head. "They'll shoot you down before you can get through the rimrock!"

"I'll take a chance on that. Got to get yuh out of here. You ride first—I'll cover for yuh. Be ready. Let's walk toward th' *tinaja*!"

They strolled, leisurely. The path took them within earshot of Matt Jenkins' harsh voice, lowered now as he gave detailed instructions, "—got cash for that ranch over on th' Llano. A hundred thousand. That means half of it left. He only paid fifty thousand for this ranch. Now, Ellery—" the outlaw lowered his voice here, and his words to the weak-chinned man were unintelligible.

He turned to the others, "We got to make a killin' and clear out. Th' posse went back, today. They'll come bigger. Law's spreadin'—it's comin' west of th' Pecos. Frane!"

Jack Frane, the man with the limp and the twisted nose, grunted an answer.

"Yore job's toughest of all. Ride south, double back up th' river road. Be on hand at th' Bar O early, *sabe*? Deliver this to Crockett personally. Then high-tail it and meet me here!"

Barbara saw Jenkins hand Frane an envelope. And then there was no time, no chance to observe or hear any more. The Maverick Kid gripped her arm.

He whispered passionately. "I'm tellin' yuh now, 'cause I may never get another chance. I love yuh! If I sell out makin' this break, keep on ridin'—and remember *that*, always remember *that*! I love yuh!"

She looked briefly into his eyes.

"Don't get hurt, Maverick. I've been looking for you all my life. I don't want to lose you now."

VASQUEZ was standing in the creeping shadows of the trees, allowing the horses to drink sparingly. The Maverick Kid shoved a six-gun into Barbara's hand, then turned to walk silently as a panther toward the Mexican wrangler.

Jenkins raised his voice suddenly: "Brand!" he called. "Vasquez! I want everybody here to listen to orders. Where's that new hombre? That's what comes o' havin' a woman in camp—"

Vasquez turned to answer his chief. Barbara saw the startled gleam of his teeth in the shadows. Then the smack of a gun butt on bone.

The wrangler collapsed, arms dangling into the rock-rimmed water-hole. The Maverick thrust reins in her hand. "Ride!" he ordered, but she waited until he had his boot-tee in the stirrup of Boyle's sorrel.

"Find 'em, Vasco!" Jenkins ordered. "And—what's that?"

Came a sudden flurry of hooves out of the twilight shadows of the trees. The split in the rimrock was a narrow splotch of purple in the grey dusk. She drove spurs to the pinto, and lay low on his neck.

Baang!

She saw a man leap for her bridle, heard the Maverick's gun roar. The man doubled, hands at the pit of his stomach, making queer, gurgling sounds—

"Stand back!" roared the Maverick Kid, and the sorrel shot up to

crowd between her and the pack of outlaws.

Action crowded a long second, packing it with clamoring fury. Matt Jenkins ripped out an oath, snatched his gun from his holster, triggered from the hip. The Maverick Kid's .45 thundered twice, and men scattered from their path. Jenkins' bullet tore between them, flattened with a loud *spat* against the rocks beyond.

Tom Boyle's shout floated after them, "That's Crockett's gall! Stop her!"

THE GIRL shot a look back. She saw the Maverick Kid, riding Indian style, his gun flaming under the sorrel's neck. She saw another man crumple, heard Matt Jenkins bellowing for his pack to take to their horses—and then the rocky walls of the gap caught up the drumming of the pinto's hooves and flung the cacophony back into her ears.

Bullets hailed against the side wall, caromed from it, whined into the shadows. The fugitives burst out on the brow of the steep hill, and the purpling valleys lay beneath.

"Don't slow up!" yelled the Maverick. There was triumph in his tone.

Wind blasted into the girl's face. She closed her eyes, expecting the pinto to stumble and roll any instant. But he was as sure-footed as a mountain goat, and Barbara opened her eyes again. Whatever danger there was, she realized suddenly, she had to share it with the tall, tawny-haired rider just behind her. Whatever might face them, in all the years to come, she would be at his side—

The trail widened; the steepness eased. Maverick came up by her. He was cautioning her to keep low, and as she ducked she heard the zip of a rifle bullet above. There was no crack of the gun from the outlaw stronghold; another slug whipped past, and there was still no sound of the shot. Then came the clear, loud clatter of



the first horse through the pass.

The Maverick smiled at her; she saw his teeth gleam in the thickening dusk. "They'll have a hard time catchin' us, honey!"

"Where—where are we going, Maverick."

"We split. *You* go on to th' ranch. Find Reynolds and th' rest. Tell 'em th' rustlers are after th' herd. Then stay there—with somebody to look after yuh."

"And you?"

He looked away. "I got a couple of scores to settle. I'll be along, later!"

Barbara shook her blonde curls. "I'll ride to the ranch. But I'm coming back, Maverick. I'm coming back to fight by your side!"

They clattered down from the hill, reached the straggle of chaparral. Maverick held up his hand, and they drew rein for a precious thirty seconds while the horses breathed. Behind, perhaps a mile, perhaps more, came the rolling thunder of a dozen horses.

"This way!" said the tall rider, and veered to the left. They crashed into the chaparral and rode for the Pecos. For an hour they kept the horses in an easy lope, and before they reached the river, the moon was up.

There was scarcely a breeze down in the river valley. Grey ghosts of mesquites hung listlessly; somewhere in the stunted trees, a cricket shrilled. The eerie wail of a coyote floated down from a rimrock across the twisting stream.

Barbara shuddered. It seemed a year since the evening before, when the Maverick Kid rode out of the darkness into her life, and the queer jumble of events that had entangled it. A year since she heard the panther's scream. The coyote turned its nose to the stars again. Tonight, more men would die—

"Here's th' Pecos!" drawled the Maverick. "We cross together. Let **Five Spot** have his head."

Horses' hooves broke the silvered surface. The stream was not as deep here as it had been where the Maverick leaped from the wagon. The horses waded, struck swimming water, and made it across easily. As they topped the crumbling eastern bank, the tall cowboy pulled rein.

"One thing's got me buffaloed," he said. "What's Jenkins sendin' to yore dad by Jack Frane?"

The girl shook her head. Until now, she had had no time to puzzle over this mysterious move of the outlaw.

"I don't know. Unless he's serving notice on dad to get out of the country. If he is—"

"That ain't it. It's got somethin' to do with fifty thousand dollars. Jenkins mentioned a clean-up. Mebbe he knew who yuh was all th' time."

"I don't think so. Listen!"

The Maverick turned his head and nodded. "Th' herd's still under that pasture wire—bunched where they can get at 'em easy! Yuh better hurry. And—and—"

"Yes, Maverick?"

"Would yuh mind tellin' me good-by?"

She leaned out of her saddle. The Maverick's arms were hungry, and strong. His lips crushed the softness of her mouth in a kiss that was both fierce and tender. The moon rocked, and the stars whirled, and the river's song was a sigh in the night.

They drew apart, reluctantly, breathless, both a little shaken by the intensity of the caress. For a few seconds Barbara looked at him, and then, with a little cry, she whirled the pinto and headed into the mesquites.

Chapter Four

THE DARK hills shouldered down toward her, and here, on the higher stretches, there was a breeze to whisper in the sinister shadows of the live oaks. Barbara let the pinto slow to a walk as he climbed, but on the ridge she spurred

him again. And then, a little later, she caught the glimmer of the moon on whirling windmill blades.

There were no lights at the Bar O. She halted the horse suddenly. The Maverick Kid wanted to get her out of danger. She might have known, as he probably had known, that the Bar O cowboys would still be out hunting for her—hunting for the Maverick Kid—

Hooves crashed through the dry leaves under the oaks beside her. She whirled, going for the heavy gun the Maverick had given her. Before she could draw it, the rider was upon her.

"Hands up!" he barked, then put down the gun that was glinting in the moonlight. "Why—Miss Barbara! Are yuh all right?"

It was Ed Reynolds. The girl laughed. "Of course I'm all right! Where are the other boys? We have to hurry, Ed! Where's th' posse?"

He stared. "Back in town. They're comin' back out sometime tonight or early in th' mornin'. Yore dad will probably be with 'em. Why—what's th' matter?"

"Maverick! He's back up there where the herd is. Jenkins' gang is going to rustle the whole herd!"

Reynolds swore softly. "Come on!" He turned his horse. "Jake and Slim are over th' ridge, here. We was waitin' for th' posse. So, th' Maverick Kid is in cahoots with Matt Jenkins, eh?"

"He is not!" flared the girl. "He's up there ready to fight the whole bunch. We've got to hurry—they'll kill him!"

The foreman looked at her curiously, then his jaw clicked. He slapped his horse with the end of his riata, and they topped the ridge. Down the other side, under a lone live oak, the two other men were waiting.

"It was th' Maverick's hoss, all right," said Reynolds. "But see who's on it! She says th' outlaws are—"

He bit off his words suddenly. Down river, borne on the rustling

breeze, came the first rumble of six-guns in the night!

"You'll believe me, now!" Barbara breathed, and her next words were a prayer. "I hope he's all right!"

"Come on, boys!" Reynolds turned on her. "Go on to th' house, Miss Barbara. We can find this ruckus. I'll try and watch out for th' Maverick."

"I can do that, myself!" the girl snapped. "If the posse comes, they'll hear us. Let's ride!"

Ed Reynolds knew the will she had, knew there was no time to argue. He hit spurs to his horse. The four riders hammered down from the oak-dotted slope, into the mesquites.

STILL A MILE and a half away, Barbara caught sight of the gun-flashes, like fireflies in the chaparral. The slow thunder of the guns followed—and then was drowned by a new sound. The herd was stampeding!

She urged the pinto on to greater speed. He was not as fresh as the other horses, but neither was he carrying as much weight. Mesquite limbs tore at the girl's chaps, threatened to scratch her out of the saddle. Above the hammering of horses' hooves, she heard that growing, earth-shaking rumble of a thousand steers, and knew that the Jenkins gang had cut the wire.

The herd was running toward the river. Cutting at a tangent across the path of the stampede, the girl and the three Bar O men raced desperately to get clear in time. A swirl of powdered alkali dust swirled down upon them, fogging across the moon—

"Who's there?"

The challenge came suddenly from the dim mesquites. Barbara looked up, saw two men there. She knew the Maverick Kid would not compromise—where there were two, they were enemies. She brought up the .45, and was the first to fire.

The gun's heavy kick was a comfort in her hand. One of the men

howled and grabbed his arm, falling sidewise in his saddle. The other blazed away at the advancing group, then wheeled his horse and was off to spread the alarm. Around on the far side of the herd, guns were thundering.

White-faced cattle loomed in the haze, running blindly, heads lowered, pressure of a mad, unreasoning tide behind them. Ed Reynolds motioned the girl on, and closed in on the flank of the steers, firing across their faces in an effort to turn them.

Barbara felt a quick, joyful relief. All that gunfire didn't necessarily mean that the Maverick was in the fight! The outlaws would be firing their guns to stampede the cattle, perhaps—

A mesquite limb whipped across her face. She brushed the tears away with the back of her hand, leaned lower over the saddle. A bunch of cattle that had split from the main herd ran in front of the pinto. Ranch-trained, he wheeled, broke into a cinch-straining run to head them.

Barbara jerked leather, turned Five Spot back. And then she saw that the Bar O men had become separated from her in the melee, and she was all alone. It was up to her to find the Maverick.

Over to the right, guns were barking. That, she reasoned, was Reynolds and the boys. She swung the pinto to the left, with the thunder of the stampede in her ears. Riding down through a gravel-sliding draw, she came out beyond and drew rein to get her bearings.

The metallic click of a rifle-lever reached her above the dull rumble of hooves and the confused bawling of the herd. She whirled in the direction of the sound.

A tall rider sat his horse in the dim shadow of a mesquite. Moonlight shone alone on the blue steel of the rifle barrel as he lifted the gun to his shoulder. He had not seen Barbara.

It was Tom Vasco. The girl fol-

lowed the direction of his aim with her eyes, and then bit her lips to stifle a scream.

The Maverick Kid, plain in the moonlight, was riding warily down the rise beyond, a six-gun in his hand. As she caught sight of him, he halted suddenly.

WITH A dull thwack, a bullet slapped the mesquites. The Maverick Kid ducked, and came up with his gun ready. But the telltale rifle-barrel had been snaked back into the shadow of the mesquite.

Barbara heard another click—a sound too slight to carry to the Maverick's ears. She brought up the heavy six-gun, thumbed the hammer back, and took aim. Flame blossomed in her hand.

Vasco's horse jumped. The bullet made a queer, sickening sound. The raw-boned hombre went out of his saddle as if struck by a limb. Barbara remembered what the Maverick Kid had said about the force of a .45—

He was spurring toward her, calling her name. Tom Vasco threshed on the ground, groaning, clutching his shattered shoulder. The girl rode up to the spot where he had fallen.

"Get his gun, Maverick!" she called. "The rifle—it's got a silencer on it!"

The Maverick leaped from his saddle. Vasco rolled over and tried to pull a six-shooter. The tall cowboy kicked it neatly out of his hand, then picked it up.

Hooves crashed on the left of them, away from the herd. The Maverick hastily pulled Barbara out of the saddle and forced her down into the shadows at the base of the mesquite. Vasco swore luridly.

"Shut up!" growled the Maverick. "Yuh didn't give Joe Clampitt a chance, did yuh? Well—yuh had yores, and lost. Keep down, honey! This looks like showdown!"

It was a group of the outlaws rid-

ing toward them. Too late, Barbara and the Maverick realized that Vasco probably had been stationed here by the rise—that the others were coming by, tailing the herd—

Without waiting, the Maverick Kid opened fire. The group scattered. Barbara counted five of them—Matt Jenkins, Eph Baker, Tom Boyle and two others—

Again flame spouted from the smokepole in the Kid's fist.

The heavy, red-faced Baker went down. Guns began spitting back, the outlaws firing at the flashes from the Maverick's weapon. Lead ripped into the mesquite, gouged dirt and gravel from the ground and hurled it in a stinging shower. The sorrel and Five Spot stampeded down into the draw.

Escape was cut off, now. This was the end; showdown. Barbara crawled over the ground, inching her way toward that .30-30 Vasco had used—

"Off yore hosses, men!" Jenkins boomed. "Scatter and rush him!"

They swung down. Hot lead from the Maverick's .45 answered them. Tom Boyle flung his arms high and melted into the blackness of the earth.

Three left. They advanced cautiously, a foot at a time. Jenkins was in front, crawling behind bushes, slamming a shot their way at intervals of a half minute. The other two had spread out, were coming in on the wings—

Now there were long seconds when there was no sound but the rumble of the herd. And that noise seemed to have diminished. Far down toward the river, a sudden fusillade of gunfire broke out, ripping the night.

Jenkins swore. "Th' dirty skunk got th' posse 'out, boys!" he yelled in high-pitched fury. "Git him!"

BARBARA lay low in the shadows and rested her cheek along the rifle stock. She pumped a shell into the chamber and waited.

The man on the left came charging. It was the signal for a concerted at-

tack, for a rattling hail of lead that slammed into the mesquite, into the cat-claw bush at its base, into the shadows that afforded their only protection.

Braang! Bang! Br-raang!

The Maverick's gun cracked. He was getting to his feet, now, a yell on his lips. He had Vasco's .45 in his left hand, the other gun in his right—

Crack!

The girl squeezed trigger. Running in from the left, dodging behind bushes, the outlaw she sighted went down, sprawling, smearing his face in the dirt.

She whirled. Two left. One, now. The Maverick's six-gun stopped the other hombre—and there was only Jenkins.

He came in a bull-like rush, mouthing curses with insane, incoherent fury. He fanned the hammers of his twin six-guns, and they flamed before him.

Barbara never heard the Maverick's .45 crack. A sudden faintness was sweeping over her. From behind, where the noise of the running herd diminished, there was a clatter of riding men. Too many to be Reynolds and the boys—must be more outlaws—

She clutched at the mesquite, held on to it. Opening her eyes, she saw Matt Jenkins falter suddenly in his charge. He spun halfway around and fell heavily.

The Maverick Kid holstered his smoking guns, heard the hammering hooves, and yanked them out again. But Barbara was creeping into his arms, sobbing. He thrust her behind him—and then saw Reynolds and the other Bar O men at the head of the pack.

"I reckon it's over, Reynolds!" called the Maverick, coolly. "This time I won't break arrest!"

ATALL, SPARE man rode out of the group. "Barbara!" he called, and slid from his saddle. The girl stumbled toward him. "Daddy Jim! Daddy Jim!"

Reynolds climbed down, brought a heavily-built man with him. "Maverick," he said, "this here's th' sheriff. But there ain't goin' to be no arrest. Th' posse raided Jenkins' hideout over there jest after th' gang started after you and Miss Barbara. They picked up a couple o' skunks. Look—yuh seen 'em before?"

The Maverick looked, and nodded. "Ellery!" he said. "And Franel!"

"Yeah," the sheriff cleared his throat. "Frane says that Tom Vasco killed Clampitt. And he was totin' a letter that kinda cleared it up. Mr. Crockett, could I have that letter a minute?"

The ranchman handed over an envelope, and the sheriff unfolded its contents. Reynolds struck a match.

"This here feud goes back a ways," commented the sheriff. "Read it, Maverick."

The Maverick Kid read, while Reynolds kept striking matches. Barbara Crockett caught the ranchman's hand and pulled him over to the group so that she could read, too.

Jim Crockett:

Remember twenty years ago on the Canadian how you got the upper hand and run out a spread called the Forked Lightning? Remember how your son four years old got stole and drowned in Red river? Well this is to inform you that the boy was not drowned at all but lived and the man who knows he is still alive is working for you named Joe Clampitt. We have your son and will deliver him to you for the sum of fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) cash which we know you have. Here is a locket from the boy's neck if that ain't enough identification the Forked Lightning brand—

"Maverick!" It was Barbara Crockett, gripping the tall cowboy's shoulder. He looked up at her in a dazed way and went on reading:

—the Forked Lightning brand is on his shoulder. Remember I told you if I ever caught the boy I would brand him? I did only he got away from me for a spell due to this same Clampitt being a trater. But I have him now and unless you shell out you will never see him alive. Follow this messenger with the money.

The match flickered and died, but not before the Maverick Kid, head whirling, had seen the Forked Lightning brand at the bottom of the printed sheet.

Involuntarily, his hand went to his shoulder. Barbara's was already there. She plucked at the pins that held his torn shirt.

The sheriff was talking. "This here Ellery has also confessed. Jenkins picked him up a couple o' months ago, and slapped a brand on his shoulder. That was when Jenkins heard that Mr. Crockett was goin' to buy th' Bar O. Jenkins knew th' Pecos country couldn't hold 'em both. They laid this plot, and they killed Clampitt. He knew too much."

Barbara pulled Jim Crockett closer. "Strike a match, Ed!" she said in a voice tense with emotion. "Daddy Jim, I want you to look here. I—I want you to meet your real son—the Maverick Kid! Joe Clampitt got him away from the old Jenkins gang. Joe thought he died. But he didn't—here's the brand!"

The match flickered on old Jim Crockett's face. His moustache twitched, and he swallowed hard. In the darkness, his hand found that of the Maverick, and his other arm stole around the cowboy's shoulders.

"Maverick Kid!" he said in a choked tone. "I reckon it's true—after all these years. It ain't th' Maverick Kid any longer—it's Jim Crockett, junior. We used to call you Bud. Let me see—yuh'r a man, son—a man any father ought to be proud of! Now you'll settle down and stay home with me, won't yuh?"

The Maverick blinked back moisture in his eyes and laughed happily. For answer, he took Barbara into his arms and kissed her lips.

The girl spoke for him.

"Try to run him away, Daddy Jim!" she said. "Just try!"

THE END

LONG - REMEMBERED LADY



True Fact Story

By Bert Reichert

WHEN Julia Bulette's body was found in her bed that Sunday morning of January 20, 1867, the "good women" of Virginia City, Nevada, rejoiced; but the men of the town went into outraged mourning and vowed not to rest until Julia's killer had been brought to justice.

For Julia, although one of the many girls who made their living by "entertaining" the men of the city, had been more than just a "lady of the line." Tall, slim and dark-eyed, her generous personality dominated Virginia City. Her lacquered brougham, decorated with a crest of four aces, was a familiar sight on its streets, and no parade was complete without Julia riding enthroned on the superbly polished fire engine of Company No. 1.

But it wasn't Julia's attractiveness, alone, that endeared her to the hearts



of the men of Virginia City. When Julia heard of a family that was destitute or of children who needed clothing, she provided suitable gifts, mak-

ing certain that the donations were made anonymously so those receiving them might feel no embarrassment over accepting charity from her. When men were killed in the mines, she was prompt to contribute money to a fund for their widows. And once, when Virginia City was threatened with attack by the Piute Indians, Julia refused to leave with the other women being sent to Carson for safety, preferring to remain with the men and nurse them.

All of which perhaps explains why the men of the city adored her and why the "good" women detested her; the ladies naturally saw in her a rival for their husband's affections, and a menace to their family life.

Julia lived alone in a house on the corner of Union and D Streets, where she entertained lavishly. But she permitted no rough-house or vulgar talk in her home. On the contrary, she encouraged good conversation, served meals of outstanding quality and taught the men to appreciate fine wines and champagnes.

On this Sunday morning of January 20, 1867, Gertrude Holmes, a neighbor and also a friend entered the back door of Julia's home at eleven-thirty to call her for a breakfast the two women had arranged. She found Julia lying in her bed, her head in the normal position but her feet and legs protruding to one side from under the covers. Death had been caused by strangulation.

Two doctors who examined the body estimated that she had been dead some six or eight hours when found. A newspaper carrier, upon hearing of her death, came forward and testified that he had heard a single loud scream coming from the direction of Julia's house as he made his rounds at five o'clock in the morning.

Examination of the body revealed that Julia had been struck with a stick of wood, leaving bruises on the side of her head. The blows had apparently served only to awaken her, resulting in the scream the newspaper-carrier heard. Alarmed, the murderer

had strangled Julia and then robbed the house.

To kill a woman on the Western frontier was about the most heinous offense a man could commit. When murder was committed with only a robbery as the motive—as in Julia's case—it placed the killer completely beyond the pale. The men of Virginia City vowed he would not escape.

But tracking down the murderer was not so easy. The Virginia city of those days had no crime-detection laboratories operated by men skilled in gathering clues. In fact, it was later revealed that the killer sat up with the corpse at the funeral parlor the night after the murder and marched in the funeral procession wearing crepe on his arm.

IT WAS NOT until three months after Julia's death that the crime was solved, and even then it was not through the efforts of the authorities that the killer was caught.

The break came when Martha Camp, a friend of Julia's, found a man in her room carrying a large knife. The man escaped when Martha screamed, but she recognized him on the street several days later and had him arrested for attempted murder and robbery. He was identified as John Millain, a resident of Virginia City.

After Millain's arrest, evidence was presented to connect him with Julia's murder. A woman testified she had bought a dress pattern from him which had belonged to Julia. A jeweler reported he had bought a diamond pin from Millain, and this was identified as having been Julia's. Spurred by this evidence, the authorities instituted a search for Millain's possessions. In a trunk he had left with a French baker, they found numerous articles which had been the property of the dead woman.

Although Millain had informally confessed the murder to the authorities when shown the evidence against him, he pleaded not guilty at his trial,

which began on June 26, 1867. He admitted having taken part in the robbery, but claimed that two other men had actually committed the murder. The jury, however, believed Millain guilty and brought a verdict to that effect.

Millain's lawyer, Charles E. DeLong appealed the case to the Nevada supreme court, but a rehearing was refused and the case was returned to the Virginia City court. There, on February 22, 1868, Millain was sentenced to be hanged on the twenty-fourth day of April, between the hours of ten in the morning and four in the afternoon.

Despite his conviction, Millain lived high at the jail while awaiting execution. The "good women" of Virginia City brought him wines, jellies and other delicacies, apparently feeling that the murder of Julia Bulette was not a crime to be punished by death. They even circulated a petition urging that Millain's sentence be commuted to life imprisonment.

But on April 24 Millain was execut-

ed before a crowd consisting of almost everyone in Virginia City. The town's militia, and forty special deputy sheriffs, were needed to handle the surging mass of humanity which marched with the killer to the place of execution, a natural amphitheater one mile north of the city.

Millain took his execution calmly. He read a prepared statement in French, his native tongue, then thanked the good ladies of the city for their interest in him. After kneeling while the noose was being adjusted and the black hood pulled down over his face. The trap was released and Millain at last paid in full for his crime.

Millain's grave in the cemetery at Virginia City has long been neglected and its exact location today is unknown. But the grave of Julia Bulette on Flowery Hill has been carefully tended throughout the years, the only grave in the cemetery to be given perpetual care.

THE END

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Look for
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FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

WITH PRINTER'S INK -- AND LEAD!



EDITOR Mal Smith was in the back room, setting-up an ad for the Mercantile when the two gunmen came into the *Stirrup's* office. The young newspaperman rubbed ink-stained fingers on his worn leather

apron. "Who's out there?"

"Two friends."

Smith did not recognize the voice; he had been publishing the *Singletree Stirrup* for only a month, and there were still many men on this range he could not recognize by their voices alone. "Coming right out, men."

He pulled off his dirty apron, for it was always best to present a good front when meeting a customer. He threw the apron over the press and started toward the front office. He was going through the door when the fist smashed into him.

The glancing blow almost floored him. Mal went back and felt the wall steady him. Through a haze, he saw the man who had hit him; that one was coming ahead, a grin on his thick lips, fists up and ready for another blow. He was squat and tough-looking.

Behind him stood a lanky man who grinned in open pleasure. This hombre growled, "Finish the bucko, Sid."

"I'll finish him!"

Both were strangers to Editor Mal Smith. But there was trouble here on this range and his newspaper had taken him into this trouble. He found

★ ★ ★
By Lee Floren

Mal Smith knew he was a fool to buck Jack Williams, to set his newspapers against the man's well-used guns, and the violence his money could hire. But Smith preferred being that kind of fool to becoming a captive journalist.

★ ★ ★

himself asking, "You two gents work for Jack Williams?"

His words sounded distant.

"Maybe we do," the advancing man conceded; and hit at Mal again. But, by this time, the shock had somewhat left the editor and a cold anger, deadly yet controlled, surged through him. He ducked; the man missed.

"Work the gent over, Sid!"

Mal was no fist-fighter; this man outweighed him, and his surprise attack had put the odds with him even to a greater extent than his weight allowed. Besides, if Mal accidentally did whip the man called Sid—and that would be a big accident—there was still the lanky one left.

Smith was sure Jack Williams had sent these two over to wreck the *Stirrup's* office, for nobody but Williams would sic two gunmen onto him. This thought was strong in him as he sledge-hammered Sid in the belly. Sid grunted, hurt.



The agonized tone in the grunt brought a wild hope to Mal. There might be a chance... a slim chance. Then, Sid hit him again alongside the head. The blow was mauling, stunning; another red haze surged over the young editor.

Sid could hit; he was fast, hard, tough. Again, Mal felt the wall behind him; he saw Sid come in.

Sid's face was pale, his lips pulled back. His eyes were almost closed under pulled down lids. His head was down, too, his left shoulder high in front of him to protect his coarse jaw. He had all the mannerisms of a professional fighter.

These facts registered on Smith. Had Jack Williams sent this pair over to kill him? This put desperation into him and made him fight with the strength of a man about to die. He knew he could not hope to whip Sid; he did not have the strength or the skill. Bravery had its place in life, but in this case bravery was almost foolishness. He slid along the wall.

Sid missed.

The lanky man watched with a smile on his sallow face. Mal fell against his desk and his hand landed on his heavy inkwell. He flung it wildly, pitched it underhand, and it smashed into Sid's belly. He heard the whoosh of Sid's breath, and the blow stopped Sid. It doubled him and anguish showed on the man's face.

"Gimme a hand, Marty!"

The man named Marty had locked the door; he now tossed the key in the corner and it made a thin metallic sound as it hit the hell-box. Marty said, "You asked for it, printer!"

It wasn't much of a fight. Mal did his best, but his best was pitifully short. Despite the two against him, he made a fair fight. His paper punch helped; he threw it and it smacked Marty across the bridge of his nose. It tore and cut, but it didn't stop Marty.

"Tough gink, eh?"

A fist hit Mal from behind. Sid

was back in the fight. Mal fell into Marty's blow. It turned him. Sid hit him; he was out on his feet, but still he fought.

A smashing blow connected on his jaw. He never did find out whether it had been sent by Marty or by Sid. The floor came up and hit him.

A VOICE, far away and dim, said "He'll come out of it soon. Here, give me that whiskey jug again, please."

"He's had enough whiskey, Doctor Arms!" The feminine voice was filled with authority.

"This isn't for Mal, Peg; this drink is for me."

"He's coming out of it, doc."

Mal Smith did not speak for some moments; he just sat with his back to the wall. The odor of whiskey was thick and he did not like the taste of the liquor. Doc Arms had poured down him. Mal looked up at Peg Harwell and tried to smile; he didn't figure his smile was too successful.

Peg wasn't hard to smile at, either; she had dark hair, dark eyes, and a straight-lined jaw. Now Mal wondered if those dark eyes really showed concern for him, or if he was just imagining this was hidden in her eyes. She had hard eyes to read. "Howdy," he said. Crazy thing to say, but he had said it.

"How do you feel, Mal?"

Mal said, "I've got a headache, for one thing; for another, my eye is almost closed."

"You'll have a lovely shiner," Doc Arms said.

Arms was a stocky, thick man of about fifty. He took another pull at his jug. Mal glanced around his printshop. His desk was upside down and its drawers had been pulled out and papers were strewn on the floor. Somebody had fallen over the hell-box and tipped its contents. Yes, and the waste-paper basket was flat, over there in the corner.



"Who did it, Mal?" Peg demanded. Smith made himself grin. "Two strangers to me. One named Sid; the other was called Marty. I figure they worked for Jack Williams."

Peg looked around at the wreckage, hands on her hips. "Who else would they be working for, if they aren't on Williams' payroll! After they knocked you out, they tipped over

the press. They scattered type all over the back room; they tipped over your paper racks."

"They missed nothing," Doc Arms said.

Mal got to his feet rather slowly. For one thing his knees needed braces; somebody was hammering an anvil in his skull. Back against the wall, he closed his eyes and fought nausea.

"Here, Doc, help me get him in this chair!"

Arms and Peg got him into the chair. Doc asked if he wanted a drink and Mal shook his head. Peg went into the back room. Doc drank and said, "You're a fool, Smith."

"I'm not crazy enough to drink myself to death," Mal said pointedly.

"I'd rather drink myself to a grave than to have one of Jack Williams' bullets put me there."

"Williams won't kill me."

Doc Arms snorted. "You're kidding yourself, son. Come over to my office inside an hour for a checkup . . . that is, if you're still with us inside of another hour."

"You're cheerful."

"I'm a realist."

Doc Arms left, jug under his arm, bag in the other hand.

MAL LOWERED his head onto his desk. He felt sick; he was tired and nausea hit him. He fought it, won, and heard Peg moving around in the back room. He thought of Doc Arm's warning. Maybe Doc was right; maybe he wasn't using good sense. Jack Williams had warned him. Williams had stood on the porch of his big *Emporium* saloon and said, "Done heard you aim to publish a newspaper in this burg, fella?"

"I do."

Williams toyed with the silver coin that hung to the gold watch-chain that spanned his vest, then looked over Mal's shoulder to a farmer who had pulled his wagon and team to the hitchrack in front of the Mercantile. Mal followed the wide man's gaze.

"You've been in Singletree a week, Smith." Jack Williams spoke very softly. "You know how things stand between me an' the farmers; don't get on the wrong side of the fence."

Mal kept his face blank. Williams was warning him not to hook up with the farmers.

Six months ago, Williams had controlled Singletree Basin, running his Double W cows over government land. He had no deeds for the land over which his cattle ran. No cowman in Wyoming ran cattle over deeded land; they ran their stock on government range. Jack Williams had been the big boss on this grass.

Then Congress passed the Homestead Act; and the Union Western Railroad put its rails into Wisdom which was forty miles to the east. The rails would not reach Singletree, for the railroad turned at Wisdom and crossed the Rockies over Northwest Pass.

But rails did not need to reach Singletree; farmers could haul their grain and produce the forty miles to the railroad elevators. And so farmers came into Singletree Basin. They took up homesteads and filed on desert-and-hill-claims and they moved in on Williams' range.

Jack acted quickly by staking-out cowpunchers on choice water-holes; these cowpunchers would prove up on their homesteads and then deed their titles over to Williams.

And Mal asked, "Which is the wrong side, Williams?"

"The farmers' side, of course. But these farmers can't stay; the wind will drive them out, and this country is too dry for farming."

"You threatening me?"

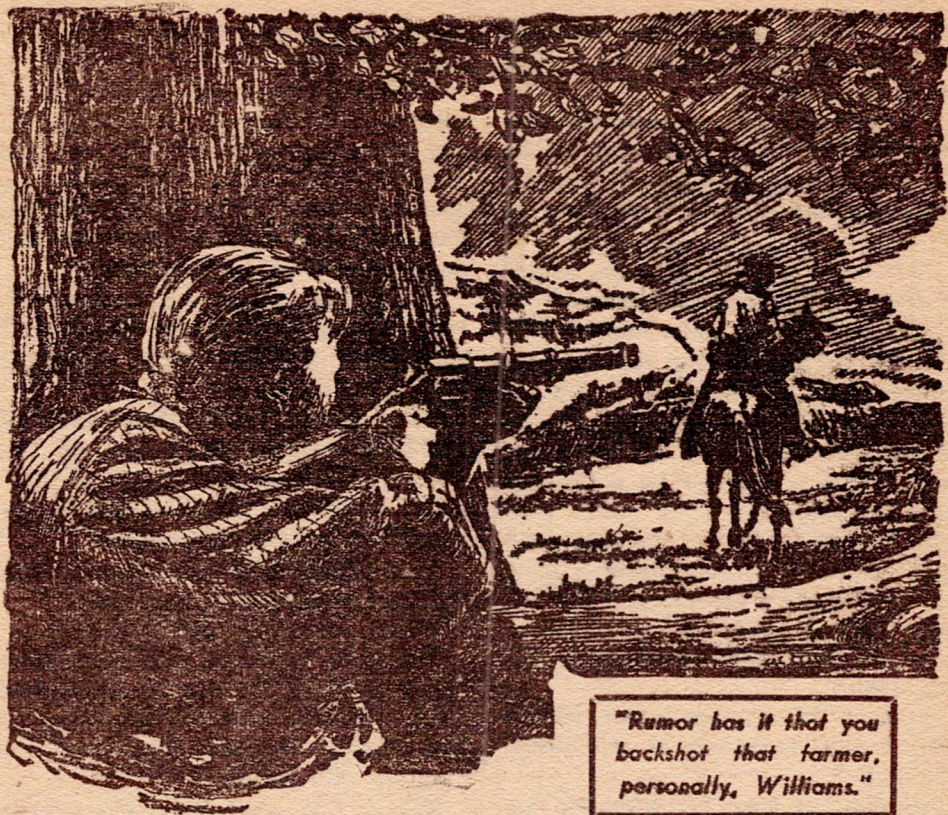
"I don't threaten; I order."

Mal Smith kept his voice calm. "Tomorrow my press is to be freighted into town; by Friday, my first edition will be out for sale."

"Where will you stand?"

"On the side of law and order; on the side I think is right."

"And what is that side?" Williams



"Rumor has it that you
backshot that farmer,
personally, Williams."

studied him with his dead eyes.

Mal wished he could have read what thoughts ran and played behind those obsidian-dark eyes. "What do you think?"

"I'm sorry. You know, Smith, I kinda like you, too."

Jack Williams had apparently lost all taste for further conversation, and Mal walked down the street remembering the man's hard eyes.

Now, sick and beaten, Smith remembered this conversation.

IN THE FIRST edition of the *Stirrup*, Mal pointed out that his sheet stood for the advancement of the Singletree country. Lawlessness and disorder must go and although he used no names the editorial lifted a bony finger toward one man—Jack Williams.

Two days later Williams called at the *Stirrup's* office. By that time Peg Harwell, who taught the local school

wintertime, was working with Mal.

"Danger coming, Mal."

"Not too much danger."

"Plenty dangerous."

Williams, seemingly was cordial. "I could sue you for libel, Smith, but a court of law is no place to end a little argument; so I reckon I'll jes' starve you out of business."

"You can't do it."

"That's your opinion." Williams bowed to Peg. "Good day, Madam." And then he walked out, exuding power.

Mal looked at Peg. "He's not too tough."

"You don't know him like I do, Mal; you haven't been in this burg as long as I have."

Now Smith, remembering his fight, saw he had underestimated the power and ruthlessness of Jack Williams. Peg stuck her head in the door; she figured they could straighten up the press and

make it usable again. Type was scattered though and it would be a hard job to sort it out.

Mal got to his feet, stronger now. He went into the back room and looked the situation over and judged Peg was right. She had a good level head on her.

"What are you going to do, Mal?"

"Keep on publishing, of course."

"Can you handle a six-shooter?"

Smith knew what she meant. This would end in gunsmoke if he did not kowtow to Williams, and he was no gunman. Before coming to Singletree, he had been a reporter on a Chicago sheet. He had saved a few bucks, then headed west to find a growing community where he would have a good chance to make a success of his newspaper. "No, I can't."

"You'd best take some quick lessons, then."

He said, "I'm a good shot with a rifle; I used to belong to a Chicago rifle club."

She did not meet his eyes. He noticed that she was frowning and Mel figured he knew full well what was bothering her. It was the same thing that had tormented him for weeks. Now this lay between them and neither mentioned it but both were keenly aware of the other's affections.

"I'll get some help to help us raise up that press," Mal said.

When Mal walked past the *Emporium*, Williams loafed in the easy chair on the big porch. "Done heard two range bums come in an' wrecked your print shop."

"Yeah, two range bums...hired by Jack Williams."

Williams' fingers toyed with the silver coin on the watch chain. "Can you prove that, Smith?"

"I'll admit I can't—no more than the local law can prove your men, or you, murdered that farmer last week out in the alley behind your place.

Rumor has it you backshot him, personally."

Williams' face was the color of watersoaked rawhide as he got on his feet. Mal saw he had said too much but he blamed it on the recent excitement. This, along with his natural hatred toward this man, had got the better of his judgment.

"If I was one of them scissorbills who always hollered for the law, I could drag you into court for those words, Smith."

"You won't; you're afraid some of the local citizens might get on the witness stand and one or two of them might forget he's afraid of you an' he might talk a little too much."

The saloon man was himself now. "You're no danger to me, Smith."

"Glad you think so."

For once, Mal had got under Williams' thick hide; for once, he had made Williams lose his temper. Was that good...or bad? He shoved the question into the discard.

Maybe Peg was right. The winner might be decided upon through gunsmoke, and Mal did not like this thought. For one thing, he was young and he wanted to live; and he was no hand with a short-gun. Still, a man had to believe in himself and his goals. Smith had his goals; Williams had his. He believed that Williams was wrong, and in this belief laid their trouble.

What would Williams do next?

SSMITH KNEW what he would do—he would keep on printing the news, honestly and fairly, letting the chips fall where they might. He went into Deputy Will Muckford's office. The deputy was playing solitaire and he looked up at Mal's beaten face with surprise in his face. "What the hell happened, Smith?"

Mal told him about the two gunmen jumping him and wrecking his office. Muckford listened in silence.

"I just rode into town," the lawman supplied. "Was out talkin' to the nester that was found dead behind the

Emporium. So you say the two was named Sid and Marty?"

"That's their names."

Muckford's fingers toyed with the cards. "That reminds me; I saw two riders from the distance, when I rode into town." He described the two strangers and Mal realized the description fit Marty and Sid. Marty and Sid had done what Williams wanted, then had drifted out.

Williams was smart; he didn't want the pair loitering around town, for he wanted no evidence that pointed to-



ward him. With Sid and Marty gone, nobody could ask them any questions; therefore nobody would get any answers that might tangle up one Jack Williams.

"Wish I could do somethin'," Deputy Muckford said. "I never found out anything from that nester woman. I'm still up in the air—so far as evidence goes—as to who murdered that farmer. And by this time, them two thet jumped you is miles away an' there's no chance to catch them."

Smith knew that Muckford was honest. The deputy, though, had been

in hiding when the brains had been passed around.

"What do you aim to do, Mal?"

"I don't know; but if Williams jumps me again I'm moving against him."

"Report to me, first."

Mal nodded. He had a friend in Muckford, and he needed friends. He went to the Mercantile and told the merchant about the pair wrecking his print shop. The merchant had heard of his trouble and wanted to know if Mal could get his ad printed in time for distribution tomorrow; Saturday was a big day, with the farmers coming into town for trading.

Mal promised to have the ad printed in time; he owed his livelihood to the local merchants. At first Williams had tried to force the local merchants to keep their advertisements out of the *Stirrup*. Then, to counteract that order, Mal had printed their ads free for a week. The resultant increase in trade had made the local merchants disregard Williams' order.

A dollar is greater than a threat.

HE GOT two town loafers and they set up the press. He paid them four-bits each and they hurried for the closest saloon. Doc Arms dropped in, whiskey-jug with him, and watched. Peg had a smear of ink on her forehead that made her look prettier than ever.

"What's your next move?" Doc wanted to know.

Peg watched him, also.

"Do I have to make a move?"

Doc snorted, "You ain't one to sit back, Smith!"

Mal Smith made no answer so Doc snorted again and left; he went to his desk and started rearranging things.

"What are you going to do, Mal?"

"What do you mean, Peg?"

"You know full well what I mean. Jack Williams is out to get you and you are out to get him before he gets you. I know you too well. You aren't

letting Williams get away with that beating."

"His thugs are gone."

"Sure, they are gone...but Williams is still here!"

"Does the *Stirrup* mean that much to you?"

"*Stirrup*? Mal, are you blind?"

It happened then. How it happened Mal did not know, but the next thing he knew was that Peg Harwell was in his arms. Peg was soft and warm and very feminine and Smith was very glad he had left Chicago to come to Singletree.

"This—this makes it worse," Peg moaned.

Mal knew what she meant. Now the world was doubly precious to them; therefore the danger of Williams was greater, too.

"Oh, Lord," Mal groaned.

•

After Peg had left, Mal pulled down the blinds and sat at his desk. But he could not remain sitting and soon he was walking back and forth in his office. Once he stopped and picked up the rifle in the corner. He broke it and looked at the brass rim of the cartridge in the barrel.

Lamplight reflected from the brass. It made an ugly, thin light that brought a squint to Mal's eyes. Then he snapped the breech shut, thoughtful and silent. A knock came at the door and Doc Arms entered.

Doc looked at the rifle, and a smile broke across his grizzled face. "Armed for bear, Mal?"

Mal nodded.

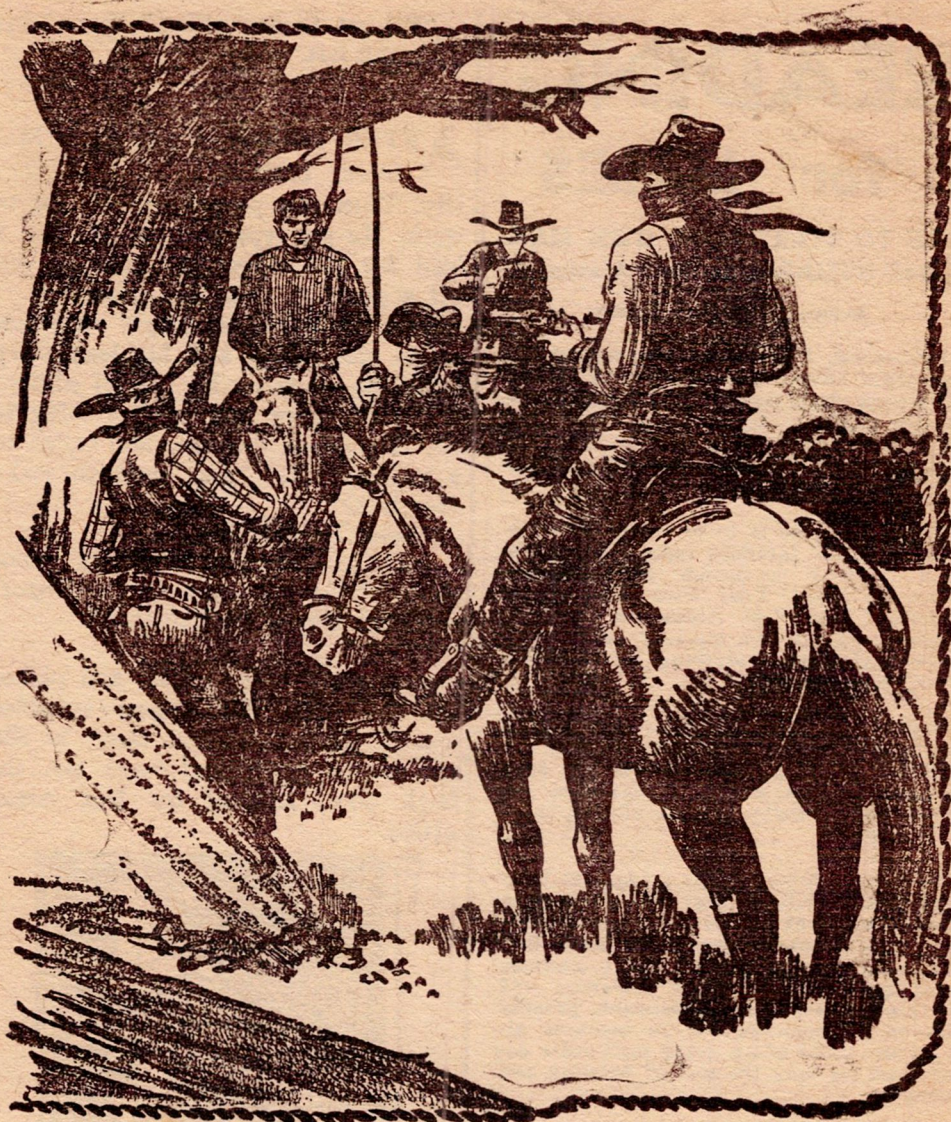
"I'd hate to see that light die in Peg's eyes."

Mal did not look at the medico. "So you've seen it, too."

"I've been around a long, long time, Mal."

Mal looked at the heavy set doctor; Doc Arms had a reason for coming to the *Stirrup's* office.

"Well, what is it, Doc?"



"I was in the bank today when Jack Williams came in and drew out two hundred bucks. I saw him meet this gink Sid, an' Marty, in the alley and give it to them. That was right before they came in and wrecked your print shop."

"Why didn't you tell me this this afternoon?"

"Because of Peg. I went to her first and told her. She said to tell you. I guess you know what it means, eh, Mal?"

Mal nodded seriously. "It means that I've got Jack Williams where I want him. Would you give me a sworn statement?"

Doc nodded. "I'll give it to you; but that will drive Williams against us, sure as hades."

Mal talked quickly. Doc Arms would draw up his statement and they would get Peg and Muckford for witnesses. Muckford could get to Wisdom and send out wires and possibly catch Sid and Marty.

READING for MALES

HOW TO START YOUR OWN MAIL ORDER BUSINESS by Ken Alexander

Reviewed by Jack Parker

Believe me, I feel a healthy respect for mail order, having seen a friend, a former \$30-a-week clerk, acquire a Cadillac and a country estate in the business. Questioned about his success, he explained, "Mail order! You just slice open the mail and extract the dollar bills."

But perhaps he is to be taken more literally than his facetious reply implies. I've come to that conclusion since reading "How To Start Your Own Mail Order Business," by Ken Alexander, a book which dissipates the mystery about mail order, explaining everything in a simple, straightforward way.

Beginning with the idea, the author shows what makes a product suitable for mail order, giving many illustrations such as hair colorings, medicines, cosmetics, jellies, novelty jewelry, picture albums, magic kits, etc.

I'd always thought that going into business meant quitting your job, drawing a sizeable sum out of the bank and renting an office. It was a surprise to learn that one could operate a mail order business from home while working elsewhere and all this on very little investment, practically on a shoestring. If in business already one could add a going mail order department for only the cost of printing and stamps.

The book shows how to prepare a mail order ad, where to place it and gives the names of list brokers, and publications used successfully in mail order.

Having just finished the book, the technique of mail order seems so crystal clear that I'm almost tempted to take a crack at it myself!

The book is sold on refund guaranteed basis and persons interested are advised to get it by sending \$2.00 directly to the publishers:

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Dept. T H, 113 West 57th St.,
New York 19, N.Y.

"I'll get to my office," Doc Arms said, and left.

AFTER the medico was gone, Mal Smith knew a moment of anxiety. Then this passed and he got to work. He set type quickly, making a lead for the story, and then he ran off a proof of this, and studied it.

Now he would tie Doc's statement on to this story, and his lead story would be ready for his special edition. But first, there was another thing to do. He opened the door and called to a passing man. "Joe, want to make four bits?"

"Sure, How?"

Mal handed the man the proof sheet. "Take this down to the *Emporium* and give it to Williams."

"Sure."

Mal went to the corner and picked up the rifle. His fingers trembled against the barrel's cold steel; he slid the safety catch and went out the back door, heading for Doc Arms' office.



Williams would read the proof-sheet, then hurry to Arms' office, too, for the medico held the key to danger soon to be unlocked. He would try to buy Doc off or to silence him.

The night was clear with a bright moon. A thin sliver of yellow lamp-light showed under the blind in Doc's office. By this time, Arms should have finished writing his statement; but Mal knew that the medico was almost

[Turn To Page 120]

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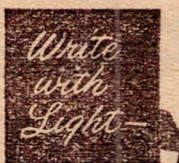
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drunk and he figured maybe Doc had fallen asleep over the table.

He peeked in under the blind. His guess had been right; Doc slept with his head on the table, a pencil and tablet beside his elbow, his jug on the table. Mal drew back and stationed himself at the corner.

The night was quiet. Now he was quiet inside, too. But Time seemed to run on sluggish feet and his fingers were moist against the rifle's smooth barrel. And then, Jack Williams came.

Williams came boldly, stride strong on the gravel walk. He did not see Mal because of the shadows. But he stopped when Mal said clearly, "This is Mal Smith, Williams."

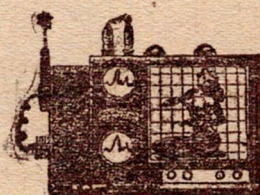
Williams pushed back his coat and his right hand became anchored on the butt of his holstered gun. "Come out, Smith."

Mal moved into the moonlight, rifle down at a slant, the hammer under

[Turn To Page 122]

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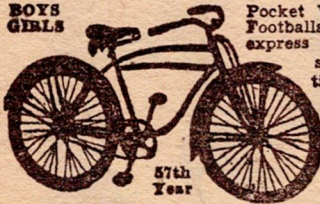
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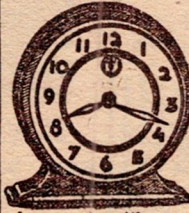
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his thumb. He stopped, tense and wary, about thirty feet from the saloon man.

"What are you doin' here, Smith?"

"I figured you'd fall for that proof-sheet I had that gent take to you. Doc saw you pay Sid and Marty for beating me up. I'm taking over from here, personally; you aren't going to jump Doc."

They stood and both were silent.



Finally Jack Williams said, "If we work together, we both can make a lot of money."

"I don't cotton to your kind of money."

Williams settled down. Hate lay between them; both were aware of this hate. And when Jack Williams spoke his voice was very soft and low. "No other way out... I guess."

Williams pulled his Colt.

MAL SMITH caught the lift of Williams' shoulder. He guessed, rather than saw, the hand dip back; because of his speed, Jack Williams shot first.

Flame smashed out at the editor.

[Turn To Page 124]



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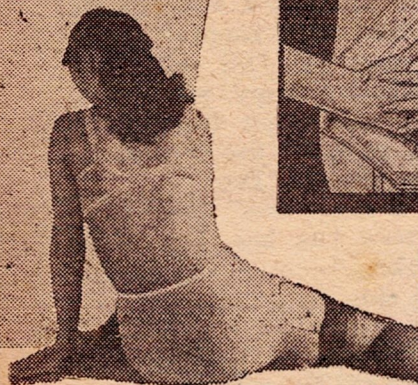
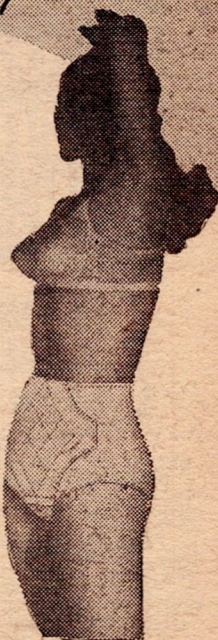
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Something hit him in the right side of his ribs, knocking him back against the wall. He almost went down, but somehow he got his rifle raised.

He let the hammer drop. The rifle kicked back, for he had not raised it to his shoulder. Then Mal Smith leaned against the wall of Doc's office, sick inside as he looked down at Jack Williams, who lay in the dust, face down.

Behind him, he heard Doc's voice. People were moving out on mainstreet, febrile voices raised in inquiry. Doors slammed and dogs barked.

"Here, Doc."

Doc said, "So he came to see me, and you waited for him. Son, he shot you, eh?"

"In the—in the—ribs."

Doc said, "And I went to sleep like an old drunk, I did." He put his arm around Mal. "Here, come into my office, youngster."

Doc had him on the high table, his shirt off, when Peg came. She said, "Williams is dead, so a man outside said. Mal, how did it happen?"

"Some other time I'll tell you."

Mal was sick and sleepy, yet he felt good. "Doc says I got four busted ribs. But I guess I'll live through it, according to him. Eh, Doc?"

"You're a tough one," Doc Arms grunted. "Now kiss him, Peg, while I'm not looking."

And Peg did.



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TOUGH BOY

by Wade Hamilton

TRUE FACT FEATURE

IT WAS early spring; the morning air was bitterly cold. A five-year-old Cheyenne boy, naked as the day he was born, stood knee-deep in the creek. The water, fed from the mountain snow, was ice cold.

He chuckled when his mother poured the ice cold water on his naked, bronzed body. "Make me strong warrior," he said. "When I get to be big warrior I can kill many buffalo."

His father watched stolidly from the tepee. The squaw bathed the young boy for about twenty minutes and then the father said, "That's enough, woman; come, son, and eat."

The boy ran up the path through the high mountain grass. He was blue with cold but he was chuckling. He was undergoing hardening-up exercises; his father wanted him to be a great warrior.

Inside the tepee, his older sister squatted as she cooked antelope steak. Her frying pan was a flat stone held over the fire. Smoke and grease had lined the buffalo hides making the walls of the shelter. The boy pulled on his buckskin clothing.

"You cold, White Elk?"

"No, I am warm." His teeth chattered.

White Elk rubbed his muscular small body with a doeskin towel. His father entered, glanced at him, then snarled at the girl: "Hurry with the food, daughter; you are slow."

The daughter did not answer. Already she was used to the lot of the Cheyenne woman—a chattel to be worked and to be sold to the highest-bidding husband. To her fell all the hard, menial tasks. To the boys of the tribe fell the easy tasks, the glory.

The Indian buck was the lord of his lodge. He did not work; his job was to hunt meat and fight for his tribe.

The Cheyennes moved camp that day. White Elk rode his pony around but did not work. His mother and sister loaded the *travois* with household goods and did all the labor.

Boys weren't supposed to work; to work was a disgrace; work was for the women.

They moved to a new camp higher in the mountains. Here the squaws would build willow traps and trap fish. They would dry the fish and store them for winter. The boys would loaf around, break their ponies, and play sham games of war. Their fathers—the bucks—would powwow and smoke and talk and take it easy.

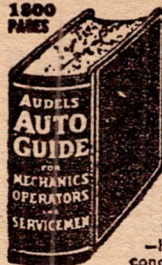
The boys liked to play at war. They would chose up sides and one side would be the *enemy*—either the Black-foot or the Crow. Their ponies would flash in and out, they would hang close to the neck of their mounts, and their clubs would rise and fall. Bucks watched and grunted and made bets. White Elk grew to become a great warrior. Continuously he trained for battle. He played sham battle, he talked war, he listened to the older warriors talk.

Then, one day he rode to battle.

Behind him the Cheyenne village was gripped with a tense grimness. Squaws sat in tepees and wailed. Some of the younger boys—too young for the warpath—were camp-guards. Today nobody raced horses or romped with the dogs. Eager young eyes scanned the horizon for returning bucks carrying scalps of the Black-foot or Arapaho.

[Turn Page]

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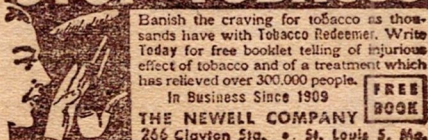


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THAT DAY White Elk killed his first man. He killed a Blackfoot warrior about his age. His war axe split the Blackfoot's skull. His scalp now dangled from White Elk's belt.

He had been toughened thoroughly in his youth. Now he looked upon death as a part of his life and he was calloused toward Death. The scalp in his belt had once belonged to a young Blackfoot brave. He had killed the brave. He had no thought for the dead man; he was proud of his scalp. He had counted coup.

He was, now, a man.

Squaws screamed, girls hollered. But the bucks were silent and morose, playing up to their old tradition. They feasted on boiled dog-meat. Steam arose from the lodges as buffalo steaks sizzled on rock frying-pans.

The bucks gulped their food. Then the boasting started. A war-drum sounded; tom-toms beat monotonous tattoo. Moccasined feet shuffled in weird dances. Guttural songs echoed into the dawn. This kept up for days. They were thanking their God, Manitou, for their victory.

Squaws and girls worked, cooking meat. Boys ran and shouted, brandishing tomahawks, playing at war. Dogs barked. White Elk, a warrior now, sucked his pipe, grunted, and then, when the proper time came, he told the story of Thunder Nest.

Along the Santa Fe Trail was a huge heap of rocks. Here, in these boulders, lived a tiny bird, no larger than a brave's index-finger, and this bird was mated with a serpent—this serpent was the maker of lightning.

The bird hatched her little eggs, and her serpent-mate ate the young—his tongue darting out with fire and smoke. This was lightning. When the serpent ate his young, lightning darted across the stormy sky, and the Red Man bowed before the awesome sight. Thunder Nest.

[Turn To Page 130]

MEDICAL RESEARCH DISCOVERS TREATMENT FOR PIMPLES

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SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH REVEALS NEGLECT CAUSE OF MANY SKIN TROUBLES

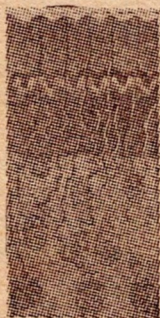
Skin Specialists and Medical statisticians tell us that broken out skin usually occurs from adolescence and can continue on through adulthood. Adolescents often carry these scars throughout their life. Many never get over the "feeling of embarrassment" and are always conscious of their appearance and complexion. Persistent cases of "bad skin" sometimes continue on through adulthood. In this stage of life, the responsibilities of earning a living and meeting people are essential if you are to climb the ladder of success in your job. It is doubly important to give your skin problems *immediate care*. Physicians state that to neglect your skin may prolong your skin troubles and make it more difficult to clear up. And, there is no better time to get pimples under control than NOW!

Laboratory analysis using special microscopes gives us the scientific facts regarding those unsightly pimples. High-powered lenses show your skin consists of several outer layers. Projecting through this epidermis, are hairs, the ducts of the sweat glands and the tiny tubes of the sebaceous glands which supply the skin with oil to keep it soft and pliable. Skin specialists will tell you that many skin eruptions can often be traced to an over-secretion, of oil from the sebaceous glands. As a result of

CAUSES OF PIMPLES AND BLACKHEADS SEEN THROUGH POWERFUL MICROSCOPE



this over-secretion, more oil than is normally required by the skin is deposited on the outside of the skin. Unless special care is taken, this excessive oil forms an oily coating which is a catch-all for all foreign matter in the air. When dust, dirt, lint, etc. become embedded into the tiny skin openings and block them up, they can cause the pores to become enlarged and therefore even more susceptible to additional dirt and dust. These enlarged, blocked up pores may form blackheads as soon as they become infected and bring you the worry, despair, embarrassment and humiliation of pimples, blackheads and other externally caused blemishes.



Illustrated is a microscopic reproduction of a healthy skin:

The sebaceous glands are shown as they project through the many layers of skin. In a normal skin, the openings of the gland tubes are not blocked and permit the oil to flow freely to the outside of the skin.

DOCTORS RECOMMEND THIS TREATMENT

Physicians report two important ways to control this condition: First, they prescribe clearing the pores of clogging matter; and second, inhibit the excessive oiliness of the skin.

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Clinical reports state that many people squeeze out pimples and blackheads with their fingers. This is unsanitary and may lead to the spread of the infection. This abuse may also inflame your skin and leave red welts and ugly looking blotches and bumps. As a result your face may be covered with pimples and blemishes. Soon you'll be sorry you ever squeezed or picked at your skin by using this unscientific method to get rid of skin eruptions.

Some warriors, of course, were slain in battle. Then did a squaw inflict punishment upon her body. The more she punished herself, the greater the love and regard she had held for her warrior husband.

A sharp knife would slash her breasts. Porcupine quills would be jabbed into her and punched under her skin. When a number of warriors had fallen the squaws involved would many times tear up their wigwams and move to a separate camp. There they would punish their bodies and wail and tear at the earth.

One old buffalo hunter said, "Man, onct them Sioux had a camp of squaws miles long—they was whupped by the Blackfoot aroun' Signal Butte. You could hear fee-males hollerin' an' carryin' on for miles. 'T'was a terrible thing to hear, I tell you."

White Elk was married now. He had taken a bride in a simple savage ceremony. She was his wife, his slave. He in turn was toughening-up his first son. One night the child wailed and kept him awake. "Take him to the river, squaw; pour cold water over him until he stops."

"Maybe he sick?"

"Take him to the river."

The wife had no other choice than to take the squealing infant to the river. It was fall of the year and cold enough to freeze the rim ice. She poured water over the child, using a buffalo-bladder as a cup. The baby bawled louder. White Elk did not even go to the door of his tepee. When the squaw returned, the child was cold and blue—but he was not crying.

"He be big warrior some day," White Elk said.

Apparently he was not worried about the child's chances of pulling-through and living. If the baby died, he died; he would die because he was weak—and weakness had no place in the scheme of things. The unfit died; the fit-lived. That was the philosophy: simple, earthy. He, White Elk, had

been raised on that principle. His race needed warriors, strong warriors.

Very few bucks died a peaceful death.

WHITE ELK, history records, died in battle.

He was then about fifty, and his speed and agility had decreased somewhat, falling before the encroaching of old Father Time.

One fall day, when the wind was chilly, he rode down a slope and came to a small creek. Here lay a Black-foot youth who drank from the stream. White Elk untied his battle-axe from its holster and dismounted.

The Blackfoot had his war-axe lying beside him.

White Elk sneered, squatted, and waited for the Blackfoot to finish drinking. The Blackfoot studied him with insolence in his dark eyes. "You are not thirsty, Cheyenne dog?"

"I want water, but I will not drink while a Blackfoot coyote spoils the stream."

The Blackfoot's youthful face went strong with dark anger. "I have never let my war-axe taste Cheyenne blood," the Blackfoot said; "I think the time has come."

Both mounted, for a brave would not fight on foot. They wheeled their ponies, they rode toward one another; the autumn sun glistened on cold steel. Their ponies were trained for battle—they were nimble, quick, intelligent. But youth was with the Blackfoot, and when the Cheyennes found White Elk, the Blackfoot's axe had split the warrior's skull. And the the Blackfoot had scalped White Elk.

They tried to track the lone Black-foot, but he was wily and resourceful; they lost his track. One warrior returned to the Cheyenne village and told White Elk's squaw about her husband's death.

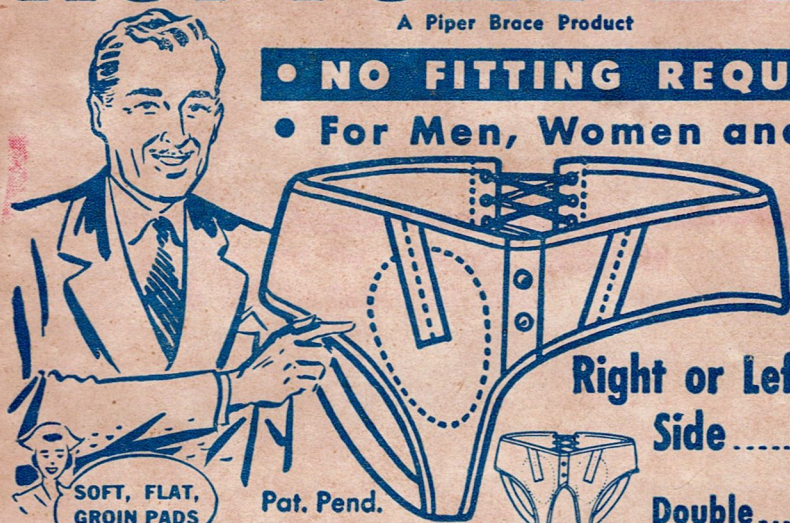
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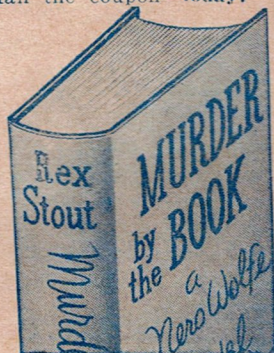
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