THE BIG FRONTIER WESTERN MAGAZINE

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.44 Western MAGAZINE

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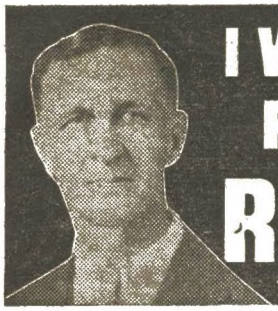

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Vol. 31 **Contents for January, 1954** **No. 1**

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NEXT ISSUE OUT DECEMBER 18th

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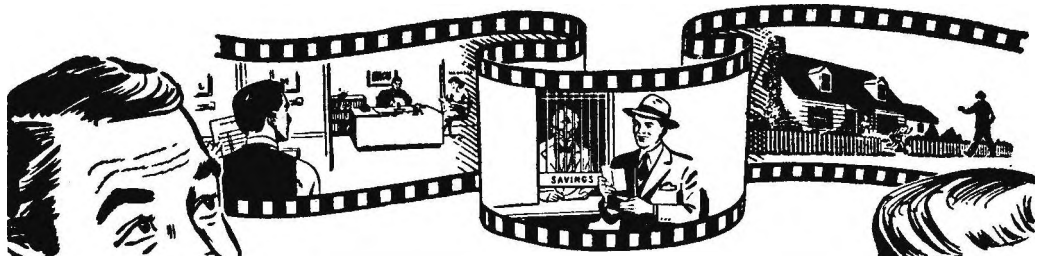

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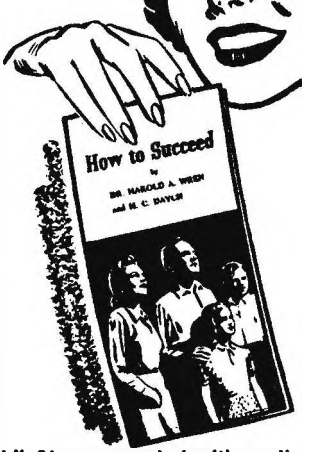

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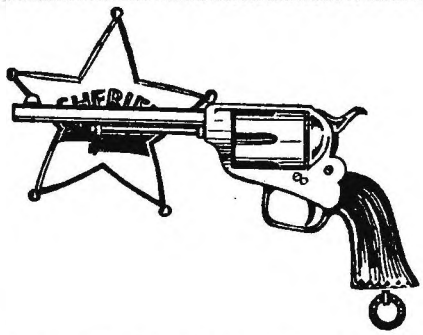
.44 TALK



OF ALL the sagas of the West, none is more famous than the Chisum-Murphy war, a conflict that Billy the Kid's friend, John Tunstall, somewhat unwittingly brought to bloodshed. Bess Ritter writes us the history of this mild mannered man who touched off the most violent explosion in Western cattle history. . . .

In the 70's many English families were sending their younger sons to the wild American West to find their fortunes. Some of these had already blotted the escutcheon, others were expected to; a few came with money and blessings, others with a curse and an empty purse.

Nineteen year old John S. Tunstall arrived in New Mexico in 1877 with a well-filled wallet and the reasonably good wishes of his folks back in England. Just a lad, he seemed more interested in hunting than in augmenting the contents of his wallet.

He arrived in Santa Fe with a servant, a blooded riding horse, six pieces of luggage, and very impressive letters of credit from a London bank. Here in Santa Fe he met a milder American counterpart of himself, Alex MacSwain, a brand-new twenty-one year old lawyer-adventurer. The two liked each other, solemnly decided it was time they settled down and made a place in the world for themselves. They decided that uniting their forces would improve the odds.

Together the two young men moved down to the Pecos valley, leaving the servant but not the thoroughbred, and looked up John Chisum, one of the great cattle and gun barons of southeastern New Mexico.

Chisum, an empire builder, needed all the friends he could find or buy. He agreed to help the two resolute youngsters. He suggested the country west of the mountains would make excellent ranchland and, when the two agreed, helped them to start a spread of four hundred head on the Rio Feliz. He sent them Dick Brewer, one of his most experienced hands, as foreman and mentor.

MacSwain, additionally, went off to Lincoln, the county seat, and opened an office for the practice of law. Tunstall surveyed the new ranch, made a few suggestions about interior improvements for the ranch house and went off into the pine-studded hills with his blooded mare to hunt bear.

Since the two young men had been started with help from John Chisum, Chisum's natural foes and rivals for supremacy in the Pecos country, Messers Murphy and Doland, store keepers and politicians, marked the newcomers for early destruction with incidental profits, ethical or otherwise, to Murphy and Dolan.

A man named John Fritz had died leaving behind several unpaid bills and some insurance, but no will. One of the debts was to the Murphy-Dolan general store, a considerable amount. MacSwain, engaged by the family, filed a petition of adjustment

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 6)

with the court and payment of all debts would be made following the court's decision. Murphy and Dolan refused to wait for the court's decision; they demanded that they be paid at once out of the insurance money. MacSwain refused.

Through one of the several judges in their own employ, Murphy and Dolan obtained a writ of attachment, not against the Fritz family but against Alex MacSwain as withholding monies from them. They sent word to Sheriff William Brady, who knew where the butter and jam on his bread came from, to attach the Tunstall-MacSwain herd.

Brady realized this was pretty far-fetched, though not too unusual for his employers. Instead of going himself he delegated the actual task to one of his deputies, another Murphy-Dolan henchman, George Pepin. Pepin, telling folks that John Chisum was up to his old tricks and that his rustlers were loose in the Pecos valley, rounded up a "posse" of twenty-seven ranchers and chowhands and rowdies, gunmen, and real rustlers like Bill Morton, George Davis, Tom Hill, Frank Baker, Jesse Evans, and Shotgun Roberts. These last had only recently completed a series of rustling raids in Sonora, Mexico, and sold their loot to Murphy and Dolan who had asked them to stick around.

Neither Brady nor Pepin were cautious about their movements. Before their posse was gathered Alex MacSwain knew about it, who was part of it, and had dispatched a rider to the ranch. Oddly, and perhaps unfortunately, Tunstall was at home when the rider who hadn't stopped even to breathe his animal galloped in covered with a film of sweat and dust.

Not quite understanding it all young Tunstall listened. Then he turned to his foreman, Dick Brewer. "Please have the horses ready first thing in the morning, Mr. Brewer," he said. "We shall ride into Lincoln and learn what is amiss."

"Man," Brewer virtually screamed. "There's more than thirty of those hombres and some of them are professional killers. They're more than half way to the ranch now. They won't stop to talk. All they want is the cows. We'll have to fight them off if we can. From the house.'

"But Mr. Brewer," remonstrated Tunstall. "This is merely a legal matter which Mr. MacSwain can no doubt easily adjust. Surely the sheriff's call will be a mere formality."

Brewer wiped cold sweat from his brow. He swallowed and tried to find words.

"Look, boy," he said slowly and patiently, "This is Lincoln county, not England. A man's home ain't his castle here. It ain't anything when fighting starts. That sheriff ain't interested in serving papers and making a polite legal speech. He and his gang is coming here to kill us off because we're friendly with the Chisum people which they ain't."

There were vigorous nods and supporting remarks from the other cowhands. One briefly recited the tale of three brothers against whom a similar maneuver had been successful four years earlier.

Tunstall remained adamant. The situation was inconceivable. His precise English mind and upbringing couldn't grasp wholesale abandonment or misuse of the law.

"I'm certain you gentlemen are mistaken and unduly alarmed. Such things just aren't done. We'll ride into Lincoln. Please have the horses ready early."

Half a dozen of them started for Lincoln at dawn, Tunstall riding his blooded mare. As the sun was readying to set after many hours of hard riding, they were down in the canyon of the Ruidoso. Brewer, ever watchful, constantly searching in each direction, spotted the "posse" and gave the alarm.

As one the little group, excepting only the unreconciled Tunstall, hit for the sur-

(Continued on page 10)

Whee!

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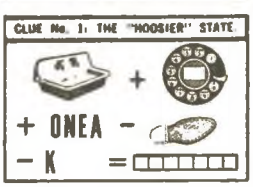
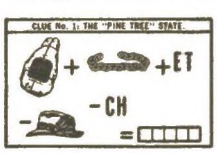


You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

Fun? Yes! Now Solve This Typical Contest Puzzle



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(Continued from page 8)

rounding timber. Brewer was half way to safety when he noted his employer was not with him. Looking back he saw Tunstall walking his horse toward the mounted hoodlums. Brewer spurred back and tried to force the young Englishman into the woods. Tunstall refused, grew angry. He kept repeating, "This is but a legal matter. You're being melodramatic and unduly concerned."

The sheriff's party was uncomfortably close now, riding hard and flanking out on either side to circle the two men.

"For god's sake, please come," cried Brewer once more and then raced for the shelter of the woods.

From his retreat the foreman saw six of the "posse", the six known cattle rustlers, surround the Britisher. Their guns were drawn. One of the guns spoke, and Tunstall, his eyes wide with amazement, tumbled out of the saddle. Another gun roared, and the thoroughbred horse crumbled. Horse and man lay dead beside each other.

Others of the posse joined the six. One of them, Milo Pearce, a rancher who had no use for land-grabbing, gun-fisted John Chisum but who was no criminal, voiced his protest. He turned his horse about after a minute and rode for home, not sure but that a bullet might end his ride any minute. Three others followed his example. The others, too fearful of the six known gunmen, hesitated and stayed with the posse. The ruffians merely laughed. One of them sent a few near shots after the men riding off.

Frank Coe, on whose land they were, gathered up the Englishman's body and directed one of his Mexican hands to take it into Lincoln to MacSwain.

LATE that night the body lay on a long table at MacSwain's Lincoln home, and eleven men, including MacSwain, Brewer, and two former cow punchers of the dead man's ranch, sat up to do it honor.

The small group vowed that someday Johnny Tunstall, who had wished all men well, would be avenged.

One of the two cowboys was William Bonny, someday to be famous as Billy the Kid. He was a seventeen year old lad, born in a New York City slum but reared in an even tougher portion of Silver City, Nevada. At sixteen he had killed a blacksmith there in an argument and had fled. Billy had wandered through the Southwest stealing horses from Apache Indians, easy victims, dealing monte in Tucson, and rustling cattle in Sonora.

He had been one of the Sonora rustlers who had sold their "finds" to Murphy and Dolan, but he had refused to stay with the gang. Instead he had accepted employment from that same Frank Coe on whose land Johnny Tunstall had been killed and had spent the winter with Coe hunting grizzlies in the pine woods. There the boy had met another young bear fancier, John Tunstall. The nearness of age and hobby brought them close. Bonny quit his job with Coe and went to work for the Englishman as hunting companion and cowhand.

"Tunstall treated me right," said the lad in a choked voice. "He paid me good wages, twenty-five dollars a month. I liked him." From his pocket he drew a sheet of paper on which he had scrawled names, those of his former partners in Sonora whom he had recognized as the ringleaders of the Tunstall murder.

"You guys do as you see fit. Me, I'm going after these buzzards."

MacSwain took the list from the boy and made a copy. "There are many ways to skin a cow," he said. The lawyer sat brooding by himself the remainder of the earling morning hours.

When day began to stir, MacSwain nodded to Brewer, and together the two men went out. The man they called on, a justice of the peace, wasn't delighted to

(Continued on page 112)

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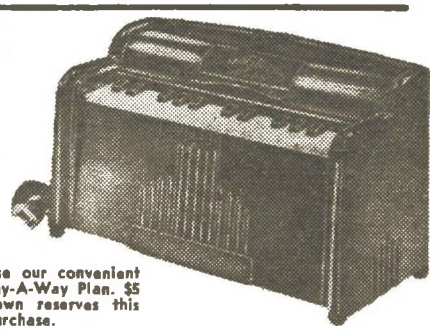

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Wrong Man's

Lew Barton rode ghost-like out of Prior Heath's past to make a ghost of his future!

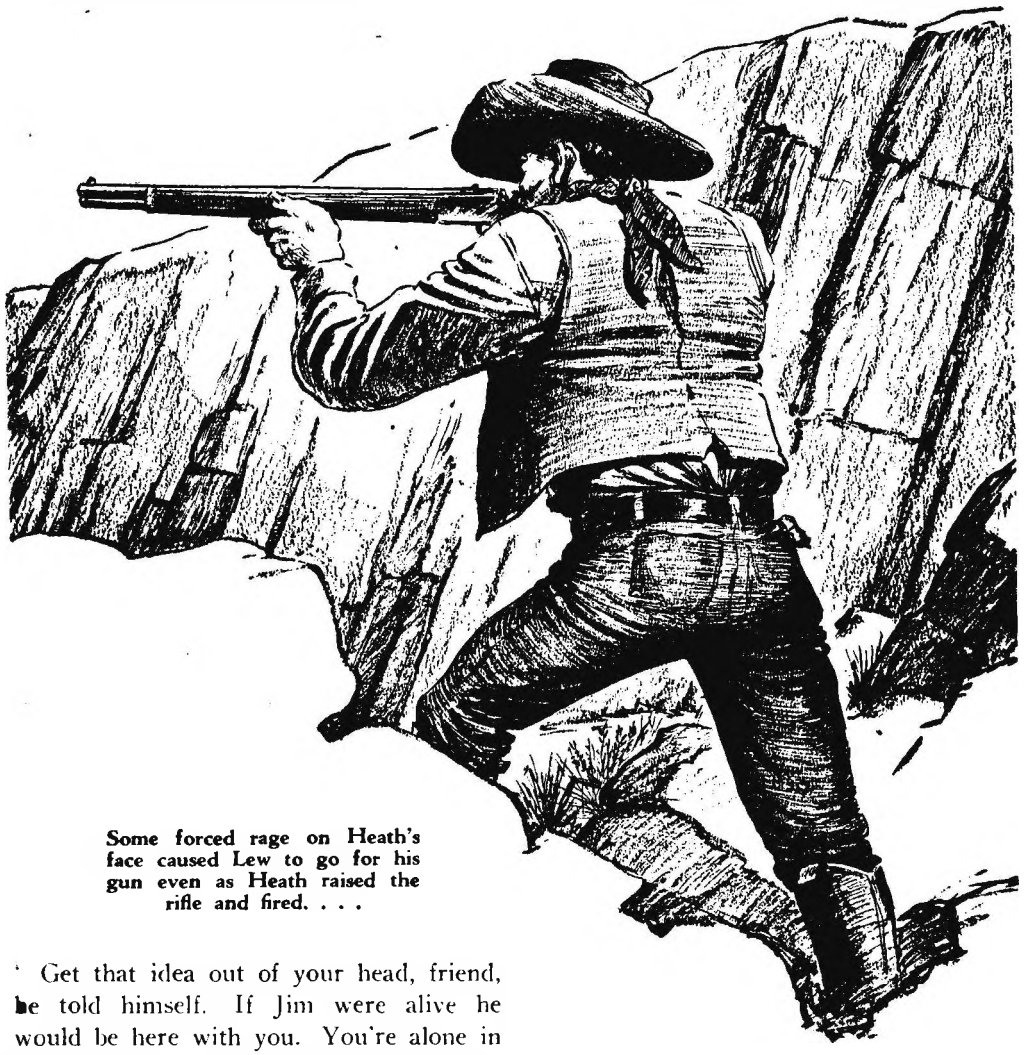
THE TALL man turned his sorrel from the creek bottom and rode up the rocky slope, at the crest of which he reined in. Wind moaned across the undulating sweep of land before him, and rain clouds floated sluggishly above a distant range of New Mexico mountains in September. The man looked long and carefully across the land. It had taken him many months to get here, and during that passage of pain it had been the need to kill that had given his life purpose. A hatred that had buried all other emotions, that had torn out of him all desires but one.

He's within three miles of you, friend, the man thought. He doesn't know it, but you do. The thought sustained him in this moment, haltered the sudden cold rage that goaded him.

A year and five hundred miles to this day and the nearby town of Twin Forks, to this imminent and final meeting with Prior Heath. Now he should be able to await old Judd's return with patience, and yet an unheard voice urged him to ride quickly and finish the job. He slid a hand inside his denim shirt and fingered the knuckle-deep scar on his chest, and he wondered with grim curiosity if the voice were his own or that of Jim MacMurdy.

Noose

By J. L. Bouma



Some forced rage on Heath's face caused Lew to go for his gun even as Heath raised the rifle and fired. . . .

Get that idea out of your head, friend, he told himself. If Jim were alive he would be here with you. You're alone in this and you're going to do it for yourself. For Mister Lew Barton, and no one else. His mouth took on the semblance of a smile as he thought of the look on Heath's face when they met.

"This is it, Lew," old Judd had told him last night. "He's down there in town. Owns a saloon and gambling house. But getting to him won't be easy, not during the next couple days. Yesterday the railroad finished laying a spur to Twin Forks, and today they started a three-day celebration. The town's packed, and the marshal put through a no-gun law. That'll kind of put a halter on you, and I aim to have another look around in the morning. One day won't make no difference. He ain't likely to pull stakes."

No, not Heath, Lew thought now. Not Heath, who considered Lew Barton dead and buried beneath the rock slide. Who had told the sheriff of that Colorado county a story of murder and attempted mur-

der, so that, dead or alive, he had Lew balanced between hell and the law. And Lew knew he must move with the utmost caution to escape the law anyway.

His thoughts had not stopped his searching gaze, and now he saw the rider, dwarfed by distance, and he put his horse down slope. They met at the foot of a small hill. Judd sat hunched on his old mare, his veined hands on the pommel of his saddle. His eyes were a direct and startling blue in his wizened face with the gray whiskers. Judd had the brim of his shapeless felt hat pinned to the crown, and his buckskin coat was worn soap-shiny.

"Town's thick as a prairie-dog village," he said. "Must be ten thousand folks crowding it." He scratched his whiskers.

"Learn anything new?"

"Got two blocks of the main street roped off," Judd said. "Put up a couple of big tents where they got stuff up for show. Gonna have a rifle shoot this afternoon, and horse racing in the morning." He hawked and spat, giving Lew a glance from the side of his eyes. "Jim's wife's in town. Fine looking woman."

"Emily? I thought she went back to Ohio!"

"Well, she didn't. She's down there running a little hat and dress shop. I got to snooping and learned Heath backed her. She must've followed him here."

"The hell with it," Lew said shortly. "Is he in town today?"

"Saw him twice this morning, but he didn't see me. He lives up over his saloon, and that'll be the place for you to get him. But don't go wild hog, Lew. Figure what you're gonna do, then do it and get out. Either that or wait till the celebration's over."

"I'm not waiting."

Old Judd gave Lew a close look. "Keep it cold, Lew. Let it mean too much, and you'll fall and never hit bottom when it's over with. Don't let it change you." His eyes searched Lew's. "Be like you were. Let your gun speak for you and then forget you heard it."

"The hell with that."

Judd was silent. He said finally, "Another thing—no dodgers out on you. None tacked up in the post office or the marshal's office, anyhow."

"Colorado's a state—this is Territory, and a long ways from where it happened."

"Don't make no difference. That's a U. S. marshal in town. I talked to him some, and he's no fool. Deputized a dozen men, and they'll have their eyes open for trouble. There's fifty thousand in bullion on display from the mines around here, and they won't take chances, so you damn well better watch your step."

"Let's ride."

"Hold it," Judd said, then considered what he was going to say. "You figure you owe Jim anything?"

Lew said bitterly, "How the hell can you pay a dead man?"

"You can pay his wife. Don't you think you ought to tell her about this before it happens? Don't you think she's got the right to know about Heath? And you'll have to tell her before, not after, for then it'll be too late. By then you'll be on the run."

"Just walk up and tell her, is that it? Hell, man, she'd yell for the law. What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

"I'll take you for something other than a fool if you don't tell her the truth."

"She don't know me. All she knows is that Lew Barton killed her husband and that the law hasn't caught up with him yet. Do you think for a minute that she'd believe me? After knowing Heath for a year, and accepting his help, do you think she'd even listen to me?"

"She might after I talk to her first."

"Forget it. I didn't ask her to come here." Lew turned his horse, glanced back at Judd, who sat with his hands still on the pommel, watching him.

"You'd better ride on ahead," Judd said.

"Couldn't get no hotel room, so if you need me I'll be hanging around Jackson's stable. Watch yourself."

They looked at each other. Then Lew reined in close and leaned over, his hand extended. "I want to say it in case anything happens. Thanks for everything, Judd. You've done a lot for me. I count myself rich, having you as a friend."

"Keep alive, boy," said Judd. "You've got a lot of living ahead of you, and maybe after this is over, you and me can team up and head west. Always did want to see what an ocean looked like."

"We'll see," Lew murmured, and rode away.

TURNING on the road, he saw the brown buildings of Twin Forks, the steel rails snaking toward the new railroad depot, the high water tank beside the tracks. Tents, prairie schooners, farm wagons and buckboards were scattered on the outlying flats. There was the movement of people, of horses snorting in rope corrals. A boy ran toward him, eager face upraised. "Take care of your horse, mister? Stable in town's full up!"

The hoofs of Lew's mount raised little dust spurts with each step, a reminder of a long dry summer gone forever. The frayed gray edges of rain clouds drifted across the lowering sun, putting light and shadow patterns across the land. He passed a straggle of little frame houses with fenced-in yards where flowers blazed, a church on the rise, a schoolhouse with its weathered bell, before he found himself facing the crowded main street.

He sat his horse in front of the Land and Cattle office, glancing at banners and bunting, hearing the crowd, snatches of distant music, and he swung down abruptly and shouldered between a dun and a gray to tie his mount at the rail.

U. S. Marshal was printed in gold letters on the window across the street, and the sign said ***Check guns here.*** A gaunt man leaned in the doorway. He wore a black suit, a white, pleated-front shirt, a string tie. There was a badge on the coat that flashed momentarily as he stepped aside, his eyes on Lew. "In for the celebration?"

The gaunt face was friendly, the eyes searching. Here was a man who could spot a stranger to this part of the country on sight, a man who would look into a face and make his silent decision. Lew glanced along the street. "I ain't seen this many people since leaving Santa Fe."

He stepped inside, seeing rifles stacked along the walls, gunbelts hanging from pegs, piled on a corner table. He unbuckled his own belt reluctantly, wrapped it around the worn holster which held his Colt, and handed it to the deputy behind the desk. As he turned to go out he found the gaunt man studying him, and then the man said, "Sign up for the rifle shoot at Heath's saloon, if you've a mind to."

"Thanks. Might try it."

The marshal followed him outside. He said mildly, "Friendly crowd. Aim to see that it stays friendly."

Lew felt no need to answer. He nodded and walked into town, feeling a distinct tightening of his shoulder muscles. Was this a standard warning, or had the marshal singled him out? Or was it that the furtive look of the hunted man showed on his face? It had been a long time since he had known laughter.

Drifting with the crowd, he felt naked without his gun. He found Heath's place facing the four corners, one of the few two-story structures in town, and he stared at it for a long moment, aware of his fists that he couldn't clench tight enough. His heart hammered the walls of his chest.

He moved on; he turned at the corner and walked as far as the alley. Beside the downstairs door, stairs led to the second floor, where Heath had his quarters. Across the alley was a small barn-like structure. The yellow mound of hay next to it was covered with a stained tarp.

He looked at the stairs, at the upper windows that reflected the last golden sunlight. Not now, friend, he cautioned himself. Tonight, after the town's bedded down. Maybe you can get up there, and then you won't need a gun.

The tents on the vacant side street lot were canvas stretched on wooden frames. Make-do stalls and pens had been erected in one for live stock—pigs, sheep, cattle and horses. In the second tent, long wooden tables displayed fruit and vegetables, preserves, pies and cakes. Two men edged past Lew, and one of them said, "I want a look at that bullion."

Lew wandered in after them, his eyes touching every face he passed. A small area had been roped off at the rear of the tent. Bars of gold were displayed on the table in its center, where four guards stood with sawed-off shotguns under their arms.

Nearby, a dozen chattering women crowded around a stall where dresses were on display. There was a sign—*Dress and millinery display through the courtesy of Mrs. Emily MacMurdy.*

Lew frowned and turned that way—and suddenly he froze, his right hand reaching automatically for the gun that wasn't there.

He drew back, his eyes never leaving the face of Prior Heath, who was smiling down at a fair-haired young woman. Heath was slender and tanned, and his hair curled black below the slant of his light brown hat. He wore twill pants tucked into tooled leather boots, and a brown corduroy coat.

He put a hand on the woman's shoulder, spoke, nodded and laughed, and moved on to speak to the men guarding the bullion. Lew watched him take cigars from a vest pocket and hand them around, the guards grinning thanks.

Lew turned and went out. He could not afford to let Heath see him. He crossed the street, put the point of his shoulder against an awning post and tugged his hat brim low across his eyes.

Heath came out a few minutes later. He strolled up the street smoking a cigar, pausing now and again to speak to someone, to lift a hand in greeting. Lew followed, saw Heath enter the saloon, then turn back abruptly to scan the crowd as if some animal caution nudged him to be careful.

He came to the edge of the boardwalk, still puffing on his cigar. Lew, at the side of a building deep in twilight shadow, saw him toss the cigar into the gutter, then shrug and turn slowly back into the saloon. Lew expelled his breath. He waited a few minutes longer before moving on down the street.

At the corner, he hesitated, remembering the sign above the dress display stall, the light-haired woman Heath had spoken to. And with time on his hands now, a mild curiosity stirred within Lew, a wry need to know if the woman was Emily, and why she had followed Heath to this town. He turned back to the tent.

She was still there, talking to a group of women, a slender girl in her early twenties, wearing a dress of some shiny material with mutton sleeves and a fetching bustle. Her blonde hair was thick, combed back to a bun at the nape of her neck. She had a pleasant face, and her throaty laughter reached Lew as she spoke a parting word to the women who moved slowly away.

Then, as if aware that she were being watched, she turned and looked straight at him. For a moment they gazed at each other; he saw her eyes grow large, grow small, and what might have been recognition leaped into them. He turned away, puzzled by this, then glanced back again and saw that she was still watching him, a hand clenched against her breast. He saw her face grow pale, and he knew suddenly what it was, remembered and cursed himself for this oversight as he swung out of the tent, half fearing to hear her cry out. He walked fast, lost himself in the crowd.

THE MINING camp in Colorado. A Sunday in town, the three of them—Heath, Jim and himself. A photographer had opened a shop, and Jim insisted on having their picture taken together. "Come on," he'd said. "I want my wife to know what my partners look like."

That was it! Why hadn't he remembered? It had been a good picture, the three men with their arms on each other's shoulders, Lew in the middle because he was the tallest.

Had she recognized him? Or was it an awareness of similarity only that had caused her to stare?

He made his way to Jackson's livery stable. Judd was nowhere in sight, and he hunkered down and rolled himself a smoke. He took a deep drag and let the past flood through his mind. . . .

The day shift at the Iron Horse mine. He and Jim MacMurdy working together. Jim, who had left a wife in Ohio, who had come to Colorado to make his fortune.

But five dollars a day did not add up to a fortune, not if you worked a lifetime. Why not team up and prospect, maybe strike it rich? They had not enough money for tools and supplies, so they talked to Prior Heath, who also worked their shift, and he fell in with their plan.

"Suppose we try it for a year," Jim said. "We're bound to make expense money, and we just might get lucky. Others have."

They panned a dozen creeks, moved on. The year was nearly behind them when they uncovered the rich pocket. Inside of a week they took out an estimated 15,000 dollars worth of dust and nuggets.

"We'll double that before we're through," Jim said, "and my share'll be as much as I want. I'm sending for my wife, boys. I like this country, but I don't aim for the gold bug to bite me too deep. It's cattle I'm interested in, and there's plenty of free graze south of here."

Jim wrote his letter, and Lew took it to town the next time they needed supplies. Four days later he turned up the deep narrow gully to their camp, leading the pack horse, when Prior Heath appeared in front of him, rifle in hand. There was something on Heath's face, some forced rage that caused Lew to go for his gun even as Heath raised the rifle and fired. He felt the shock of the heavy bullet, the burning agony as his world reeled and he tumbled from the saddle. Even so, he had a picture of Heath clutching a wounded arm, before he passed out.

Judd found him next day, and later told him about it. "I left my cabin that morning and rode down to your camp, figuring to stop by and see if you needed anything from town. First thing I saw was Jim sprawled in front of the tent, dead as he'd ever be. Then I saw there'd been a slide in the gully, and there was a head and arm sticking out, and by god it was you! How the hell you ever crawled out of there with a chest wound and a busted arm, is something I can't figure out."

Later, flashes of memory returned, and he knew it had been the forked limb of a small tree that had saved him. He could not remember the slide, but during moments of consciousness he was aware of the limbs across his back, and knew they had taken the brunt of the rocks, the dirt that had buried him completely, leaving only a little pocket of air. At first he had accepted death and then the thought of Heath set him to digging frantically with his good hand until he passed out again. He remembered that finally his head was in the open, and that it was night, and then knew nothing until he woke up in Judd's cabin.

When he gathered his strength he told Judd what had happened. Judd listened him out, his old face grim, then said, "I'll get the sheriff on this as soon as you're well enough to leave alone."

Lew struggled to rise. "No! I'll get him myself!"

"The sheriff'll have to know sooner or

later, boy. And there's Jim. I brought you here two days ago, and I've been afraid to leave your side, but I'll have to go down now and bury him."

The sheriff and a posse showed up before Judd could leave. Judd saw them from the doorway and told Lew, who whispered weakly, "Tell 'em nothing—"

"Boy, your horse is in my corral."

"Tell 'em you found it wandering. Do it for me, Judd!"

Judd was a lonely little old man, and not many people had asked his help. Lew looked at his troubled face, saw him draw a long breath.

"I'll do it, but I don't know why except that you're so damned close to crossing over that if I don't watch out you'll be joining Jim. All right, boy. I guess the main thing is to keep you alive."

For a week it was touch and go. The bullet had gone clean through Lew, miraculously missing the lungs, but it had festered, and Judd's small skill barely saved him. When he was finally well enough to listen, Judd told him about the sheriff's visit.

"It's you they're after. Heath made it to town and told how it was you that killed Jim, and then wounded him before he got away. The gold's gone, and the sheriff figured you had a fast horse staked out. There's a murder charge against you, boy, and I don't know why I didn't tell him the truth."

"Heath took the gold. He probably hid it somewhere."

Judd said angrily, "Didn't you hear what I said?"

"It don't matter. Even if we go down and tell our story, there's no way of proving it. Anyhow, the hell with the law. I'll get him myself."

The wound healed slowly. It was a month before he could sit up, his arm in a sling. During that time Judd made the trip to town. He came back to say that Heath had left town some days before. "He didn't try to keep it a secret. Told folks he was heading for New Mexico. Hear he spent a lot of time with Jim's wife. She come from the east about a week ago, and she's still in town."

She wasn't, the next time Judd went to town. Lew wasn't interested. It took months before he got his strength back, months during which Judd's was the only voice he heard. Finally, when he was ready to leave, Judd told him that he might as well string along. "Been here too long. Anyhow, you'll need me to help you. I can scout ahead when we reach a town, and keep you from walking into trouble."

It was more than that. Lew understood. The old prospector had gotten used to company, and now he hated to part with Lew.

"All right," Lew told him. "I guess I could use your help."

CHAPTER TWO

Gold Split

LEW was still hunkered at the side of the stable. It was full dark now, and he rose and went around front to look again for Judd. The old man was puffing his pipe, talking to a hostler, and when he saw Lew he came over and said irritably, "Where the hell you been? I've been looking all over for you."

"What's up?"

"I been talking to Emily."

"Listen, Judd—" Lew began, his voice annoyed.

"I told her what happened, seeing as to how you wouldn't, and she said she thought she saw you."

Lew gripped Judd's arm hard. "You wanted to help me. Now she'll run to Heath and tell him. Damn you, Judd."

"She believed me," the old man said quietly. "She wants to talk to you."

"What makes you think she'd believe you, you damned old fool?" Lew shook

him. "If Heath gets wind of this I'll never get to him. What the hell's the matter with you?"

"You gonna see her?"

"Why the hell should I?"

Judd said, "You asked me once to do something for you. Now I'm asking you to do something for me. Go talk to her. She was Jim's wife."

Lew stared stolidly into the night. He felt suddenly tired with the year of waiting, a tiredness that went beyond the physical, that hung like a weight in his brain. He resented Judd in this moment, as he resented Emily MacMurdy. They asked of him and he felt their pull, but time was short and a man had to die. A certain man named Prior Heath, who'd shared his and Jim's friendship and labors and had betrayed them. Now Jim's strange young wife wanted to see him, and he knew that he had been thinking of her with a restless awareness. Yet he distrusted her, distrusted anything or anyone that crossed his path tonight.

Judd was looking up at him. "You'll come?"

"Damn it, Judd—oh, all right. But she'd better have a damn good reason for wanting to see me."

She was home, Judd said, leading the way, home being two rooms in the back of her dress shop. And she was there when Judd knocked.

Judd stayed outside. Lew stood in the center of the small room, his hat in his hand, and watched her close the door and turn to look at him, and she said in a low voice, "Don't do it."

His mouth tightened. "This is not your business."

"Don't do it that—way. If you must do something, go to the law and tell them how it happened."

"Is this all you have to say to me?"

"You won't listen to me, will you? I know this must sound pretty crazy. After all, he killed my husband."

"You believe that all at once. Why? You met him a year ago, and he helped put you into business. But tonight someone tells you a different story from the one he probably told you, and all at once you change sides. Why?"

"I don't know—I can hardly explain it to myself. But I believed Judd, and I never did feel right about Prior."

"Right enough to follow him out here."

"That's something I can explain. I had very little money left when I reached Colorado. Then I learned what had happened, and I met Prior. He said a friend of his was staking him to a business in New Mexico, and he offered to help me. I didn't want to go back home . . . I kept thinking of Jim, and what he wrote in his letters about the country, and how we would make it our home. That's why I couldn't go back. Maybe I sensed his closeness, and remembered how it was with us." She looked at him. "And maybe I thought that somewhere, someday, I'd find the man who killed him."

"You know who he is now."

"Yes. And I believe it. I can look back now and remember things he said, about you and Jim. It's strange Jim never really liked him. He never said so in his letters, but it was there just the same. He wrote differently about you . . . but that's not why I wanted to see you. It's—I suppose it's a woman's viewpoint. Right now it doesn't matter to me whether Prior lives or dies. What does matter is that it will solve nothing."

"That's where you're wrong, Mrs. MacMurdy. A killer doesn't deserve to live."

"You're thinking of him, of him! Why don't you stop and think about yourself, and your future? The law—"

"It's too late for that." He turned to the door, his face taut. "Don't try anything to stop me."

She looked at him. Her eyes were steady on his. "Nothing will stop you once you get started."

For a moment longer they looked at each other. Then he went out. Judd came out of the dark alley to his side. "I put your horse up at the stable, case you look and can't find it. Got us sleeping space in Jackson's loft."

"All right, go there. Maybe I'll see you later."

"Lew—"

"Good night, Judd."

He walked quickly away from the old man, down this alley, then along the street until he reached the four corners. A cold wind had come with the night and the sky had a deep black look to it. A thin mist of rain stung Lew's face as he turned his head to look along main street. It was nearly deserted. A drunken cowboy whooped somewhere in the darkness. Two riders trotted along the street out of town, shying at the bits of paper, the trash that the wind rattled along the street.

Lew crossed slowly to Heath's saloon. He glanced through the window. A thin old man with gray side whiskers was sweeping the floor; in back, a man in a black coat was covering over the gambling tables.

HEATH was behind the bar, counting a stack of bank notes with rapid motions of his fingers, a cigar between his teeth. There was a stack of gold coins at his elbow, beside which lay a revolver. Heath finished counting the money, took a watch out of his vest pocket, glanced at it and spoke to one of the men who began turning out the lamps.

Lew went quickly around to the alley and mounted the stairs. He reached the door and turned the knob slowly, pushing steadily with his shoulder. The door was locked, probably bolted, and a sudden wild fury swept through Lew, wanting him to break the door down, to kill Heath with his bare hands.

Then he thought of Judd saying, *Do it and get out,* and slowly the fury diminished. Later, when the town was asleep, he would take the chance. Now the sound of splintering wood would be heard downstairs. He would first get his horse, his gun, be ready to move.

The door below him opened suddenly. A slant of pale yellow lamplight shone on the alley. There was the sound of something being moved, a man grunting as if struggling with a weight. Lew froze and waited. Carefully, he turned and looked down. It was the thin swamper rolling trash barrels outside. After a moment, the door closed, a bolt slid home. Lew hurried soft-footed down the stairs and went to the marshal's office.

The night man dozed behind the desk; he woke up as Lew entered, yawned and rose when Lew asked for his gun. Lew glanced up at the wall clock; it was twenty past two. He took the gun and belt, buckled it around his waist with a feeling of reassurance. The night marshal said, "Gonna rain and spoil the last day of the celebration.

"Looks that way."

"When it rains here, mister, she rains!" Lew nodded good night and went out. He walked with rapid strides to the stable and demanded his horse. When he turned out of the runway into the deep blackness, wind and rain lashed at him. He leaned over and patted his mount's neck, wishing he'd taken care of the animal the moment he came to town; he was not a man to abuse horses, but his own need to see Heath had been strong in his mind, and he'd forgotten the horse.

He rode as far as the edge of town and then circled back along its far edge and along the side street toward the twin tents, where he dismounted. He tied his horse between the tents, where there was a measure of protection from the wind and the rain. Then he hurried along the street to Heath's saloon.

He was standing alongside the small barn across the alley, looking up at two

windows where the shades were drawn but yellow with lamplight. Would Heath open the door if he knocked? If he didn't, then was the time to break it down. As he started to cross the alley, the sound of hoofs reached him, and he faded back, waiting for the riders to pass.

There were three riders, ghostly on their tall horses in the darkness and the rain. They swung down in front of the barn, and one of them opened the big door. A few minutes later, the glow of a lantern put its light outside, and then the other two men led the horses into the barn. Lew heard a muttering of voices, the creaking of saddle leather, the scuffling of hoofs. He edged closer to the open door, hearing voices plainly now, and one of them saying, ". . . So if it works out right, there'll be no shooting, and we'll be miles away before they know it happened."

"This rain'll wash out our trail," a second voice said.

"What time'd you say, Red?" a third voice asked. "Four?"

"That's right. They're keeping it at the depot tonight on account of the first train's pulling out tomorrow morning, and the gold's supposed to be on it. Only two men guarding it. Heath figured it out a long time ago. He's seen to it that they got a bottle—" The man gave a low laugh.

"Maybe we'd be smart if we took it for ourselves."

"Hell no! He's splitting with us, ain't he? As soon as he peddles it, and he says that'll be about a month. Why the hell should we chance being caught with that bullion? Hell, man, he's got it figured right. The best part is that it won't ever leave town. The law'll never think of that—they'll figure whoever got it took it with 'em. Let's get up there."

"We gonna stay upstairs here till we're ready to move?"

"That's right. Only be an hour. Ed, you got it straight what you're supposed to do?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Douse that lantern and let's go."

Lew pulled back behind the barn. He peered past the corner and saw the three men mount the stairs, rap on the door. It opened at once and he saw Heath's slender figure for a moment before the others stepped inside. The door closed. Lew returned to his horse, where he hunkered down. Then he rose, untied his slicker from behind the cantle and put it down. Inside its protection, he rolled a smoke and struck a match. He smoked in silence, his mind busy. Four o'clock. He waited.

RAIN fell heavily by the time he returned to the barn. The wind whipped it, stirred little waves in puddles. Mud clung to Lew's boots at every step, and the rain pocked the mud.

He waited only a moment before the upstairs door opened and the three men hurried down the steps, their heads bent against the rain. They walked fast down the alley, disappearing immediately into the darkness.

Lew stood where he was, the rain splattering against his slicker. He wanted this to be over with, so he could ride away with his mind empty of the weight that had filled it for so long a time. He thought of the strange young woman Emily MacMurdy, and how she had tried to keep him from what he was going to do. She and Judd had both seen something in him, and he puzzled at it. He kept his thoughts on her, the angles and planes of her face, the look of her slender body, the sound of her voice. Jim had often spoken of her in that easy way of a husband who holds a possession. He thought of where he would go after this was over, but the future was dim and he could not even think of tomorrow. Do it and get out, he thought. That's all you have to think about now.

The men were not gone long—twenty minutes at most, before they reappeared at

a half run. One went directly to the barn and inside; the other two up the stairs, a small chest swinging between them. One of the men knocked, the door opened, the chest was lowered, a few words spoken, and then the two men went down where the first man was waiting with the horses. They mounted and rode away at a trot.

Lew looked up at the lighted windows through the rain. He took off his slicker and let it fall, and then mounted the steps. Would Heath open if he knocked? Perhaps thinking one of the men had come back? It was a chance. Lew knocked, his eyes and ears alert. The window to his right darkened. He had the sensation of being watched, and he cursed himself for having made this move.

Putting his back against the railing, he lifted a sodden boot and crashed it into the door. There was a splintering sound. He kicked again and it crashed inward. He flung himself low into the room as the slam of the shot sounded, his own gun in his hand, and he fired at the shape to one side of him.

Two rooms, his mind said in that moment. There was a lamp in his room; the other room, with a double open doorway between, was in darkness. Heath's in there, his mind said.

Heath's voice said, "Who the hell is it?" Heath's voice was shaky, uncertain.

"Take a look, Prior."

Silence. Had Heath recognized his voice?

"Let's not be playing any games," Heath said.

From near the window, Lew thought. He gathered himself and lunged low through the double doors, firing once where he thought Heath might be. There was a grunt of pain. Then silence again. And then, "All right. Let's look at it in the light. No use rousing the town."

"Walk into the other room," Lew said, and immediately moved. There was no shot. He saw Health walk into the lighted room and turn there, and Heath was holding one bloody hand in the other, looking completely stunned.

Lew rose slowly and faced him. Heath stared at him and took two faltering steps back, his eyes wide with some haunted horror, his face suddenly waxy. He tried to speak, but only an inane sound came from his slack mouth.

Lew said nothing. Something terrible, cold and distant, showed on his face, and his eyes held a dull and steady shine. He looked at Heath, who wore a maroon velvet jacket, who was holding a bloody hand and staring at him. The busted door banged open and shut, the sound of wind and rain was audible, and there was a distant ripple of lightning followed by a low rumble of thunder.

Lew edged to the door, booting a chair over on his way, his eyes never leaving Heath's face. He used his hip to wedge the chair against the door.

"Lew—" said Heath. He put a hand in the pocket of his jacket. "By god it's you, Lew—"

Lew leaped to one side as the jacket moved. There was a muffled shot and then his own gun spoke, and Heath screamed and broke at one knee. Lew fired again, the bullet slamming Heath back to the floor. And Lew stood with his legs planted, his breath coming hard, muscles holding his head rigid.

Heath looked at him with an amazed expression. He said slowly, "It doesn't hurt."

"It will."

"Get me a doctor—"

Lew picked up the lamp, took it into the other room. The small wooden chest with the leather bindings was on the floor. There was a safe in one corner, the door open, a cash box on a table. Lew went to the safe, lifted out two canvas sacks heavy with coins. He picked up the cash box and took it back into the other room, where he bent down over Heath.

THE MAN was alive. Lew reached into the jacket pocket and took out a derringer, thinking it was like Heath to have a gun there. Heath whispered, "Lew, get a doc. I'll bleed to death."

"On a rug," Lew said. "I lay in dirt, and there was dirt and rocks on top of me."

He glanced at Heath's wounds nevertheless. One bullet had smashed the man's right knee; the second wound was low in his side.

Lew said, "I rode down to our diggings after I got well. That pocket was cleaned out. You and Jim cleaned it while I was in town. How much did you take out?"

"Maybe ten thousand worth."

Lew looked in the sacks. One held gold double eagles, the other silver. He opened the cash box and counted what money was there. Twenty-two thousand.

"Lew, I can't move—"

"Neither could I," Lew said, his face expressionless. He returned to the other room, found paper, a pen and ink. He propped Heath up. "Write what I tell you to write."

Heath wrote slowly. Lew read it. He heard Heath saying, "Please, Lew, get me a doc. The gold, Lew, I'll split with you. Just get me the doc. I'll tell the law somebody come up and tried to rob me. I won't tell 'em it was you—"

Lew turned to the door. "Five o'clock. I don't reckon things will be stirring for another two hours. By that time you'll be either dead or dying."

He moved the chair, conscious that the weight was still in his mind, suddenly aware that killing Heath wouldn't lift it. With some men, yes. But not with Lew Barton. Judd had been right. . . . . *Fall and you'll never hit bottom when it's over with. Don't let it change you*

Maybe a man couldn't change from what he was inside. He heard Heath's faint

voice, "I'll get the law off your back if you get me a doc. Lew, I don't want to die—"

"Neither did I," Lew said. He went out. . . .

There was a doctor living on the edge of town. Lew routed him out. The rain had slackened, and a little gray showed in the eastern sky by the time they returned to Heath's place.

The doctor made a careful examination. "You'll live, but it will be a close thing." He adjusted spectacles on his nose, turned to Lew. "Let me see that paper again."

Lew handed it to him, and the doctor read it out loud. Then he looked hard at Heath. "Do you swear to this? You weren't influenced—"

Heath gave a bare shake of his head. "Doc, I hurt—"

Lew took the paper, folded it, and put it into his pocket. He picked up the money bags, the currency, and went out.

Emily MacMurdy answered his knock. Her thick rich hair was down below her shoulders, she wore a blue cotton robe, and looked at him uncertainly. Then she stepped aside for him to enter.

He put the money on the table and handed her what Heath had written. She read it slowly, then looked at him with the beginning of a smile. "Why, that's—"

"There's twenty-seven thousand here," Lew said. "Yours and mine. And I guess Judd deserves a share, too."

"And you will take this to the marshal?" she asked, handing him back the paper. "You won't run now?"

"I'll take it," he said. "They'll probably hold me, and it might be a long time before they straighten it out. But Judd will be there to back me."

"So will I. We'll be there together."

Lew smiled at her. For the first time in a year he felt the weight lift. He thought for a moment how close he had come to utter violence. One more step, and he would have been over the edge, never to return. And he smiled.

"I've always had a hankering to try my luck with cattle," he said. "And Colorado's the country for it."

"Yes," she said.

"You hold on to that money," Lew said. "Take care of it."

She stepped close to him, her hand on his arm, the pressure of her fingers steady as she searched his eyes. "I—I wish that could be for us both," she said. Then she dropped her hand and turned blushingly away from him. "I—I guess lonely people have the bad habit of speaking their thoughts out loud."

"I wish I had said it."

Judd lonely, he thought. Himself lonely. And Emily. "We don't have to be lonely," he said. "Not you, or I, nor Judd. We never have to be lonely again." He knew it was true.

She turned to him again, and he gripped her shoulders. She looked up at him, and he knew she believed it too, and he had the feeling of fullness such as he'd never experienced. And there was a sun behind the rain to shine for them both. ■ ■ ■

TIME was when the Army in the West was allowed seven laundresses to the company. It seemed a workable rule for a while. Not only did it keep clothes clean, it also furnished a status and salary for pioneer-minded women who were willing to join their soldier husbands in the far west.

During the Mexican War, the rule was suspended for good, when the Army had the temerity to conscript a Mormon battalion from freshly settled Utah. Until suspension went into effect, there were more laundresses than soldiers!

—E. Jakobsson

Wild Willy and The Carnie Man

By T. C. McClary

He came slowly toward the giant, calling our low insults, taunting. . . .

Carnie man Smith, the town said, was no better than a horse thief or tinhorn—until they forced him to prove he was the best man of them all.

I REMEMBER the way the carnival's flashy steam calliope came down the street, splitting folk's ears with its shrill, piercing noise and jarring the windows with its bass. Man, that was music such as no music ever heard! It made the girls clutch for their fellows, and it would wail on a high note, and the boys

would grin and shoot their guns and try to beat it with their wild yips.

There was a little fellow at the calliope's keys, wearing a black stovepipe hat, a full three feet high, that threatened to drop down around his collar. He looked comical, but his whole chest was covered with medals, and, when the parade would stop, which it did every few yards, the boys would call out, Who is he? and the carnival master on his trick all-white horse would have the drums rolled and make him stand up, and announce him as master of all the instruments known to music, master of the calliope, internationally famous for his appearances before kings, but holding loyally to his plain American name of Peewee Smith.

That got everybody. We were damned proud of being Americans in those days.

Then the parade would move along with the clowns doing flips and giving the kids lollipops and rushing at the women, who'd squeal and love it. And the calliope would blast away, and the Indians who'd come to town would begin to shuffle and look like they were going into a war dance.

Mr. Peewee Smith could sure blow sound out of that instrument, and I was just going to say so to Miss Terry Vaughn, who taught music in our town, when I saw by the spark in her eye, that she was busting with laughter. I was ready enough to laugh, but I didn't know why, so I asked her, and when she could get a cinch on her voice, she grabbed my arm and said, "Lon, that famous maestro of the calliope can't play a note! I'll bet he never even tried before today."

Well, I was kind of sorry to hear that but glad she'd told me because I was just about to express my musical opinion of how good he was. Then the carnival passed and we drifted down to the Ladies' Aid feed at the picnic grounds until the carnival was set up and had made its private arrangements with the marshal.

I can't say that I ever had to worry about making conversation with Miss Terry. I seldom got a chance to speak, because we wouldn't get seated before the boys would be buzzing around like honey. She'd been born on our range, but she'd been away for learning, and when she came back, she was about the prettiest thing you ever saw, and she had all those extra things that a woman learns in a big city.

Not that she put on airs, or that she'd outgrown our sandtank in any way. She'd come back of her own because she wanted. She liked the country, and she had a little ranch her pa had left, and, believe me, she ran it. She liked the boys, too, but not too serious. So she had picked me for chief beaux because I was old and safe.

Well, we all stoked up on about the best vittles we were like to see that year, and then Peewee Smith sent his calliope call to come to the carnival, and the crowd broke and drifted down to the stock pens where it was already set up, bright and gaudy, and the sharpies and hoola girls would coax you into tight packed crowds while the pickpockets would steal the rest of your money.

There were always a few fights over that and the gyp games, but the carnies didn't always come out on top. We weren't rubes, and this was cow country. On one occasion, a whole carnival got burned and its folks run out in their underclothes and bare feet. But the carnies still gyped, and there were still troubles, so the carnivals had worked out a few specialty acts for free that would draw the crowd's attention when it looked like a fight might grow into a riot.

It wasn't long before one of those occasions came up. Wild Willy Elson's bunch, not above a little gypping themselves, had corralled a couple of wheel-of-fortune carnies and were knocking them to hell, with trail calls and cries of "Hey Rube!" singing out in all directions.

The calliope thundered some noise above

it, and then, little by little, the crowd began to note that the carnival master had mounted his trick horse atop a little platform where he had it performing. Well, a fight was only a fight in our country and could wait, but a horse like that was something special, so the gathering riot broke for a space while the crowd watched.

That was some horse, I'll say that. But even a trained horse only has so many tricks. He was running out of them, and the crowd was grinning appreciatively and ready to applaud, but the ugly feeling still drifted off the boys like a raw smell. That fight wasn't ended. It had just been suspended, and the carnival master was quick to smell it. So he pulled his second stunt which took some time.

They'd set up a high ladder with a little platform at the top. I guess that ladder was all of sixty or seventy feet. Down below it was a little tank, not more than eight feet wide and six feet deep. The carnival master got silence from us and his organ voice rolled out like sound coming from a cave. Mr. Peewee Smith, who had learned this art from no other than Nousa Sukioki, the greatest diver of the Orient, would proceed to defy death and destruction diving into five feet of water, and don't crowd the tank, ladies, for the water will splash, and then again, the human being is not infallible and there may be a scene of horror.

YOU could hear the crowd's breath suck in like the calliope was letting off steam. Mr. Peewee Smith appeared, preceded and followed by retainers in gaudy coats and turbans. He himself wore a painted Japanese kimona, we were informed, laden with more medals presented by kings and princes. But the medal that got the big hand was the one presented by Teddy Roosevelt. The boys whooped it up, and you could feel the last of their truculence breaking up like mist.

Then there was utter silence while Mr. Peewee was disrobed by his attendants. They took his sandals off and put a special pair upon him. They taped his wrists. They rubbed him down with oil, and sprayed him with some oriental stinkum that would give him smoother control when he hit the water.

The excitement built up through the crowd like a thunderhead. Folks were so quiet you could hear a boot squeak. In fact, eighty feet away, you could hear Peewee Smith breathing.

Terry suddenly clutched my arm, and when I looked at her, she was white. "Lon!" she whispered tensely. "I'll bet he's never done this before in his life! I'll bet they've had sickness, and he's just filling in like he did at the calliope."

I patted her hand. I said, "You don't break your neck on a calliope, Terry. Don't worry."

But I studied Peewee afresh, and he was stiff like a man frozen in his shakes, and, under the grease paint, his face was gray as putty, the lines pulled hard and biting deeper. Privately, I began to agree with Terry.

After a spell the preliminaries were over, and with drums throbbing out a death march time and fifes squealing like devils, Mr. Peewee flexed his muscles and began to climb the ladder.

He wasn't big, but he had a build— not the corded rawhide muscles our range was used to, but rounded, smooth, and so limber that they looked soft except when movement tensed them. Mr. Peewee mounted the ladder step by step, pausing occasionally to stretch an arm and leg and give his performance a little extra flash. High up, he hesitated, and I could feel what was in his mind clear as if he'd called it. I'd seen this act once before at another carnival. Part of it was a fake slip as the diver neared the top of his climb, and I knew Peewee was contemplating that.

But he didn't pull it, and right then, I knew there was no doubt that Terry had

guessed the secret. That wild little mite was doubling for everybody. Like as not, he'd be in with the lions too, if the lion tamer was sick.

I can't say that I enjoyed the way he stood upon the platform and kicked off his sandals. I just stood craning my neck, feeling grim and a little sick. I had my hands on Terry's shoulders, ready to wheel her away should he hit wrong and split like a paper bag.

The drums gave a last lead up roll and stopped abruptly. The carnival master sang out his piece. High up, Peewee hooked his toes over the platform edge and flexed himself, and then caught careful balance. Then his body tilted forward. Stiff. One line. He made a half circle that put him dropping straight down from the position where he'd stood.

The drums thundered out their roll, and women began to squeal and shriek. I felt Terry go taut and knew she didn't breathe. I didn't breathe myself until I sucked wind as he jacknifed just above the water and hit that tank with a splash that sluiced half the crowd with water.

His guard of honor were instantly swarming over the edge. They pulled him out, and one of them lifted his right arm for him and waved it. The crowd yelled wildly, and the boys began to pepper the tank with change. But Peewee never heard the calls of homage. He was out cold and just being held up on his feet.

Terry turned in my hands and pressed her forehead against my chest a moment, and then asked shakily, "Lon, would you think I was a very bad girl if I asked you to get me a real man's drink?"

I patted her smooth shoulder and took her to a table and went off to make proper arrangements to disguise a slug of whisky with soda pop and guard Terry from gossip. I made it a slug, too, a man's slug. She had it coming.

Well, the tension broke in her after we made sure that Peewee was all right and still amongst the living. Then excitement and interest took her, and nothing would do but she had to meet Pewee and get at the truth of that story. Of course, the truth wasn't going to be possible in just casual talk on the spot. He was a carnie, and he'd give her whatever story he thought would best spread his fame if she asked directly.

So we cooked up the idea of a little dawn breakfast party in Peewee's honor as the musical maestro, it being fitting that Terry should invite him as the town's outstanding citizen in the music pasture. We coralled our guests and arranged to drive out to Dawn Lake and catch the sunup, and I corralled chuck and a cook outfit and presented the invitation to Peewee to meet us at the close of the carnival.

He accepted without ever batting an eyelash, but there were quirks at the corners of his mouth. I took him over and introduced him to Terry. He took her hand and looked straight at her. His mouth was set to speak, but he didn't say a word. Neither did she. They just looked at each other and stood holding hands until she gave an abrupt, nervous little laugh, and he recollected his manners and smiled and bowed.

He said, "I'll be very happy to be honored by you, Miss Terry," and he sounded as if he really meant it. Then he made an apology and sank into the crowd. He was, I imagine, pretty nervous with reaction.

Terry stood watching his tall hat, her blue eyes wide and surprised, and her lips a little parted. "Terry," I warned, "don't forget he's still a carnie."

She gave a low laugh of rank guilt. "Don't worry, Lon," she told me. "But it's funny, isn't it? A minute ago he was just a freak stranger I was curious about. Then we shook hands, and now, somehow, I know him well."

"That was a big slug I fixed for you," I noted.

She clutched my arm. "Saving me for

the range, Lon?" she laughed. "Let's go get some cotton taffy and smear our faces and get gypped at chances."

WE DIDN'T get gypped. Maybe Peewee had passed the word. She won so much junk I had to go find her a little pushcart and a couple of boys to haul it. Clocks, Indian blankets, rugs, kewpie dolls, watches, and the most indecent red garters, that drew indignant envious looks from the other women and appropriate kidding from the boys who'd joined our procession.

When Peewee reappeared at dawn, I figured he'd be decked down in some special costume with probably all his medals. Instead, he appeared in a riding man's boots and pants and bobtailed broadcloth coat. He wore a white shirt open at the neck and a soft, gray hat, and he looked, and acted, like any ordinary, well-bred young fellow right off our home range just out for a little friendly social. I wasn't altogether pleased about his looks, particularly by the impression they made on Terry. As a celebrity, he was one thing. As one of us, he was moving in too fast.

We reached the lake while it was still steaming like a cauldron. Night's last dark shadows clung like heavy soot to the hollows, and the fire felt good, and the smell of food was better; and Peewee pulled out a real expert's mouth organ and gave us some real range music while dawn spread its yellow-rose toward the morning star.

It was quite a party, and Peewee got himself well liked with decent modesty. He skinned out of talking about the carnival as long as he could. It was full sunup when Terry finally rammed straight into him. She said, "Peewee, you never made that dive before tonight, did you?"

He looked startled, and then humor crinkled at the corners of his eyes. "What gave me away?" he asked.

She laughed. "The way you played the calliope!"

He leaned back and roared and slapped his thighs. "First person in five towns knew the difference!" he told her.

"The dive?" she needled him.

His eyes sparkled, and I could see he was considering various tall stories, but then he said with sudden honesty, "Well, the fact is that I never did try it that high, but I have been practicing low down. It wasn't as risky as it looked. I knew how to fall and I knew how to hit, if I just held balance."

"If!" Red Meahan repeated and shattered the prairie quiet with his deep chested laugh. "You're all right, Peewee!" he guffawed. "Stick around and we'll make at cattleman of you."

Peewee looked across at Terry, and she looked at him, and then she colored slightly and dropped her gaze. Peewee still looked at her as he told Red softly, "I might do that."

Of course nobody took him seriously. Not until the day after the carnival was gone, and there was Peewee, still there, cocked back in a chair on the hotel stoop.

Now this was serious for Terry, and, even excited and pleased as she was, she knew it. The caste lines of the cow country are sharp and severe. The code is strict, and it can break the man, or woman, who defies it. In normal times, any foreigner on the range at all would be accepted only with the tolerance extended a visitor. A carnie would be regarded several steps lower. He would be watched with suspicion, he would be baited, and he would be regarded little better than a known horse thief or crooked gambler.

Going after a respectable local girl, he'd have every decent man on the range ready to break his neck, but if the girl extended her friendship and protection, the local women would break her, too, and pronto.

I talked it over with her pretty bluntly. I'd always been pretty much like an older brother.

We were out at her ranch house and had

just finished supper on the stoop. She was moving about while I talked, and she stopped suddenly and looked out at the last pagan glow of sundown and ran her slim index finger along the rail. "Lon," she murmured, "just forget me for a minute. If he got a chance, isn't it possible he might prove up? He was honest about himself, and he's got grit, you've got to hand him."

I said, "Yes, and I hate to see a man with his innards stampeded. But he's a carnie, and he totes the brand, and this is pure cow country, Terry, and there's nothing honest for a man like him to do. If he started a store, he'd still be doubted. In any case, if you tied up with a storekeep, you'd begin to find troubles on the ranch."

She gave a mirthless laugh. "We're still pretty feudal, aren't we?" she asked.

"And proud of it," I agreed. "Even the townsmen, or they wouldn't be here."

"He's probably got some money, but what will he do after that?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe he just means to visit. That's going to look worse for you. If he stays, there won't be anything for him to do but gamble. Even if he plays straight, and that's not likely, the boys who lose will think he's crooked. If he isn't broken up or shot, he'll be ridden out on a rail. If you're wise, you'll tell him to dust along, Terry."

She dropped her face, but it was clear cut against the brightness of the sky, and I saw her biting her lower lip. I came to my feet with a cold feeling in me. I put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Terry!"

She turned to me suddenly. Her mouth was a tortured oval against the whiteness of her face, and her eyes were wide and glowing and yet dark. "It's not what you may think, Lon," she told me frankly. "But it's my fault he's here. I told him to stay."

I sucked a long breath and then took out a stogey and lighted up as cover to still my agitation. I stood pouring a second cup of coffee without looking at her and asked, "Are you in love with him, girl?"

"I'm afraid so," she murmured. Then I could feel her stiffen and her fling up, even though I couldn't see her. "No, I'm not afraid," she corrected. "I hope so, Lon. I hope so very much. I am twenty-four, and there is nobody on this range for me. A woman is entitled to a little joy and love."

I nodded agreement, but I felt somber. Love breaks all the rules, but the lovers are liable to get hurt. She was my friend though, and, if she loved him, I stood with her, provided she wasn't being taken. That was the first tough thing to crack. The life of a carnie doesn't make for a domestic man. But in his case, at least, it sure made for nerve and guts.

WELL, if he was serious about her and really meant to stay around, he might win some respect and tolerance by the nerve he'd already shown. But then there were the toughs, Wild Willy Elson's bunch, brutal, bigoted, narrow-minded, and intolerant of anything they couldn't understand or do themselves. And there was Peewee's size. Of course, with his sheer nerve, he might be a wicked man with a gun. But I doubted it. He didn't have the eyes. In any case, if he did shoot a local boy, that would be his finish on this range.

Finally, there was the matter of what business he might get into. I couldn't think of anything he might be fitted for in a cow town except gambling, or running a saloon. Either of those would either put him out with Terry, or get them both run out of town.

She must have read my thoughts. She said, "If I find it's love and he asks me, Lon, I'll go away with him, if need be."

I said, "Terry, if he's worth your love there won't be need. But this is going to to be rugged. Very rugged. Why in hell did you have to fall for a carnie?"

She smiled then, a little sadly, a little whimsically. "Who else would have the nerve to try and play a steam organ when they didn't know a note?" she asked softly.

I said, "Well, we'll see," and patted her shoulder, but privately, I thought all we'd see was trouble.

I rode into town and found the beginnings. Wild Willy Elson was snorting at the bar that Peewee's dive had been a trick. That the carnival had a big hole dug beneath the tank, so he had all the water he needed to fall into.

I wasn't so sure he wasn't right, so I corralled Red Meahan and Tad Ames, and we got a lantern and went to the stock pens and took a look. The marks of the tank were still there, clear. There wasn't any sign of fresh turned dirt or fill inside of them.

Both men had been friends of Terry's father. We rode back to town in heavy silence. At the edge of town, Red erupted, "I hate to kick a good man down. But a man good in one way ain't always good in others."

I said, "Gentlemen, I am going to give you a strict confidence. She asked him to stay on."

They both reined up and stared. Tad finally grunted, "I'll be damned! Then we've got to make double sure of him!"

Red growled, "First we've got to kill that Elson story," and we headed for the bar.

Elson was still there, still on the same theme, and mighty arrogant. Red told him flatly, "Shut that noise off, Willy. You're just simmering with envy. We just investigated, and there was no hole under that tank."

It put Elson's nose out of joint, and he looked sullen. Then his eyes flamed with wicked lights. "Why didn't he speak up agin me then?" he demanded. "I said it in his hearing!"

"You say it straight to him?" Tad demanded.

Elson's eyes wavered. He made a big chest, but he didn't look at Tad. "I speak loud enough for a man to hear," he growled. "What truck would I have talking with a damned tricked-up carnie?"

"You might match what he did," Red told him gruffly. That shut Elson up for then, but his mouth pulled cruel and his eyes smoldered.

We went to trail down Peewee. He wasn't in any of the saloons, and nobody had seen him in any game. We found him finally where we wouldn't have expected, talking with the town clerk, about surrounding land. We edged in on the talk and finally talked up a little poker. He played a nice game, with us at least. I'll hand him that.

We broke the game up middling late and talked small talk while we waited for breakfast. Tad riffled the cards casually and asked, "Peewee, you mentioned like you were fixing to root."

Peewee nodded, "That's right. Man roams too long, he forgets to stop."

Red put a light to his dead cigar and asked around it, "You got a business in mind?"

"Why sure," Peewee told us. "I aim to be a promoter."

Red stopped sucking his cigar and stared at him open mouthed. "A promoter?" he repeated. "What in hell is there to promote?"

"Why the whole county, far as I can figure," Peewee told him. "There's a hundred things here could be stirred up. There's that lake where we had breakfast. It's high and cool and ain't far out. It would make real campsites for summer shacks. Then there's your horseflesh. I hear tell this county's got the finest heavy mustang stock in the southwest, and two hundred miles from here, folks are settling thick, but they don't know where to buy heavy horses. Then I thought of a rodeo. . . ."

Tad frowned dubiously. He said, "We have a last day at the roundup just about cleans that idea up."

Peewee grinned at him. He said, "Friend, three counties over they've got a town ain't half what this is that puts on a rodeo and draws folks from five hundred miles. Half the boys I've talked with right here ride

over to it. You all be savin' a long trip."

Red looked at us and made a non committal gesture. He said, "He talks good if he can put some of them things over."

Peewee grunted, "I'll put 'em over!"

Red sucked at his cigar and then said without harshness, "There's just two catches, Peewee. This is a tough cow country that likes to see a man prove up in the things it knows before it backs him in things it doesn't, and you're a carnie."

"Was!" Peewee corrected. "I guess I can buck that. What's the other catch?"

Red looked at him, looked at his cigar, looked back at him, and then looked at me for help. I took a long breath and let Peewee see my eyes and told him, "Every stranger ever moved into this country had to fight his way in, Peewee. You've got a ton of grit, but you're small on size, and no friend can side you until you've first proved up yourself."

Peewee showed no resentment, but his mouth compressed. I had the idea that maybe his size had cropped up to thwart him before in his life.

"Of course," I added, "you've got the right to tote a gun, and using one is not unheard of hereabouts. But it's not considered the best of form."

He shook his head. He said, "That's not my style. I can use one, but I don't hanker to kill nobody. I sure wouldn't tote one just watching for a phoney chance to prove myself."

That was a nice little statement and all the rest of us liked it. It put Peewee right in my books, but it still didn't help him with his problem. With regret, chiefly out of my liking for Terry, I figured Peewee as a straight hombre but out of luck. He could have the best and soundest ideas in the world—like that horse one; that was good—but he wouldn't be able to drop his loop on a local dollar or friend to back him until he'd cleared the range of the kind of talk that Elson had been cooking.

True, it was chiefly the toughs and ignorant that he'd have trouble with. But there were plenty of solid citizens hoping to throw their brands on Terry, and they wouldn't be above aiding and abetting idle gossip and conjecture until Peewee had shut off the other talk for good.

WELL, that was a mighty odd and disturbing summer for a man in my position. I liked the game little carnie, but I couldn't help him except with a little blunt opinion and advice. All over the county folks bumped into him out learning, studying, getting up some new idea. Some darned good ideas, too. There was one for a toll bridge where it was needed, another for a right-of-way that would chop sixty miles off the main trail which ran through the next county and bring it through our town.

Wherever folks saw him, he was bustling, full of enthusiasm and energy and optimism, and they began to like him. But that still didn't affect the fact that he hadn't proved up on the only basis of manhood, respect, and trust our range understood. He hadn't stopped the toughs from jeers and scoffing and finding fault with anything he undertook. Mostly, that was Elson, and nobody with sense had much use for him, but derisive talk like that spreads out, and nobody stops to figure where it came from.

Just take that one idea about the mustangs. Peewee could ride, ride reasonably well. But he didn't know horseflesh the way the cow country knew it. That was all Elson had to point out. How in hell was he going to put together any deal that would stick?

I grew pretty bothered about Peewee's situation as the summer wore on, for he had cropped up with a decent action which surprised me. He wouldn't see Terry in public at any time. He wouldn't even go to the dances and socials. Hard as they tried, the gossips never caught him riding out to her ranch, nor knocking on her door in town.

He did see her. Naturally, she'd tell me. But it was seldom, and then only for stolen

half hours that nobody else knew about. Maybe he'd catch her driving in from the ranch. Maybe they'd make a date to meet in secret two weeks or a month off.

That must have been a pretty hard choice for him to make, but he had done it, for Terry would have breasted the criticism of the whole range and seen him every day if he had let her. And a man bucking his head against the wall of local doubt the way he was—well, that's a time when a man needs the comfort of his woman.

We were planning roundup, and Peewee still hadn't cinched a single one of his deals, but now he was busy with his plans for a rodeo. He talked cheerfully enough, he was still full of pep and purpose, but I turned back on him one day just after leaving and surprised a look in his eyes. It was the kind of frustrated defeat that a man who won't quit and knows he's right sometimes suffers. He'd hidden it well, even from me, but I caught it there for an instant—the hard, hot pull within the eyeballs, the bitter weariness of expression.

He colored, and I pretended I hadn't noticed but was looking for something I'd lost. But that night, I got hold of him in the owner's side room of the saloon. Out at the bar, Elson was making big talk with the range boys, and heaping Peewee with ridicule and scorn as not having the guts to sign up and work the roundup.

In our country, that was a damaging statement. Nobody paid any attention to the fact that there was nothing Peewee could do in a roundup, that nobody would have hired him.

I sat across from Peewee, not speaking, making sure he heard Elson's rough booming statements. After a time I told him, "There's what's stopping you Peewee. Stop that kind of talk and you may have a chance. You could have proved up a gold mine out here and you wouldn't find backing as long as that talk keeps going."

He nodded and said through tight lips, "I've been trying to figure a way out. I

was hoping he was half bluff, half yellow, and that if I stuck a fight out with him long enough, I might spill him open."

He stopped and shook his head, and I could feel a man's sympathy for him. For whatever else Wild Willy was, he wasn't yellow, and he wasn't bluff. He gloated on fights and gloried in cruelty, and he was tough as they come.

I frowned and made doodles with the dampness of my glass, and then I told Peewee straight out, "Then you might as well give up the idea of the rodeo and save trouble. Nobody will sign up."

He said, "Nope, Lon, usually you're right, but this time you're wrong. I'm going to promote that rodeo four weeks following roundup, and I will bet my last dollar that every rider in this county shows up."

I shot him a sharp look, expecting from that statement to find him cheerful. He wasn't. He looked grim as hell. He looked worse than he did that day up there on the diving platform. But he had something in mind, and I caught the feel of it suddenly, and even though I couldn't guess what it was, I went out and rooted up Red Meehan and Tad Ames and bought them drinks, and told them.

Both men just shook their heads. "He's game," Tad grunted, "but whatever he's fixing to do, he's licked before he starts with that bunch. He just ain't got the weight and toughness. He can handstand and do flips and cartwheels and tricks they never could. But rough fighting is something else, and in his case that's what this boils down to."

That kind of damped my excitement, but I still thought he'd come through with something finally, until I found out what it was on the last day of the rodeo. When I found out, I felt like I was already at his funeral.

The last day of roundup was a special event on our range. It was the day the boys got paid off, and fought out the feuds forbidden during roundup, and settled their various jeers and challenges and contests. Later on, their women folk drove out, their wagons loaded with special vittles, and the saloons sent liquor out for nothing, and the fiddlers came and a dance square was cleared. It was kind of a temper cleaning and a home coming, and the best possible time to do politics or promote some new deal.

That was what Peewee had figured, and he was out there with a rented wagon and a keg of free liquor, and two big signs announcing his rodeo, and a big book for the boys to sign up entries.

If you were a friend, it would break your heart to see the sneering grins he got and hear the comments and see the lonesome way he stood there. Nobody at all came to sign his book. Damned few came for a drink of his free liquor.

WILD WILLY couldn't resist the chance for insult, though. He winked at his bunch, and, they drifted over to drink Peewee dry, while they insulted him, that being their idea of smart humor. The boys smelt out the hazing and gathered around to watch the fun, and Wild Willy, with this big audience, outdid himself with witticism. He kind of cottoned to the word, "Promotion." He kept shoving it at Peewee, reminding all and sundry of Peewee's other flops, and needling him about what new ideas he had when the rodeo failed to come off.

Peewee gave him rope and let him draw his own drinks and timed his plan well. He said finally, "Well, I got an idea that rodeo's going to come off fine and dandy, because I've got another promotion, for today, that's going to make it."

Wild Willy turned and winked at the crowd and allowed, "This I got to hear! What harum scarum idee you got that's so good it should come off at roundup end, minnow tinhorn?"

Peewee looked at him a space mockingly,

and maybe Willy had a premonition. He begain to roil even before Pewee told him, "Why now, I got a promotion will settle all the bad blood of round up and give every man a chance at once to prove up who are real men around here."

Wild Willy let out a blast of breath and swelled his chest. "There ain't much doubt!" he boasted, but other waddies called in, "Let the little man talk!"

Peewee nodded and pulled out a poke and clunked the gold coins in it. "One hundred dollars prize money," he allowed, "for the winner of a battle royal. Entrance fee, five bucks. All fighting has to be done inside a rope square. Man knocks or crawls out of square is out of fight. Winner is last man standing up."

A dead silence of surprise dropped over the crowd. Peewee jangled his prize money again. "Scared of a real fight, boys?" he challenged. "Step right up with your five dollars! Come one, come all!"

Wild Willy dropped his head and stuck it forward, breathing hard. His eyes were flaming. "Smart, ain'tcha?" he rasped at Peewee. "You ain't got the guts to fight one lone man, but you'll fix it up for others to stampede each other?"

It was right then I felt the turn of my stomach, for I saw the light spread through Peewee's eyes like a cold winter dawn, and I saw his smile, his teeth set edge to edge. He said softly, "I wouldn't want you to win this money, Willy, so I've put myself down as first entry to make sure you don't."

He flipped open a little book on a table, and the boys crowded forward to see what was written on the page. At the top was the date, and the words "Roundup's End." Below that, "Battle Royal." Then the words entries and paid, and his own name.

Wild Willy let out an angry, gloating bellow and grabbed Peewee's pencil and scrawled his name and paid his fee. Every man with a boast or a beef taunted his enemies and got taunted back, and the boys pushed in to sign.

The square was roped off, men stripped and made muscles and boasts and gave their taunts while the owners elected judges and the roundup foremen were duly sworn as honest referees. Red Meehan gave Peewee one pitying look, then his face lighted with the excitement and he stood with his gun drawn to give the starting signal.

Peewee went into the ring and stood flexing his shoulders modestly. Wild Willy strutted and pawed the earth. He kept close to Peewee and kept telling him, "Just so nobody else gets you first!" But plenty of men were conniving in whispers to get Willy. They were ganging up to give him hell. They'd wait to fight their own fights later.

Red Meehan sang out warning and then his gun barked into the silence. Inside the ring, there was an instant's utter lack of movement. Then a roar like a pit full of bulls and bears broke out, and Willy reached for Pewee, and two men as big clipped Willy from both sides, and in a twinkling, the place was a melee of cursing, howling men, rushing each other, tumbling, flailing, kicking, gouging. Hell's own violence and mayhem boiled up that dust smoke.

For a space I lost sight of Peewee, but then I heard Buck Drago of Flying D sing out, "Atta boy, Minnow! Show him yore wildcat!" Buck's yell ended in a hard bark of breath, but right after it came a screech. Nothing on earth is like a battle royal. Nothing is as utterly brutal and vicious and savage.

A few men were being hurled out of the ring now, and the referees were busy identifying them to keep them from going back in. One man crawled out, one ear ripped off, dragging paralyzed lower limbs. I saw Peewee tossed high in the dust smoke a half dozen times. The last time there was a thin spot in the dust smoke and I could see him clear, and he was a pretty terrible sight to see, but as he fell back his arms were flailing.

THEN I didn't see him any more and I wondered what epitaph we'd put upon his grave. Even if he was down, knocked out, that wouldn't necessarily save him damage. At this point of frenzy, men reached out blindly for whatever bone they could break or whatever face they could gouge and rip.

Red Meehan came around from the far sound and said, "Forty-two minutes. The smoke's thinning."

"Where's Wild Willy?" I grunted.

"Been down a couple of times and up again. The whole packs been after him. He's torn to ribbons, but he's still howling."

I said, "I haven't seen Peewee."

Red said, "Probably tromped like he'd been hit by a stampede."

The smoke thinned rapidly now. Now more men got thrown clear. Those left were growing too weak, but came crawling out from all sides, battered, crippled, groaning, sobbing, but in two minutes, yelling in hoarse, brute encouragement for some survivor to annihilate some enemy.

The dust smoke thinned enough so that we could see the ring. Bodies, some moving, some still, lay strewn all over. Five men were still fighting in a knot. There was a wild yell, and then there were only three on their feet. They smashed down tumbling. The sounds were hideous. The breath blasted out of one with pain, and the other two rolled and flailed, great, muscle-ripping, bone-cracking blows and holds. Like this, antediluvian beasts must have fought upon the prairie.

Red jabbed me sharply and pointed. A small figure was lurching to his feet. "Peewee!" Red muttered disbelievingly. Not that you could tell from his face. But he was the only man that small that had gone in there.

He stood lurching, catching his wind and senses. He watched the two big men fighting and that seemed to bring him some wits. He stopped swaying and he stepped clear of sprawled bodies, and he picked a space and flexed out his arms and legs and midrif.

Then out of the two men there was only one, and he gave a wild brute yell of victory and lurched to his feet. He yelled unintelligible sounds through his smashed in face. You couldn't recognize him or tell his voice, but we knew that it was Wild Willy, and that he thought he was victor of the melee.

Then we saw the incredible thing—Peewee stalking across that cluttered, bloody ring like a killing puma. He could have caught Willy unaware from behind, but he wouldn't. He just came slowly toward the giant, calling out in a soft voice, low insults, taunting.

Willy gave a bellow of anger and cleared blood from his eyes and lurched to meet Peewee and crush him. Peewee's fist lashed out and put fresh blood spilling in Willy's eye. He kicked his shin and grabbed at Willy's lowered head and jerked and threw him. Peewee lifted into the air like a big cat and came down with his heels in Willy's kidneys.

Willy lurched off with a roar and reached to grab him, but Peewee was like a snake in Willy's tired and heavy movements. He slithered free, and crashed Willy's chin with his knee. He could have stood erect and kicked the daylights out of Willy, but he didn't. He just stood over him taunting him, daring him to get up, and knocking him down every time he tried.

He didn't slam Willy down any more. He just knocked him back in a position from which Willy couldn't fight. He just did that and kept taunting him. Willy flailed and kicked and cursed and yelled until he sounded like a desert thirst crazed man. And finally, he couldn't yell any more, he could kick, and Peewee sat on his back and pulled hairs out of him one by one.

Willy tried to get up, but he was licked, and the relentless insult of having hairs

pulled out of him was more than he could bear. He tried twice to come to his feet and failed, and finally, with a last sobbing yell, he began crawling for the rope, Peewee still astride of him, still pulling hairs, still taunting.

He reached the rope and Peewee jumped off him and kicked him through. But he was beat himself, more than he knew, and he stood swaying so badly he looked as if he'd fall. Red and Tad jumped under the rope together and grabbed him. Red lifted Peewee's hand and roared, "Peewee Smith, the winner!" and I will wager that the yell the boys raised was the most savage yell of homage ever heard.

Peewee never heard that yell, though, any more than he'd heard the one at the carnival. He was out cold in Red's arms, and Red was laughing and toting him over the sprawl of bodies like a baby in a woolen blanket.

The boys never agreed on just how much knockout and how much trick there was in the little rest Peewee took through most of that gory performance, but he was battered up as bad as any, and he'd stayed in the ring, and if he'd used a little trick, that was all right with the range. He was a downright smart and savage fighter. And he'd done something they wouldn't have had the cool sense to do. He'd made Wild Willy crawl of his own; he'd ridden Willy like a busted horse right smack to the edge of the ring.

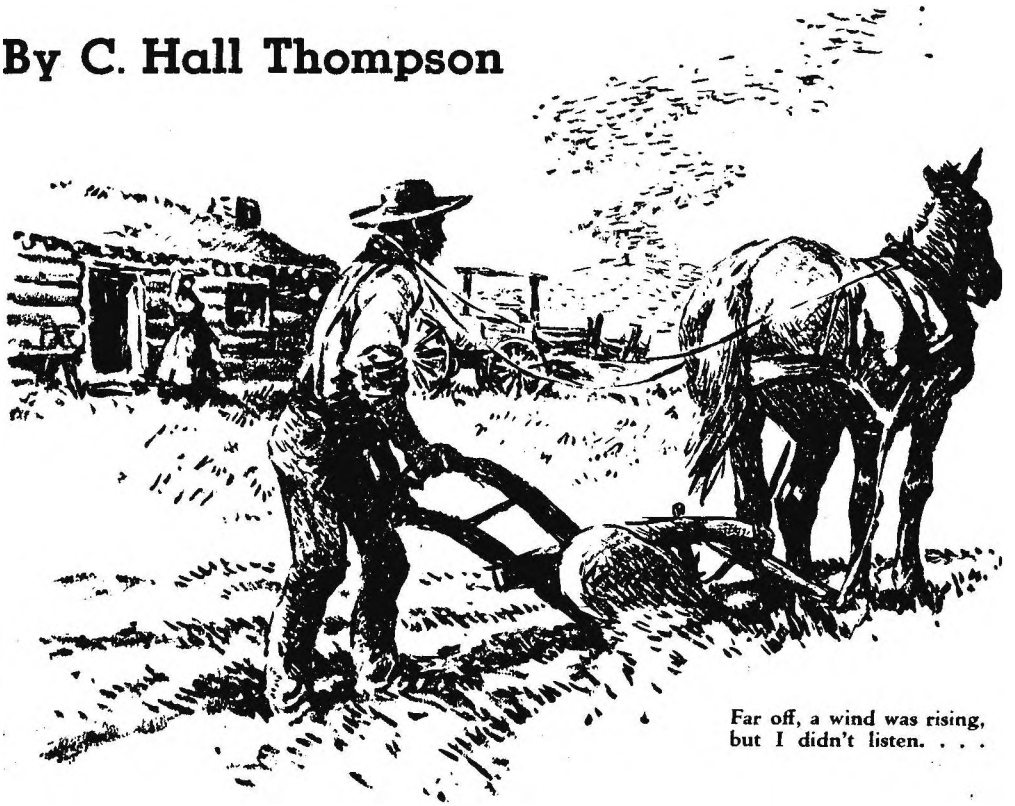
Well, there isn't much more to tell, is there? Was that roundup a success? There wasn't a man on the range, even those still crippled, wasn't entered. And that story of the battle royal reached five counties over, and every waddy who could reach our town came in for the rodeo to hear the story of that mass hate and gore.

Yessir, Peewee and the whole town and the whole range made a nice thing out of that rodeo. I don't calculate the boys will give Peewee another battle royal next year just for publicity, and they feel all right about this one. It was good blood letting all around. It polished up a heap of old grudges.

Well, I guess there isn't much more to tell, except that Terry and Peewee had about the most bang-up kettle branding ever seen. Peewee went right to work on that toll bridge and rounding up a heavy horse cavvy. Peewee's doing all right. Wild Willy ain't been seen. ■ ■ ■

THE DEAD LAND

By C. Hall Thompson



Far off, a wind was rising, but I didn't listen. . . .

Is the death that lurks over the horizon better than the living death you already know? Tom Brewton had to find out—while he was still alive enough to tell.

SHE was standing in the doorway. West over the badlands, the sun was whitehot, and the smell of the desert was in the air, and, when I topped the last rise and came down toward the cabin, I saw her.

She was my woman. It was scarcely two years ago, but she wasn't the girl I had wed back in Independence and brought in a wagon to this place we meant to make a home. The lightness had gone out of her eyes. They frowned against the glare. She was twenty-four, and there were callouses on her palms from guiding the plough.

I went through the dooryard gate and stopped under the cottonwood and the bone-dry leaves hung still as if expecting a storm.

My woman said, "The hot wind's coming. The desert wind."

Then, she went inside.

There was an ache in my throat. I washed my hands at the cracked china bowl her folks had given us as a wedding present.

She spread the noon meal. The food-

smell was heavy. I sat at the table, and, in his cradle, young Adam commenced mumbling. She went and talked to him, gently but with no smiling.

"The crop looks good today." My voice was too loud. "It'll be fine this year," I said. "It's bound to be."

My woman said, "You better eat."

She stood on the doorsill, waiting and listening like the leaves. I saw her lips move.

"What's that, Sarah?"

"Nothing."

"You was talking."

"Nothing, Tom."

I clapped down the fork. "A man's got a right to—"

She spun so quick it felt like a slap across the face.

"You want to know what I said. "All right."

"Sarah. . . ."

"I said I hate it."

I just looked at her.

I didn't say anything.

"All of it, Tom. This thing we call a house, this burnt-out land, this hoping and pretending it'll all be fine. I hate it."

The room was dim and still. Suddenly, she crossed to me, caught my arm.

"Tom, it's no place for us, for the boy. We could move on."

"We stuck this far."

"Tom. . . ."

"The land needs help, that's all. It's where we started, Sarah. It's home."

"Home!"

The laugh was shrill and close to tears, and it was all in her face then, the young bright dreaming, the early planting last year, the first feeble harvest, the winter when there was no doctor to bring the baby and the drudge of starting all over in the fields, the sweat, dust, the heat. Too quiet, she said, "It ain't no home, Tom."

I got up. I went past her to the doorway.

"It's a dead place. It ain't no. . . ."

I didn't wait for the rest.

A MAN can scarcely bear to hear his son's crying. The boy had started a high whimper, like a pup sensing trouble in the warm litter.

I walked faster. I made the hill and the motionless tree-shade. Once, I turned. No one stood in the cabin doorway. It was vacant and desolate.

I felt empty. But, there is a stubborn streak in the Brewton hide, a hanging-on streak, and I swung angrily to the roll of the land and the crops.

Far off, along an eastward break of hill, a dull cloud was shifting; a wind was rising but I didn't listen. I slung old Bess into the ploughshare halter and smacked her withers. It was the way you went on, broke a new field while the old one's growing. It was the land, and you had to work with it, coax it. Not just any land, mind, but your land, and it needed your believing and hope. Lose it, and you lost a piece of yourself.

I twisted free of the guy-lines. By God, I would go back. Sarah had to see; someway, somehow, she had to be made to understand. . . .

Then, I stood still. All the while, it had got louder, that whir of wind, and now the cloud's shadow was blurring the sun. I shaded my eyes and stared, and the cloud was blacker and the noise more swarming and my own voice was a whisper, "Locusts," then a dry sharp yell piercing the sky, "Locusts!"

I wheeled to the cabin, and Sarah was coming toward me, not running and crying woman-like, but slow and silent. She stopped in a furrow and her eyes stayed on that rasping cloud, and I saw something building up behind her face, something that had to break through. I said, "Maybe they'll pass over."

She kept watching.

The locusts came in low, supporting each other with dry brassy wings in one dark

mass, followed by their shadow over the belly-rolls of land.

"Go in," I said.

She didn't move.

They were straight overhead, and a rip opened in the cloud, the first fringe dropping like hail on the green shoots. I felt a crackling shell slap my face, and I screamed, "Go in, woman," and then I was fighting them.

They came like a storm, pelting the skin, swarming in layers, the top ones jumping wild as I beat about me with the spade; they popped underfoot like dry hay, and they stank. Blind-hungry, they batted against Bess's muzzle, and she reared, hoofs crushing down. They crawled up the trouserlegs and clustered like sores on the chewed leaves, and all the while they kept up that whirring sound.

I expected screams. They didn't come. I saw the thing break in Sarah's eyes, hot and bright, and it wasn't fear, it was anger. She caught up a harrow blade and flailed at the crawling things. She fought hip to hip with me, and the locusts fell away in masses and after a while another cloud lifted, hissing.

That was when we saw them headed for the cabin. Color went out of Sarah's face and I said, "Lord A'Mighty, the boy," and we were both running. She fell once, but it didn't stop her. I saw the scrape of shale and blood on her arm but her fist held tight to the blade.

They were in the cabin, dashing against the chinking, flooding over the larder. They crawled in the dust and a small swarm had reached the cradle. The boy was squalling, and I let out a string of curses. I slashed at the fluttering dry wings. I ground them underfoot, and Sarah pounded with the harrow blade, over and over, white and quiet, saying, "There. There," at the fall of each blow.

I can't reckon that time in minutes or hours. I don't know when the whirring started again and the cabin floor was clear but for the dead ones, and we saw the cloud gather and lift into the burning air, hissing as it swung west. The sound drifted back for a long spell.

Finally, there was no sound anywhere in the world at all.

I sat in the rocker, my hands dangling between my knees. I didn't look at Sarah. I didn't want to see the lines deeper around her mouth now, the eyes dulled and empty. I heard her go to the cradle and lift Adam in her arms.

A single locust, half-alive, floundered on its back. Slow and hard, I set my heel on it and ground into the dust.

My woman was in the doorway, holding the boy. She watched the land-rise where crops scattered broken and chewed, sap bleeding out of the naked roots turned to the parching sun.

In the end, I said, "I'll load the wagon tonight."

She didn't speak. "I'll load the wagon," I said.

I went and put an arm across her shoulders.

"There's other land. . . ."

Then, I stopped. She had turned to me and the face was the face of my woman, but there was something more in the eyes—She said, "Tom."

I held her against me, and the words didn't need to be said, the knowing was there between us. You don't know. You don't know it's home till they try to take it away.

You don't know till you have to fight to keep it.

Sarah watched the land.

"It's a long row to hoe," I said.

She only nodded. After a minute, I let her go.

"It needs work," I said. "I got to wipe out the eggs they left."

My woman nodded again. I think she smiled.

"I'll have supper ready when you get home." ■ ■ ■

He leaned out of the saddle and got too far down.

Dead Man's Town

By Richard Ferber

Twenty to four they were, until, at a word, nineteen men he'd called his friends threw their guns in the dust and left Marshal Wylie to face the silent killers alone—with the whole town watching to see him die!

WYLIE finished his coffee and went out onto the porch of the hotel to catch the first morning slants of the sun. He found himself a place against a post, lighted a cigar, and waited for the sun's warmth to take the first early stiffness from his legs. The town of Colbyville spread out before him under a thin blanket of shadow and light. Down near the railroad tracks the sun glinted on the peeled paint of the water tower and, below that, reflected dully from the windows of the deserted station house. A dog came around the corner of the old engine barn and

sniffed alertly through the tangle of iron and rotting railroad ties, then trotted off with an air of stiff dissatisfaction.

Across the wide plaza the swamper came out of Parlay's Saloon, sloshed a bucket of water into the dust of the street, and went back inside without acknowledging Wylie. A rooster made its long, echoing call from somewhere in the back buildings of the town just as Bob Sweet hurried out of his boardinghouse and started toward his job at the livery. He passed Sam Dawes coming out of the alley, and Wylie saw Dawes try to stop him without success. Dawes was a little drunk already, or else the whisky from the night before still held its affect on him. He walked down the far sidewalk, holding himself too erect, and stopped in front of the saloon. He saw Wylie then, and he moved on, peering in the window of the saddlery for a moment before he turned casually and crossed the street.

He took a post on the other side of the stairs from Wylie, leaned back against it, and stared blankly at the plaza. He said, "The town's quiet," without knowing the simpleness of the remark. Colbyville was a quiet town, and it was even more so at six-thirty in the morning.

Wylie said, "Yes," carefully, and twisted a little to study the man. Dawes was well past sixty. He wore his hair long in the old-time fashion, and it was hard to tell whether it was gray or dirty at the back of his neck. His frame was long and straight, and even now he only walked bent-backed when he thought no one was watching him. His face had gone sallow from too much whisky, and the hard set of his chin was a cover up for the courage that he had lost a long time before. He had been the town marshal once, before the years had caught up with him and something had cracked within. He was the town drunk now, and it made everybody a little sick just seeing him. There was something unpleasant about watching a once-hard man turn yellow inside, perhaps because it was too sharp a reminder of one's own lack of firmness. To Wylie it wasn't so bad. Dawes had had courage once, and his own temperament told him it was a hard thing to hold on to.

The restlessness began to show in Dawes. He shifted his feet and threw furtive glances at Wylie. Finally he said, "It's a dry damn country," though the sun hadn't yet warmed the street.

Wylie dug in his pockets, found a four-bit piece, and gave it to Dawes. The old man said, "Thanks, Marshal," lost his easy composure, and hurried across the plaza. He was half-way to the saloon before he remembered to straighten up. He walked more slowly until he got to the swinging doors and went inside.

IT WAS ten o'clock when Bradford Hemus rode into town. Wylie heard the fast run of his horse and started to get up from his desk before he realized that the man was tying-up at the rack outside. Hemus came through the door beating dust from his hat and stood panting awhile and muttering about that "damn crazy mare" and how she could run. Wylie waited patiently. Hemus got some of his wind back and leaned across the desk.

"I was on my way up to the Lazy A place this morning," he said. He was still heaving a little. "I stopped in at Bostwick's for a beer. Ben and Jake Murkey were in there, and two other men that I didn't know. They were all red-eyed-up and talkin' mean. Seems like they're snaked-off about you killing the old man."

"So?" Wylie said.

"So, they're comin' here to see which one can bust a hole in your star."

Wylie stood up, walked to the window, and looked out into the street. Brad Hemus stayed with his hands pressed on the battered top of the desk, watching him. Outside a few people loitered on the sidewalk, waiting to get the news. Hemus had left the door open, and one of them peeked

in and backed out again without saying anything. Wylie came away from the window and took his hat down from the nail on the wall. He was a tall man, with hard, lank features and eyes that showed little expression. A few gray hairs grew at the side of his head and showed under his hat when he put it on. He set his gaze on Brad Hemus thoughtfully and said, "When do you figure they'll be here?"

Hemus shook his head. "I don't know. When they get liquored-up enough to stop their guts from rumbling."

Wylie smiled at Hemus' disdain for the Murkey brothers. Still, he'd thought enough of their talk to run a good mare to the ground, and, when it came to cases, he wouldn't take the four men too lightly. Everyone had expected that the Murkey gang would break up after old Pop Murkey was killed; instead they'd been hanging around the hills for a week with the town waiting for them to leave. That they had come as far as Bostwick's now could mean only one thing.

Hamus straightened up from the desk and moved toward the door. "Just thought I'd tell you," he said. "Damn long ride though. And I still gotta go up to the Lazy A."

Wylie waited until he had left, then followed him out the door, and turned idly down the sidewalk. Hemus was standing by his mare, talking to the gathered crowd. Across the street Wylie's deputy, Tom Fenly, came down the stairs from his room over the dry goods store and stretched himself lazily. He was a young kid, not over twenty, and he had spent all that he ever made on his clothes and the two pearl-handled Colts that hung low at his sides. Wylie had never asked him what he intended to do with the second gun; the kid had a strong pride, and there was no use rankling it. He crossed the street to him now and leaned one foot on the sidewalk to talk to him. The kid nodded a greeting and squinted down the plaza, his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his trousers.

"Brad Hemus just rode in," Wylie told him. "Says the Murkeys and a couple other men are down at Bostwick's and coming this way."

The kid said nothing. He smiled and shifted his weight onto one foot and began making a cigarette. Wylie watched him with mild amusement. He said, "You stick close to the office. There may be some men around later for guns."

He started to move off, and the kid sneered and said, "You gonna arm the whole town?"

Wylie stopped, and a sentence formed on his lips, but he held it back. He said, "We could use a little help," ran his eyes up and down the kid, then turned and left him.

The sun had moved high above the street and laid a glaring screen on the bright, clean windows of the bank. Wylie found Mr. Hollis at his desk at the back of the long room and went through the gate at the man's signal. Hollis was the mayor, a short fat man with a white face and a ready tendency to perspire. He motioned Wylie to a chair, and Wylie said, "No, thanks," and then, "I just thought I'd tell you, Mr. Hollis. Brad Hemus saw the Murkey boys up at Bostwick's, and he thinks they're headed for town."

"Good. Good," Hollis said. He rocked in his chair and pushed his lips out to show his approval. "Maybe we can get rid of them once and for all. You want to make some deputies, Wylie?"

"I thought I'd get some men," Wylie said. "But I don't see where swearing them in will do any good."

Hollis rubbed his chin and picked up a paper from his desk. "You're the marshal," he said, dismissing the subject. The sweat had already begun to work out on his forehead.

Wylie left the bank and paused a moment before going on. He took the watch from his vest pocket, studying it closely. There

would be no telling when the Murkeys would get here. But Brad Hemus was right about one thing: they'd be drunk. Exactly how drunk depended upon how early Bostwick had opened up for them to get that way. Bostwick's place was on the old railroad right-of-way, long unused, and he was probably eager for business.

It was cool and dark inside Shuster's dry goods store, and the place had a pungent odor from the oil on the floor. Hollis' wife and daughter were standing at one of the counters, examining some fabrics in muted conversation. The bell over the door jingled shrilly when Wylie stepped inside, without causing Fred Shuster to look up from his books. Wylie tipped his hat to the two women and went over to where Shuster was sitting on the stool. Shuster was in his forties somewhere, a tall, lean man who wore eye glasses and had a pasty, changeless expression on his face. Fred's father, who had built the store, was around eighty, and he spent most of his time down by the railroad shed, watching. There was nothing to watch anymore. The shed was empty, and no train ran on the track even once a day. But Fred thought it was better than having him loaf around the shop. The old man was too doddering for such a respectable business establishment.

Shuster said, "Good morning," and made a neat entry on the ledger. "I hear the Murkeys are coming this way. I suppose you want a deputy."

Wylie leaned on the counter and said, "We could use a little help. There's four of them. You coming out?"

Shuster put the pen down emphatically and showed Wylie his disgust. "I suppose you know I don't appreciate this, Marshal. It's your job, not mine. If the Murkeys got any business in town, it's with you."

"That's right," Wylie said evenly. "But if you want a gun, Tom will be over at the office."

He made his courtesy to the women and left the store quickly. Shuster would be there, he knew; the man's sure knowledge of his own responsibility to the town would see to that. It would be a hard thing to convince him that the job could be done without him.

WYLIE crossed the street to get into the still lingering shade. A group of men stood in front of the saloon, but it would be a waste of time to tell them about the Murkeys. They would be spreading the news themselves by now. He walked the length of the plaza till he came to the livery stable and turned into it. Sam Dawes was standing just inside the door, hangdogging a little, but his face brightened when he saw Wylie. Further in the darkness of the stable a half-dozen men were formed in a loose circle, with Tom Fenley standing in the middle. A bottle was going the rounds, and Fenly was telling a story. He leaned back against the post and interrupted the tale only long enough to drink from the bottle. It was the story of how they had killed Pop Murkey, and how Wylie was there too, and he didn't even change the slant much when he saw Wylie. Sam Dawes tried to crowd into the circle when the bottle came around, but Bob Sweet pushed him out. Wylie waited until Fenley had finished the story, then said, "I thought you'd be at the office, Tom. There'll be some men coming around for guns."

Fenley shrugged his shoulders and took another pull at the bottle. "We've got enough men here," he said. "We don't need an army to fight the Murkeys." His voice was tight without being confident, and it was obvious that the rest of the men in the livery didn't agree with him. Bob Sweet had a rusty Winchester that he was jamming cartridges into, and Dimock, the stable owner, had come up with a Colt and well-worn holster that he was trying to find a comfortable place for on his hip. He said, "Ain't used this gun for a long time.

Since back in the spring of 'seventy-one, I think. That was when old Dawes was marshal." He stopped, realizing his mistake.

Dawes had circled the group, and the mention of his name was an excuse to crowd in again. He pressed in beside Fenley and started talking and reached absently for the bottle in Fenley's hand. He almost had it when Fenley shoved him backwards. "Get away, you old goat," Fenley snarled at him. The old man tottered and sat down in the dirt. The push seemed to raise the little pride left in him, and he said, "If I was younger. If I was ten years younger. . . ." But he let it go and had a hard time getting up. Fenley was mad because he hadn't meant to send the old man down, and he got madder and stood over him a minute, threatening, until the men turned their backs and started talking about something else. Dawes brushed himself off and went back to standing at the doorway of the livery, away from the group but still trying to be a part of it. Wylie watched him and felt sorry for him. He'd been a good man once, as far as town marshals went, but that sort of thing was easily forgotten.

Fenley's temper had taken most of the talk out of the men, and the presence of Wylie made them uneasy. They started pulling at the bottle more seriously now and rechecking their weapons. Russ Dimock glanced at Wylie out of the corners of his eyes and finally said, "When do you figure they'll be here."

"It's hard to say," Wylie answered him. "It's a long ride in from Bostwick's."

Dimock built a cigarette and thought that over for awhile. "Them Murkeys got guts," he reflected, "ridin' in here and facin' a whole town just to get at one man."

He seemed to be talking to himself, and no one bothered to answer him. Fenley left the post and went outside to look up the street. It was quiet in the stable, and the buzzing of the flies was quite audible. A horse stomped in a back stall, causing, Bob Sweet to look that way. He went over to a chestnut gelding, patted it, and made a close scrutiny of the animal's left forefoot. He found nothing wrong with it and came back again, and outside Tom Fenley called, "Somebody coming," and started up the street.

Wylie left the stable and followed him. A man had pulled up at a rack near his office, and behind him they could see the long line of dust he'd kicked up. It was the squatter, Hardin, and he was surrounded by people when they got to him. Wylie started to push his way through the crowd, but Tom Fenley was faster. He was already talking to the man by the time Wylie had cleared a path for himself.

"How long ago?" Fenley was saying importantly.

The crowd of people and Fenley's demanding presence made Hardin uncomfortable. He was a solitary nester, with one son whom he seldom spoke to, and he had a hard time not stuttering when he talked.

"Half-hour," he said, his face reddening. "Stopped by my place and wanted to know if I had any whisky. Tore down all my shelves and split my kid's upper lip. Mean ones, they were. The Murkeys and two dark-lookin' fellows."

"Were they headed this way?" Wylie asked him. He stepped in closer to Hardin, and Fenley gave way a little.

"I reckon so," Hardin stammered. "I didn't have any whisky, and they went down to the ford and drank water. I saw 'em there when I lit out."

Hardin was glad when they turned away from him. He disappeared down the street, leading his horse, and Wylie said to Fenley, "Tell Hollis and Shuster and anybody else you see. Then go over to the office and get out the rifles."

Fenley left reluctantly. He didn't like taking orders, not with the crowd around, and he covered up for it by using his elbows when he went past them. The men had

come up from the livery stable, and Shuster had already stepped outside and was locking the door of the shop. A few women caught the hint and hurried through the alleys toward the back of town, Wylie moved over to his office, and the crowd followed him, forming into restless bands on the sidewalk.

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IT WAS ten minutes before Fenley came back with Hollis. The banker wore a dark suit, and, as the sun was almost straight overhead now, there were wet patches under his shoulder. He carried a large white handkerchief, and he kept wiping the sweat from his face with it. Shuster and Dimock and a couple of other men joined him and made a close pressing group around Wylie. The rest of the men hung back, watching up the street toward the station house, and a few of them went up and down the plaza, warning off the stragglers.

Hollis was panting steadily and between heavings was saying, "We want this quick, Wylie. This is a peaceful town, and there's the women and children. . . ."

Wylie interrupted him. "It won't be a pretty sight, Mr. Hollis, and it won't be an easy job, either. Somebody's liable to get hurt."

"Nonsense," Hollis said loudly. "There's only four men. A few shots and they'll scare off."

Wylie twisted to look at the men. Hollis stood with his hands in his pockets, and except for his struggling for air he was unperturbed. He carried no arms, and he made no move toward the office to get a rifle. Wylie said, "If they were that scared, Mr. Hollis, they wouldn't come at all."

Hollis made a noise in his throat and said nothing. Shuster stood impatiently, a Winchester hooked over his arm, his face pale and immobile. Wylie turned to Dimock and said, "Russ, you take six men and go down the alley. When you see the Murkeys, stay back and let 'em come in. We'll try to force them toward the open ground in front of the railroad shed. That way we'll have them in a cross fire."

Dimock nodded and went back along the sidewalk, picking out his men. Then he cut back into the alley past the saloon and a few minutes later they saw him come out at the end of the street again, signalling. Someone said, "They must be coming," and the men began to spread out, crossing the plaza and crouching in the doorways of the buildings. No one saw Sam Dawes till the sidewalk was almost empty. He came teetering along, trying to hold himself erect, and having a hard time of it. His eyes were red and swollen, and somehow his hat had gotten pushed far back on his head, and he was carrying an old single action Colt revolver. The sight of him made Hollis furious, and he stepped out on the sidewalk to face him. Before he could speak Dawes told him, "I'm ready, Hollis," and pushed past.

"Get this man off the street," Hollis said, his voice high-pitched.

Dawes swung around and tried to put across his indignation. "You're talkin' to a marshal, Mr. Hollis. I took care of this town twenty years without your say-so. There ain't a better gun here, and—"

Two men came out and grabbed him by the shoulders and took him off down the street. When they pushed him into the alley, he fell to his knees and got up, holding on to the side of the building and brushing the dust from his pants. He started to go back to the street again, then changed his mind, and went down the alley, bent over and shaking his head.

The hotel was on a corner, facing the open ground that ran from the station house to the railroad shed. Wylie stood in the doorway, checking the cylinder of the Colt and watching a rise of dust past the buildings at the end of the street. Across from him Shuster waited stolidly, and back in the lobby Hollis and a few other men were crowded into a tight knot. Here and there

along the street Wylie could see the sun's bright flash on gun-metal. There were twenty men, he figured, more than enough to handle the Murkey's and their two friends. But he'd learned long ago that the easiest way was the safest. He'd been a lawman too long to want to be the hero that the kid, Tom Fenley, considered himself. He wiped the dryness from his mouth with the back of his hand and pulled his hat down so the sun wouldn't bother his eyes.

The four men came around the corner of the buildings, holding their horses at a jogging trot. The ponies were tired from the long ride, but they kept throwing the spurs to them so that they danced, and then had to rein in hard to hold them. They were drunk, it was easy to tell that. One of the men, a Mexican-looking fellow, let out a yell, but Jake Murkey caught the silence of the place and told him to be still. They spread out slowly and finally stopped, and Ben Murkey stood up in the stirrups and peered down the street.

Somebody had forgotten to warn Mrs. Hollis and her daughter, because they came out of the dressmaker's house then and started down the sidewalk without realizing anything was wrong. They had gone as far as Shuster's store before someone called to them and they took note of the four men. They tried to go through the door just as Dimock and his men came from behind the station house and started their firing.

The shots went wild, and the Murkeys returned the fire casually for a moment until the men opened up from the doorways. The horses went to milling when the slugs kicked up dust at their feet, and Ben Murky's mount started pivoting in a full circle. Wylie took aim with the Colt, tried to catch him as he came around, and missed. A window broke across the street, and glass tinkled in the hotel somewhere; far down the plaza Bob Weeks was firing with the Winchester, and the slugs whined over the top of the railroad shed and made little booming echoes against the cliff behind it. Mrs. Hollis and her daughter had given up on the locked door and sat hunched in the doorway; even through the dust Wylie could see the whiteness of terror on their faces. Jake Murkey had worked his horse over close to them and was making his shots calmly, drawing no fire. The Mexican was trying to re-load as a shot hit him in the shoulder, and he dropped the gun. He leaned out of the saddle, trying to pick it up, and got too far down and, for a moment, hung there before righting himself. Behind Wylie a man said, "Oh, my god," and Wylie turned and saw the man sitting on the floor with his hands pressed to his belly.

The men had started to work toward the rail shed, but Jake Murkey held his ground and called something to the Mexican. The Mex had dismounted and was trying to use his horse as a shield, and, when Murkey yelled, he left it and dashed for the sidewalk. Murkey grabbed the Hollis girl and swung her across the front of the saddle. She hung there like a rag, too frightened to move, and Murkey raked the horse with his spurs and sent it into a run toward the shed. The Mex had Mrs. Hollis on her feet and was following. He was jammed up behind her with his head over her shoulder, and they made a strange figure as they moved across the plaza. They were almost a hundred yards off, and nobody dared try a shot. Wylie drew down on Murkey's horse, but Hollis jerked his arm as he squeezed off, and the bullet splintered a board in the railroad shed.

There was a narrow door on the side facing the plaza, and Ben Murkey and the other man had gone inside already. Jake Murkey reined-in and waited astride his mount for the Mexican and Mrs. Hollis to come up to him. They had both disappeared into the dark interior of the shed when the kid, Tom Fenley, stepped into the street. He carried both pearl-handled Colts held low near his hips, and he sent half a

dozen shots ripping across the plaza harmlessly. He brought the guns up to cock them, and Wylie yelled at him and tried to get past Hollis, who was pressing in the doorway.

THE shooting had stopped now, and the kid put away the guns and stood scowling at the bare side of the railroad shed. The men came slowly into the street, and a few of them, not seeing anything else to do, began re-loading. The shed was silent, they could see nothing through the door, and the building stood too far away for them to worry if the Murkeys started firing again. Hollis paced back and forth on the sidewalk, suddenly speechless, his bald head glistening with sweat. Wylie put three cartridges in the Colt and replaced it in the holster before lighting a cigar. After awhile Dimock and his men left the station house and came down the back alley to the hotel. One of his men had a flesh wound on his upper arm, and the crowd gathered around to examine it. They had taken the man with the slug in his belly into the dining room and laid him on a table, and they heard him scream once or twice when Doc Wallbank started working on him.

It was well past noon, but the men stood in the heat of the plaza and waited for Hollis to begin talking. But Hollis was waiting too, and he said nothing. The kid started to tell how he had shot the Mex in the shoulder, and they had to shut him up when they heard Jake Murkey yelling from the shed.

"Listen, Hollis," he called. He had to raise his voice high and speak slowly because of the distance. "We've got your wife and kid in here. You know that. We don't want to hurt 'em. All we want is Wylie."

Hollis didn't answer, and Murkey started again. "Hollis, leave your guns in the street and back off. Nobody'll be hurt, but we aim to get Wylie. We aim to stay here till we do."

Hollis glanced at Wylie and tried to pull his coat tighter around him. He stood stiffly, not moving, and Wylie could see the muscles jumping at the back of his neck. The rest of the men stood quietly, their eyes fixed on the darkened doorway of the shed. Jake Murkey's voice had a hollow sound in the silence of the plaza.

"Make up your mind, Hollis. You ain't got much time."

Hollis swung around to Wylie then, but he couldn't keep his eyes still and he had to turn away. To no one he said, "My wife and child. They're innocent people. They've got nothing to do with this." He broke off and stared helplessly. Somebody mumbled "That's right," and it was enough to encourage him again. He pulled himself up straight and got some of the authority back in his voice. "I don't like to say this, men, but it's Wylie they want. They've got nothing against us. We shouldn't even be here."

At the back of the crowd a man said, "Sure," without showing himself. Fred Shuster shifted his glasses on the bridge of his nose and stepped to the middle of the sidewalk.

"They could be bluffing," he said earnestly. "They wouldn't hurt a woman and child. They'd know what would happen to them if they did."

Hollis let out a great breath and muttered, "You can't take the chance. You can't take the chance," but he was drowned out by the crowd. They broke up and began arguing with themselves, and Fred Shuster kept saying "Men, men," without drawing their attention. Wylie leaned back against the wall of the hotel and pulled on the cigar. Tom Fenley came over and stood next to him. He inspected the two Colts and spent a few minutes getting them loose in the holsters the way he wanted them. Wylie said, "Tom, maybe if you took a few men and went around the back of the shed you could jump them."

Fenley acted like he hadn't heard and drifted back toward the crowd again. Shus-

ter was trying to restore order, but the men didn't stop talking until they heard Jake Murkey's shout.

"Listen, Hollis. We've got an old man named Shuster here, too."

Fred Shuster gasped, and his mouth started working soundlessly. He went to the edge of the sidewalk and stood staring.

Shuster looked down at the rifle for a long time, then lifted it, and threw it deliberately into the street. He turned and started to say something to Wylie, but he changed his mind and moved off down the sidewalk, Hollis following him. Dimock let his gun drop into the dirt reluctantly.

The kid was the last one to come up. He stopped a few feet from Wylie and stood balancing the guns in his hand. He said in a low voice, "What a fool thing," but he kept his glance on the guns and finally pushed them gently out so that they flipped into the street.

Wylie crushed the cigar under his boot and watched the Murkeys come out of the railroad shed. He felt the fear start working in his stomach, and he waited for the first grip of it to leave him. It was nothing new to him; he'd been through it often before, but now, for the first time, the sight of the four men bothered him. He hadn't figured on facing four men alone, although he'd been expecting to do more than his share.

It was a long way from the railroad shed to the hotel, and the four men came slowly. The two Murkey brothers walked ahead, and the Mexican had moved far off to their left so that he could keep an eye on the corner of the hotel. The other man held back and kept looking at the door of the shed. Wylie picked up Dimock's discarded gun, holding it in his left hand by the barrel, and tried to figure the distance. It was over fifty yards, but, if he was lucky and got the Mex now, he would only have the two Murkeys until the other man came up. He was easing back the hammer of the Colt when he saw Sam Dawes.

The Mex saw him too and stopped. He peered at him like he couldn't understand what he wanted, and then went on again. The old man was walking stiffly, and he looked all right except that every few steps he'd stumble and list to one side. The Mex noted that, and he halted and said something in Spanish. He saw the old single-action Colt too late. Dawes' slug smacked into his chest, and he slipped down noiselessly. Dawes fired again, and it was a long shot at the man closest to the shed. The shot went low, bursting up dust, and the next one broke the man's hip and knocked him to a sitting position. Jake Murkey came around and emptied his gun wildly.

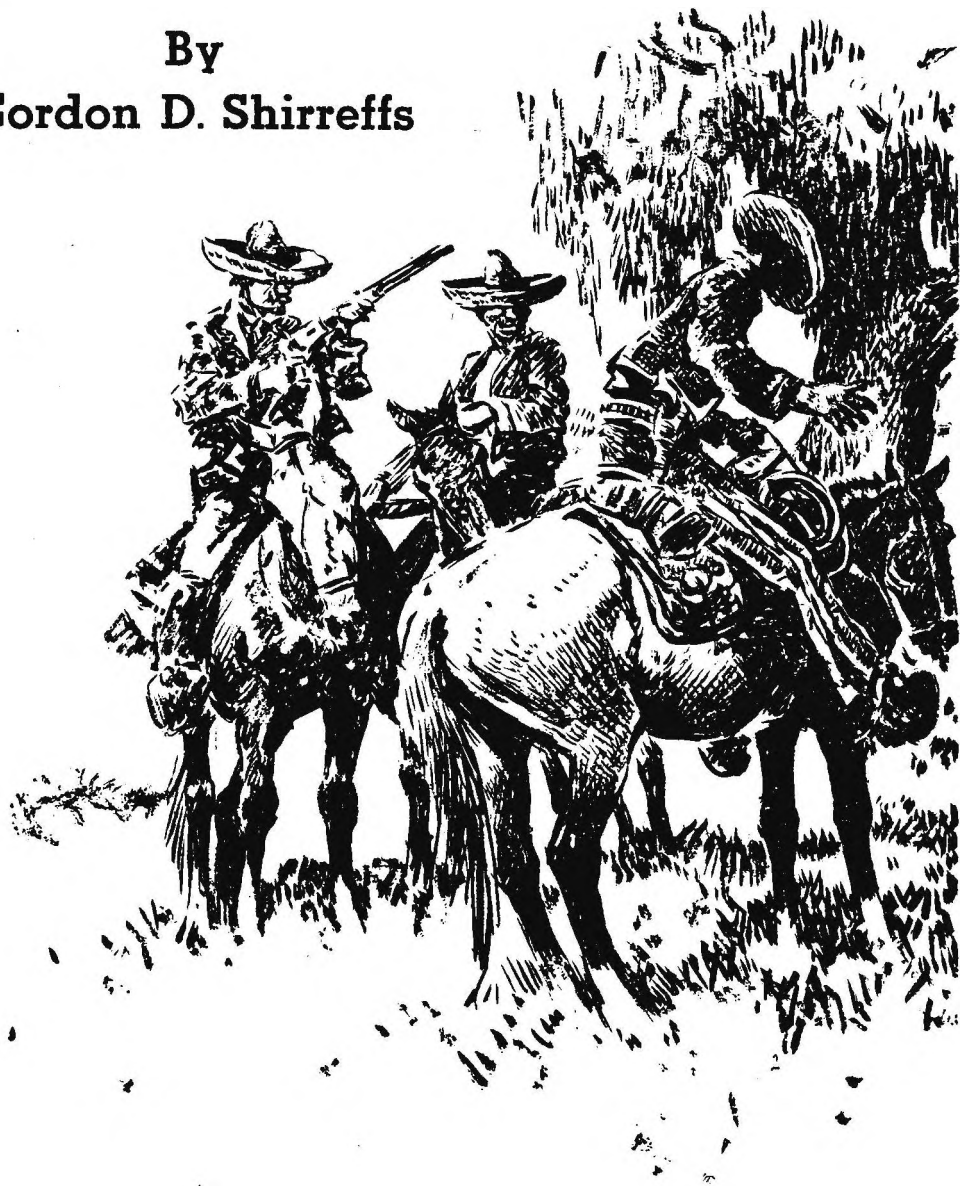
Wylie had dropped to both knees and was firing deliberately. He laid a shot into Jake Murkey's side without stopping him, and felt a bullet rip at his own vest. He fired twice more and saw Ben double up and go down. He got Jake as he was trying to re-load.

Wylie stood up and felt at the burn where Ben Murkey's shot had grazed his ribs. The two slugs hadn't killed Sam Dawes immediately; the old man somehow had twisted around, and he lay on his back now with the hat tilted off.

Later, he stood at the dusty window of his office and saw the first shadows creep along the plaza. Mr. Hollis had closed up his bank and was helping his wife and daughter into the rig, the women still crying and covering their faces. Old man Shuster was nowhere to be seen—he was probably still down by the tracks somewhere, but there was a light on in Fred Shuster's dry goods store. Dimock and Bob Sweet would be at the livery stable and maybe Tom Fenley too, with his pearl-handled Colts, and they would be passing the bottle. A group of men stood nearby on the sidewalk, and Wylie could hear their voices without understanding the words. He turned wearily from the window and took out a cigar and held the match a long time before lighting it. ■ ■ ■

HELL FOR SALE!

By Gordon D. Shirreffs



THE dust hung low over the desert at the foot of the Kofas as Burr Newell slogged on through the heavy sand. His dead horse was a distant blur on the heat-shimmering earth, and already a ragged buzzard hung over the corpse, circling patiently on an updraft. Burr ran the back of a dirty hand across his mouth and looked ahead. The turreted heights ahead seemed to lift and waver in the heat. He

Only one man could lead Burr Newell into the killer nest he sought—a coward too scared to side him when the slightest misstep meant death!

The little Colt barked, and Casas grunted. . . .

had made forty miles at least since his break from Yuma Pen the night before. But he had run the roan too hard. His one chance now was to get into the Kofas and find water and a hideout until the posse gave up the search. The break had been easy; it had been *too* easy. In the heat of his excitement he had not thought much about it, but now that he was without a horse, armed with only a battered six-shooter and five cartridges, in practically waterless country, he wondered how he had ever been able to escape. When the guard on the gang repairing the wall looked away, Burr had slid into a gully and made for the horse tethered outside a ramshackle adobe half a mile from the prison. Burr had headed south first, then had changed his mind to ride north. It was then that he noticed the posse.

"It was too damned easy," he said aloud. "But after two years in that hell hole a man couldn't let *any* break get by." He eyed a ruby-throated hummingbird hanging at the red trumpet-mouth of an ocotillo. He felt thirstier now than before. Got to keep on, he thought. Can't go back to Yuma. He pushed on, staggering over the uneven ground toward the hazy heights ahead of him.

It was dark when Burr stumbled into the water, still warm from the sun, inches deep in a natural granite tank, a *tinaja*. It had an odd taste, but he was in no position to be particular. He rolled away from the tank and lay flat on his back, feeling for the makings. He'd go on that night until he was ready to drop. He rolled a cigarette and scratched a lucifer on the rock beside him. A gun spat flame from the side of a hill, the slug whining off the hard earth, and Burr rolled sideways, pulling the old Colt from his waistband as he scuttled through a catclaw thicket, cursing mentally as the hooks ripped at his flesh. He dropped flat and looked up toward the hill, barely visible in the darkness.

"Burr! Burr Newell!" The voice came from farther down the hill from where the shot had been fired. Burr cocked the Colt and shook his left fist.

"Hey, Newell!" The voice was nearer the *tinaja* now.

Burr raised the Colt in his rage, caught himself before he fired.

"Newell, you haven't got a chance! I've got ten men in these hills! We'll have every trail covered by morning! There's a posse ready to leave Quartzsite at dawn! Grab your ears! Come out of the brush!"

Burr dropped his head on his folded arms. He was bone weary. There was no use in kidding himself; he couldn't go on another mile. Yet he couldn't give himself up. He had served two years of a ten year charge for interfering with the United States Mail. With good behavior he might have been released in five more years. Now, he'd have to serve the full ten. He'd be well over thirty years of age by then.

"What do you say, Newell? The moon is rising! It'll be like daylight soon! We'll pick you out of those rocks like a snail out of his shell!"

It was Ward Litton calling to Burr, the best U. S. Marshal in Arizona. It was he who had cornered Burr in Cascabel two years before and broken up the notorious Three Corners Gang who had operated in the country where Arizona, New Mexico, and Sonora came together. Burr let down the hammer of his Colt. "All right, Litton!" he called, "I'm coming down!" He thrust the Colt in beneath his waistband and stood up, linking his fingers together and resting them on top of his shaven head. He stumbled as he made his way down to the *tinaja*. The moon was rising over the Kofas. Ward Litton stepped out of a clump of ocotillo, holding his Winchester at hip level. "Drop that gun," he said quietly. "Careful now!"

Burr slowly lowered his left hand and, snatching the Colt out with two fingers, dropped it close to the marshal's feet. Ward whistled. Four men came out of the

brush and eyed Burr. He knew one of them to be Hastings Corse, a top-notch detective for the Wells Fargo Company. "Sit down," said Corse. He rubbed his jaw and looked at Litton. "Looks like we guessed wrong, Ward."

The marshal waved a hand, and one of the men drew his Colt and moved in behind Burr. Litton leaned his rifle against a rock. "Get a fire going," he said. "Newell here, looks like he could do with some jamoke."

Burr accepted a cigarette from Corse and sat back against a rock eyeing the two big men. "You're treating me too damned kindly," he said as he puffed at his cigarette. "You always treat an escaped con this way?"

Litton squatted in front of Burr. "No. We tried a trick. It didn't work. Either you're as innocent as you claimed you were two years ago, or you're cagier than we gave you credit for."

"What are you drivin' at, Litton?" asked Burr quietly.

"Didn't you think it was quite a coincidence that the guard looked away just when you were ready to be marched back to your cell? And the horse! Convenient, eh?"

Burr nodded. "It did look too damned easy. Anyway, I couldn't resist it. You got me now. Maybe you can enlighten me."

LITTON scratched his jaw. "You still won't tell us where that mintage money is cached?"

Burr spat. "*That* again? I told you I don't know. I never saw any of it."

"You were riding in a buggy with Gus Stiles with the sacks of money at your feet when that posse stopped you near Gleeson. You were recognized later on by all the men in that posse," said Corse.

Burr sucked at his cigarette. "Look, I told you I was driving that buggy from Pearce to Paradise for Old Man Snow. This hombre Stiles comes up out of the brush with a sixgun on me. He stows those sacks in the buggy and has a gun in my ribs when we meet the posse. The posse figures we're all right and let's go. Five miles from Pearce, Stiles has a horse picketed in a draw. He gets on the horse with his sacks and tells me to get the hell outa there. I did just that. The next day I got picked up by the law. I got away. The marshal here arrests me in Cascabel two weeks later. That's all I know. I never saw Stiles before the time he stopped my buggy, and I haven't seen him since he rode toward the border with those sacks you tell me were full of mint money."

Corse glanced at Litton. The marshal leaned forward. "You are sure you don't know where Stiles or that money is?"

Burr sagged wearily. "No. Now, can you tell me what this is all about?"

One of the men had started a fire. The light flickered, bringing out the sharp planes on the faces of the two lawmen facing Burr. Corse shoved back his hat. "You know the midnight Express was held up at Little Arroyo and that thirty thousand dollars in mint money was taken from it over two years ago. I don't know why I'm telling you this; you probably know more about it than I do. There were three men in on the deal. All masked. They stopped the train, cut the engine and express car loose, forcing the engineer to run the engine and express car a few miles down the track. There they blew off the top of the express car and split open the big safe, getting the thirty thousand. They made their escape across an area of hard sand, leaving no tracks. The next sign of them is when you and Stiles were stopped by the posse and allowed to go on. Stiles was recognized later, from a picture, as being one of the three men who was in on the robbery. The other two were never identified. We think one of them was you. Being with Stiles in the buggy sort of makes it look like we were right, doesn't it?"

Burr nodded. "So?"

Litton flipped away his cigarette. "We've never been able to find a trace of Stiles *or*

the money. As a last resort we decided to engineer an escape for you, figuring you'd head for Stiles *or* the money. The only information we have had on Stiles in two years is that he is somewhere in Sonora. We have been working with the Mexican police to nail him but haven't had any luck. We figured you'd maybe lead us to him. You foxed us by heading north instead of south."

Burr leaned back against a rock. "I might have known it was too easy."

Corse stood up. "I have never believed you were really one of the robbers, Newell. I didn't think this would work, but we are desperate. I'm sorry."

LATER, as Burr sipped his coffee, he eyed the two lawmen. They must have been getting a rawhiding from those higher in authority. Unless Stiles was captured and admitted Burr had had nothing to do with the robbery Burr might spend the next eight years sweltering in Yuma. He set his cup down and rolled a cigarette. Litton was filling his pipe. "Look, Marshal," said Burr quietly, "can we make a deal?"

"A deal? What do you mean?"

"I want to get out of the pen. You want Stiles. If I find Stiles and bring him to you will you see that I get a fair shake in getting a pardon?"

Litton glanced at Corse. The agent rubbed his jaw. "How would you go about it, Newell?" he asked.

Burr lit his cigarette. "I know the border country better than most men. I poked cows in Sonora for a time. I've got a few friends south of the border. If Stiles is down there maybe I can get a line on him."

Litton grinned. "Once you get across the line we'd never see you *or* Stiles again."

Corse waved a hand. "Wait a minute, Ward. Let's hear him out."

Burr refilled his coffee cup. "Give me a horse and an outfit. Let me pick it up in Benson. I'll work south from there, trying to get a line on Stiles."

"What guarantee will we have that you won't light a shuck for Sonora and stay there, thumbing your nose at us?" asked Litton.

Burr ginned easily. "None. Look, you want Stiles and that money badly, else you wouldn't have pulled this phony prison escape deal. You're hard up for ideas. I'm giving you a chance to get Stiles and the money. Take it or leave it."

Corse looked at Litton. "What can we lose, Ward? If Newell was actually in on the robbery and does give us the slip, we haven't lost much. Stiles is the big fish. *If* Newell is innocent, he might be the very man to do the job in finding Stiles to clear himself. Let's do it."

Litton nodded. "I see your point." He eyed Burr. "One thing: if Stiles ever gets wind of what you are trying to do, you'll never get out of Mexico alive. You understand that, don't you?"

Burr drained his coffee cup. "Yes," he said quietly, "but I'd rather take the long chance than to swelter in Yuma for eight more years."

"We can't give you any official authority. In fact, Corse and I are gambling with our jobs in considering this at all."

"I'm gambling my *life* against eight more years of hell."

Litton nodded. He eyed Newell. "I always found it hard to believe you actually were mixed up in that robbery. I hope you prove I'm right."

A week later, as Burr rode south out of Benson he reconstructed a mental picture of Gus Stiles. Tall, stoop-shouldered, with a bald head that almost belied his years, Gus Stiles could not be more than thirty years of age. Litton and Corse had patiently told him all they knew about the outlaw. He was a dead shot with either hand, had once been a deputy in hell-raising Tombstone, town marshal of Little Bend, Wells Fargo boullion guard, shrewd as a fox and as dangerous as a sidewinder, unpredictable, with a likable nature that could change

almost instantly into an icy treachery. Burr remembered the easy lop-sided grin of the outlaw, the piercing black eyes, and the witty chatter. He was a man you wouldn't forget very easily. There was one thing that stuck in Burr's mind: who were the other two men who had been mixed up with Stiles in the holdup? Neither one of them had ever been apprehended.

Burr himself had been arrested because of his resemblance to one of them. He'd make it a point to find *that* hombre too, just to make sure Litton and Corse were clear in their minds that Burr was innocent.

Burr had lost fifteen pounds since being in Yuma. His face had hardened. He had started a mustache as soon as Litton had given him the go-ahead on the deal. It wasn't much more than a heavy reddish shadow on his upper lip, but it might serve to disguise him a little. Stiles had been well known in Tombstone, coming there as a kid in the early days of the boom in silver. He had been an undercover man, guiding fugitives across the line for a good price, or turning them in for the reward if the fugitive was unable to pay Stiles' enough. Even in rip, roaring Tombstone this was not considered ethical. So maybe someone, a stickler for frontier etiquette, would resent Stiles' lack of ethics, and talk enough to set Burr on Stiles' trail.

IT TOOK three days of quiet questioning to uncover one dubious clue. Jorge Madera, a muleteer, came to Burr's room in the Cosmopolitan late one night. Burr turned up the lamp as the Mexican stood in the carpeted hallway turning his battered sombrero in his hands. "What is it you wish, friend?" asked Burr in Spanish.

"I am Jorge Madera, a humble muleteer. There is something I would like to say to you."

"Say it then."

Madera glanced nervously up and down the hall. "It would be better if I came into your room and the door was closed."

Burr shut the door behind the Mexican. He sat on the edge of the bed and pointed at the one chair in the little room. "What is it?"

"You have been noticed by some of my people asking questions about an American who now lives in Sonora."

"So?"

"You are not of the police?"

"No."

"Is it perhaps vengeance you wish to take on this man?"

"Perhaps."

Madera gravely accepted a cigarette from Burr. "If you seek vengeance on him you are a very brave man or a fool."

"Why do you say that?"

Madera waved a hand. "Senor Stiles is the very good friend of Augustin Casas."

Burr whistled. Casas was wanted by both United States and Mexican authorities for robbery and murder. He was almost as legendary as Robin Hood amongst his own people. But there was no generosity or chivalry in Augustin Casas. He came from a long line of lawbreakers, a family descended from convicts sent to the frontiers of Sonora generations ago by the Mexican government, to act as a buffer against the Apaches. Those who had survived were toughened criminals, unafraid of man or God. He stood aces high in the border country, amongst men of his own stripe, Mexican or American.

Madera leaned forward. "There is no one who would rather see Stiles and Casas dead than I. I live for the day when I can feel my hands close about their throats. But even I, who know where they hide, will not dare go in there alone."

"Why do you hate them so?"

Madera's lips drew back in a sneer. "For many years I lived in Quatros Piedras. It is isolated. My family were the leaders there. It was then that Augustin Casas came there and was befriended by my family. In time he became dangerous. My father, the alcalde, allowed him to marry my

eldest sister, Maria. Casas became angry because we did not join him in his robberies. He became abusive. My father held out against him, and one day he was found shot in the back. No one knew who did it. I learned later that it was done by Casas. Then Casas took over the town, running the lives of the people, bringing in his rabble. Casas liked to have everyone go with him on his raids so that he might have something to hold over their heads. I refused and was badly beaten. Two years ago this man by the name of Stiles came to Quatros Piedras. Casas generously gave him the hand of my second sister, Rosa, in marriage. When I protested I was beaten almost to death. My younger brother, Bartolome, helped me to escape, although he had become one of them. I cannot go back without danger of being killed. My three sisters are in the hands of the *ladrones,* and my brother is one of them. Can you see *now* why I want revenge, why I want to help you?"

Burr reached under the bed and took out a bottle. He slowly filled two glasses as the Mexican studied him. Burr capped the bottle. "A very touching story, Jorge. Your people are noted as being fine story tellers."

"You think I am lying?"

"How can you prove this wild story?"

Madera jumped to his feet and pulled his shirt from his thin body. Burr sickened as he saw the ridges that crossed and recrossed the muleteer's torso. How a man could live through the beating that had caused those scars seemed impossible. Burr looked up at Madera. "Casas?"

"Yes!"

"How can you help me then, Jorge?"

"I do not know *why* you seek this Stiles. But I have been waiting for a chance to go back there and kill Casas, and Stiles too, if I get the chance. I think this is my chance."

"How do you know I am going into Sonora?"

Madera smiled. "Actually I do *not* know. Something seemed to tell me when I heard amongst my people that you were asking about this hombre Stiles. I have been watching you. Perhaps you have been wronged by this man?"

"Perhaps."

"You are going then?"

"Perhaps."

Madera drained his glass and picked up his hat. "I will be in town when you leave. If you will let me guide you into Sonora, you will not be sorry. If you go alone into Quatros Piedras, you will die."

The next morning Burr looked up from his breakfast in the restaurant to see a hatchet-faced man sit down opposite him. Burr nodded. The man picked up the menu and looked over it at Burr. "Marshal Litton sent me down here to check up on you, Newell," he said quietly. "Thought you'd better know in case you were thinking of pulling anything crooked."

Burr grinned. "Right honest of you to come in and tell me," he said.

"The name is Joe Carr. Litton and Corse seem to think you're playing right with them. Don't make me think otherwise."

"I won't."

"Is there any way I can help you?"

"No. Wait a minute! Do you know a man by the name of Jorge Madera?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Tell me about him."

"He's a muleteer. Comes from a fine old family in Sonora. Educated. Ran into trouble with Augustin Casas and just got out of Sonora with his life. Casas took over his property and his sister as well, I understand."

Burr nodded. "He knows why I'm here. He wants to guide me down into Sonora to where Casas and Stiles are now."

Carr whistled. "You've a break there, Newell."

Burr scratched his jaw. "Yeh. Maybe. You think Madera is on the square?"

Carr leaned back in his chair. "Look.

Newell, you've got to produce. You get Stiles, and you get a pardon. If Madera is willing to go with you, you'd better take him up on it."

Burr drained his coffee cup and stood up. "Nice how you hombres are willin' to let me gamble *my* life in order for you to get your hands on Stiles and that thirty thousand mint money."

Carr shrugged. "Take it or leave it. Maybe you'd like to go back to Yuma with me right now? You've only got eight years to go. You can do that standing on your head."

"I'd like to stand *you* on your head in Yuma for eight years." Burr walked away from the table. Carr called out to him. "You're going then?"

Burr nodded without turning. He had to find Jorge Madera and get out of town. It was a cinch if Joe Carr knew that much about Madera, Burr could risk taking him along. There was something honest about Madera. But he had been wrong about men before.

CHAPTER TWO

Vamonos!

IT WAS a quite different Jorge Madera who met Burr at the edge of Tombstone when he left for Sonora. Burr had sent word by a Mexican boy that he was leaving and that Madera was welcome to travel with him if he still wished to go. Gone were the dusty white trousers and ragged shirt. Madera wore a brown charro jacket of soft leather. His trousers were of American manufacture, but his boots were typically Mexican. A fine, brown sombrero, ornamented with heavy coin silver, was on his head. A plain Colt was slung at his right side, and the butt of a Winchester showed at his right knee. He courteously touched the brim of his sombrero to Burr. "I am happy that you have accepted me as a traveling companion, Senor Newell," he said.

Burr eyed him. "Look, Madera, I'm not quite sure of your game. I *think* you're all right. But get one thing clear: if you doublecross me, I'll kill you before Stiles or Casas gets to me."

Madera bowed. "There is a look in your eye that appealed to me when I saw you first, Senor Newell. The look of a man who is determined and courageous. You are the man I have been waiting for."

Burr touched his roan with his spurs. "*Vamonos!* We've a long ride, Jorge!"

The Mexican took two long cigars from his pocket and passed one to Burr. Burr lit up and glanced sideways at Madera. "What do you know of me, Jorge?"

The Mexican puffed at his cigar. "I recognized you," he said. "You have changed. You are thinner, more brown from the sun, but the mustache has not grown enough to change your appearance."

"So?"

Madera eyed Burr. "You are the man who was sent to the prison at Yuma for the Express train robbery of two years ago."

"Go on."

"I saw your picture in the Tombstone paper. A drawing, it is true, but a good one."

Burr shrugged.

They rode silently for a time and then Madera said quietly, "You have escaped perhaps?"

"I may have."

"I do not know if you have escaped, or why you have decided to go to Mexico to find Gus Stiles, but I do know this: you are *not* the man who was with Gus Stiles when the train was robbed."

"How do you know that?" Burr said.

"Because a man came to see Stiles shortly after he came to Quatros Piedras. Stiles greeted him, very friendly. A few nights later there was an argument in a cantina. This man was challenged by Stiles. They agreed to go out into the courtyard at the back of the cantina and fight it out. There was but one shot. Stiles came back in. The

man was dead, shot through the back. Amigo, except for the mustache, he was almost your twin."

Burr spat into the dust of the road. Madera had let his imagination run away with him. It was too much of a coincidence.

"That man was the one who was with Stiles in the robbery, Senor Newell. He wanted his share of the money. When Stiles could not give it to him he began to threaten Stiles. That was why Stiles did away with him."

"Why didn't Stiles give him part of the loot to keep him quiet?"

Madera smiled. "The best reason in the world. Stiles did not bring the money into Mexico. It is hidden somewhere in this country, and Stiles does not dare come back across the border for it."

Burr looked quickly at Madera. "You are sure of that?"

"Positive. I have heard him talk to Augustin Casas. Do not forget two of my sisters are married to those *ladrones*. It is well known in Quatros Piedras that the money is still hidden in this country."

"But no one other than Stiles knows where it is hidden."

"True!"

"There were *three* men in on the robbery of the train. The third man was never identified. Perhaps he knows where the money is."

"He does not."

"How do you know that?"

"The third man was Augustin Casas. He and Stiles live together like two dogs, suspicious of each other always. Stiles knows that Casas would kill him instantly if he knew where the money was. Casas knows that he must play a waiting game to find out where the money is. It is a very dangerous situation."

Burr nodded. It would be startling news to Hastings Corse and Ward Litton when they found out that Casas was in on the deal. It would be quite a haul if Burr could get both Stiles and Casas across the line into the hands of the law and top off the whole deal by finding out where Stiles had cached the thirty thousand dollars. His stomach churned a little uneasily at the thought of sticking his head into the nest of outlaws in Quatros Piedras.

ON THE ride into Bisbee there was time for Burr to do a great deal of thinking. In Bisbee he got away from Madera long enough to send a wire to Marshal Litton at Tucson. The answer came some hours later: *Money inquired about consisted mostly of ten and twenty dollar goldpieces. Mintage Denver 1885.*

Burr went to the bank and changed some of his bills for some ten and twenty dollar goldpieces, minted at Denver in 1885. He ripped open a seam in the waistband of his trousers and slipped them in, pinning the opened seam back together again. He had a vague plan, bold in its conception, that might open the gate into Quatros Piedras.

They crossed the border into Agua Prieta late one afternoon. Madera turned to Burr. "I have friends here. Stay at the hotel. I will see what I can find out about Quatros Piedras."

It was late at night when Jorge Madera tapped at the hotel room door. Burr got up and pulled on his boots. He opened the door for the Mexican. "Well?" he asked sleepily.

Madera took a bottle from his pocket and filled two glasses. "Stiles and Casas are at Quatro Piedras. At least they were there last week. My sister, Rosa, the one who was the wife of Stiles, is dead."

"I am sorry to hear that, Jorge."

Madera shrugged. "She is better off dead. Casas frightened her into marrying Stiles."

Burr sipped his liquor. "It seems to me that Casas and Stiles must have put the fear of god into your people, Jorge."

Madera got up and paced back and forth. "They did. I failed my people. They looked to me for leadership when my father was

murdered. I was younger then, full of the love of life and afraid of violence. I tolerated Casas because I was afraid of him. I thought perhaps it would all work it self out. When I did resist it was too late. I was forced to flee. Since then I have learned one thing in the long bitter days that have followed. It is better to die fighting as a man than to live as a coward. Even now I am still a coward."

"Why do you say that?"

Jorge smiled. "Am I not depending on you for strength?"

"You are going back to Quatros Piedras. That takes courage."

Madera nodded. "Yes, I suppose so." He quickly emptied his glass and refilled it, only to empty it again.

In the days and miles that followed they rode to the southeast, into the mountain country. The closer they got to Quatros Piedras the quieter Jorge Madera came. One day he reined in his black on a high ridge and pointed ahead to where low-lying clouds fleeced a towering peak. "Dark Peak," he said. "Quatros Piedras lies to the north-east of the peak. We can be there by noon tomorrow."

They camped that night on the eastern slope of the ridge. Burr awoke in the cold of the mountain dawn. Jorge Madera was nowhere to be seen. His horse and gear had vanished with him. Burr folded his blanket, half expecting to see his traveling companion come out of the trees and brush, but after an hour had gone by, during which he ate, there was no sign of the Mexican. Burr saddled his roan and rode down the trail. He placed a hand on his cantle and looked back, but there was no sign of life on the brushy slopes. He shrugged. Either Madera's story had been phony, or else he had lost his nerve. If his story was phony, it was too late for Burr to go back now; if he had lost his nerve, it was just as well he had done it before they got to Quatros Piedras. Burr touched his waistband. The goldpieces might be the opening wedge in his campaign to get Stiles across the border again.

Burr knew he was being watched when his roan reached the bottom of the valley and stopped to drink in the shallow stream that brawled over its rocky bed on its way to the Rio de Bavispe. The sun had glinted from something metallic high on a slope overlooking the stream. Later, as the roan climbed up the eastern side of the valley, he saw a horseman pass through the brush and scrub trees high above him, to follow the winding trail.

It was very quiet in the wooded canyon through which he rode. The trail had widened into a rough road, and now and then the roan's hooves sounded hollowly on heavy planking, resting on supports which had been driven into the rock to keep the trail at its full width. Dark Peak loomed high on his right, stippled with trees, with here and there a naked expanse of rock where the frosts of winter and the heavy rains of spring and summer had loosened the rock so that it had eventually fallen to form long talus slopes amongst the trees. It was a lonely place, far from any of the regular roads. Burr could see now why Casas had picked such a place for his headquarters. It would take but a handful of men to hold the canyon against a regiment.

The sun was high overhead when Burr saw the village spread out on a flat area in a place where the canyon widened. Some of the houses were backed up against a sheer drop of two hundred feet to the floor of the canyon through which a stream dashed.

BURR drew rein and slowly rolled a cigarette, eyeing the village below him. The houses were for the most part of rock, solid and well built. The roofs were of varicolored tiles. Window and door frames were painted in brilliant yellow or blue. There were about forty to fifty buildings in the village. Dust rose from the south as three horsemen rode toward the town. Sheep clustered on a slope behind the town. It was a peaceful looking scene. But an icy

finger of apprehension traced the length of Burr's spine. Augustin Casas was not noted for his kindness towards Americans. He had been known to kill an American for an ivory-handled penknife that had taken his fancy. Stiles was no better. Some men claimed he had a yellow streak, but he was known for his prestidigital skill with the twin sixes. It had been two years since Stiles had seen Burr, and then only for a short time. The heat of Yuma summers had melted away any excess flesh that Burr had had when he met up with Gus Stiles. The mustache was now fairly respectable. Burr shrugged as he touched the roan with his spurs. He'd find out damned soon whether or not he had changed enough for Stiles to accept him as a total stranger.

Bare-footed, bare-legged women faded from the main street as the roan picked its way past piles of refuse. Scavenging cats and dogs rooted at the refuse. Half a dozen naked children followed the big gringo as he paced his roan toward the little plaza in the center of Quatros Piedras. A man eyed Burr from a doorway and then slipped inside a sprawling cantina. Burr slid from the roan and tethered it to the hitching rack. He slapped some of the dust from his clothing with his hat and then placed it on his head again. There was an unnatural quietness in the little mountain village.

Burr walked to the cantina door. Spurs jingled inside as he pulled it open. He blinked his eyes in the semi-darkness. Three men were seated about a table at the back. A fat man idly polished glasses behind the bar. Burr wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and walked to the bar. "Aguardiente," he said. He stood with his right side against the wall at the end of the bar, keeping his eyes on the men at the table. The barkeep slid a bottle to Burr and followed it with a glass. As Burr's eyes grew used to the semi-darkness he saw that two of the men at the table were typical Mexican vaqueros. One of them looked vaguely familiar. The third man was big of chest and shoulders. A heavy beard covered his face and flowed on his chest. His thick fingers toyed with a half-empty whisky glass. Now and then he looked at the door. The bartender went over to the table and bent his head to listen to the big Mexican. He hurried back to his bar and came down toward Burr. "You have been invited to have a drink with the gentlemen at the table," he said quickly.

Burr nodded and walked to the table. The big man looked up. "You are a stranger here in Quatros Piedras, senor."

Burr sat down with his back to the wall. "That is true."

The bearded man shifted a little to look Burr full in the face. "You have come alone?"

Burr smiled. He waved a hand. "As you can see."

"You are traveling far?"

"I do not know."

There was a moment's silence and then the Mexican leaned forward. "I do not understand. A traveler *must* know where he is going."

"Perhaps I have come to Quatros Piedras on business."

"Ah! That is different."

One of the other Mexicans had been eyeing Burr's Colt. He leaned forward and pointed at it. "That is a fine weapon, amigo."

Burr nodded. It was the Colt that had been taken from him at Cascabel by Ward Litton. He had won it in a poker game in Pearce. The cylinder and guard were chased in silver and the butt plates were of polished ebony. It was a little showy, but Burr thought a lot of it.

"Let me see it, amigo. Perhaps we can make a deal."

Burr shook his head. "It is not for sale."

The Mexican's eyes hardened. "Let me see it!"

Cold sweat began to trickle down Burr's sides. If he gave up his gun, he might be killed like a cornered rat. He smiled. "Let

me see yours while you are looking at mine."

The Mexican looked at the big bearded man. He nodded. Burr slid out his Colt and gripped the Mexican's as he slid it across the table. It was an old model, battered and with a rocking cylinder. Burr saw that it was loaded. The Mexican toyed with Burr's gun and then slid it into his holster. "I like it," he said easily. "I will trade with you. Agreed?"

Burr suddenly cocked the big .44 in his hand, holding it flat on the table. The muzzle was three feet from the Mexican's chest. "No," he said. "This gun is old. Perhaps it shoots well at a few feet, but I do not like it."

There was a long silence. The Mexican who had Burr's gun, glanced at the bearded man. Burr tightened his grip. "Give," he said quietly. The Mexican slowly drew out Burr's pistol and handed it across the table. Burr let down the hammer on the Mexican's gun and slid it swiftly across the table so that it hit the Mexican on the chest. The Mexican's face whitened a little. He gripped the gun. The bearded man touched his shoulder. "Take a walk, Ramon," he said with a grin. Ramon got up quickly and hurried to the door. He turned as he reached it and shot a look of pure hatred at Burr.

THE bearded man picked at a tooth with a dirty fingernail. "Who are you, amigo?" he asked.

"Call me Buck."

"You have no other name?"

"Not that I use."

"You do not know me?"

"No."

"There are many *canciones* written about me in Sonora, Buck."

"Then you must be Augustin Casas."

The man nodded. "Did you come to see me, amigo?"

Burr drained his glass. "I am looking for work," he said.

"What do you do?"

"Fight. Rope. Gamble. Anything with a profit in it."

Casas grinned. "Then perhaps you have come to the right place." He looked up suddenly. Spurs jingled on the hard-packed earth floor. "Howdy, Augustin!" It was a voice Burr knew well, the voice of Gus Stiles. Stiles stopped just behind Burr. "Who's this hombre?"

Burr turned his head. "The name is Buck," he said, looking Stiles square in the eyes. Stiles' sharp black eyes held Burr's. For a moment Burr thought he might have to shoot his way out of the cantina. "Buck *what?*" asked Stiles easily.

"Just Buck."

Casas waved a hand. "Sit, Gus. This hombre is looking for work."

Stiles dropped into a chair and rested his elbows on the table. "Where you from, Buck?"

"Arizona. Gila Bend country."

"How come you ain't workin' up there?"

Burr refilled his glass. "Maybe I prefer Sonora. For a time anyway."

Stiles grinned. "On the lam, eh?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

Burr eyed the big man. "Why are *you* down here?"

"That's *my* business, Buck."

"Fine. It's *my* business as to why I'm down here too."

Stiles rubbed his bristly jaw. "Fair enough." Stiles glanced at Casas. "What was rilin' Ramon?"

"He wanted this man's gun. He was outbluffed. He did not like it."

Stiles looked at Burr with renewed interest. "Bluffed Ramon, eh? Not bad."

Casas filled his glass. He glanced at the door. "This stranger had best watch out when he leaves here. Ramon does not forget easily."

Stiles nodded. "Watch yourself, Buck."

Burr glanced at the door. "I do not want trouble with the authorities here."

Casas laughed. "Authorities? *We* are the authorities here, amigo." His face hardened. "We have had trouble with Ramon. He does not like his split. It has been in my mind for some time that he must go."

Stiles leaned back in his chair and eyed Burr. "Yeh. Be a nice gesture if a fella was to do the job for us. It'd show us how he stood."

Burr fingered his glass. They wanted him to kill Ramon. He had nothing against the Mexican. But he had no choice. Ramon might be waiting for him now to kill him for the ornate Colt. It was all part of the game he was playing. Burr stood up and settled his gunbelt about his lean hips. "Have to take care of my cayuse," he said. "I'll be back." He walked to the door and stepped outside, feeling for the makings. A few women were in the streets. The sun beat down on the yellow dust. Burr slowly made his cigarette, eyeing each doorway and place where a man might be waiting with cocked Colt. He lit the cigarette and untied his roan, draping the reins over his left forearm and walking toward a corral at the end of the street. The women vanished. A mule bawled from the corral. Burr's jingling spurs were muffled in the dust. The fall of the roan's hooves were dull thuds. Suddenly there was a movement at the side of a building, under a ramada. Ramon stepped out into the sunlight with his Colt in his right hand, hanging down by his side. "The gun. I will take it now, hombre," he said quietly.

Burr lowered his left arm, dropping the reins. Ramon paced slowly forward. He began to raise his gun hand slowly. Suddenly Burr stepped forward, gripping the brim of his hat with his left hand. As he drew with his right he flipped the hat squarely at Ramon's face. The Mexican shied. He fired. The slug whined past Burr's head. Burr's shot caught the Mexican in the gut. He folded over like a sheet of wet paper and went down on his knees. "Ah, *Chihuahua,*" he said quietly and then fell flat on his face. Burr slid his Colt into its scabbard and walked forward to pick up his hat. Behind him he saw Casas, Stiles, and the other Mexican watching him from under the cantina's ramada. Burr picked up the reins of his roan and led him to the corral. A boy hurried forward, and Burr handed him the reins. He walked slowly back up the street past the sprawled corpse of Ramon. The Mexican's blood had formed a black patch in the thirsty dust.

Casas was back in the cantina by the time Burr reached Stiles and the other Mexican. Stiles glanced at Ramon. "You sure can handle yourself," he said to Burr, "Seems to me I've seen you somewhere before."

The Mexican studied Burr. "You have been in this country before?" he asked.

"Yes. Some years ago."

The Mexican held out his hand. "I am Bartolome Madera."

Burr took the young Mexican's hand. Now he knew why he had thought the Mexican was familiar. He must be the younger brother of Jorge Madera, the one who had thrown in his lot with the outlaws.

There was no excitement about the death of Ramon in Quatros Piedras. As evening came the cantina filled with men, Mexicans and Americans, rawhide tough, with the look of birds of prey. They accepted Burr because he sat at the table with Casas and Stiles, but many times during the evening Burr saw their eyes studying him. One slip, and he'd be riddled with bullets or stomped to death under their boots. It was past midnight when Burr managed to get to his room in the littered patio behind the old cantina. His head was a little hazy from the aguardiente he had swilled, but he had left Stiles passed out, with his head pasted to the table top with liquor slops, and Casas asleep in his chair. Burr sat on his cot, dousing his head in the bucket of water he had found in the room. He pulled off his boots and lay back, with his hands clasped beneath his head. He had

seen the wife of Augustin Casas, a tired-looking woman with the fine features of the Maderas. Like a thoroughbred mated to a mongrel. Bartolome Madera seemed of a different breed from Jorge, his elder brother. He seemed at home with the outlaws who had taken possession of Quatros Piedras.

As Burr dropped off to sleep he thought about Casas and Stiles. Outwardly they seemed to be the best of friends, but Burr remembered what Jorge Madera had told him.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood Wedding

A WEEK drifted past in which Burr found himself seemingly one of the outlaws. They accepted him in their drinking bouts and at their card tables, but there was always an undercurrent of suspicion. About a quarter of them were Americans. Some of them vanished from the town during the week, and others came in, travel-stained and weary. Casas and Stiles held high court in the big cantina, taking a share of the loot from the men as they reported in. Stiles was living high, not exposing himself to the law, and still making a neat profit from the men who were protected by him and Casas in Quatros Piedras. One night Burr left the overcrowded cantina for some fresh air, seating himself on the edge of the ancient fountain in the patio. A woman came out of the shadows carrying a bucket. She silently pushed it under the water of the fountain. It was Maria, whom Burr had learned was the eldest of the three Madera sisters. Burr studied her as she drew the bucket from the water. "You work very hard," he observed.

"It is my husband's wish," she said.

"A woman should have time to pretty herself, Maria."

She laughed. "Here? In Quatros Piedras? Once I *was* pretty. My father was the *alcalde* here. I was to marry Juan Escobar. Instead I was forced to marry that *ladrone* in there. *Peludo!* The Hairy One! A beast out of the field has more manners than he."

"You can always run away."

She shook her head. "How far would I get? Besides, I cannot leave my younger sister now."

"I thought there was but two of you in your family. You and Bartolome."

"Bartolome? He is no longer *my* brother. Rosa was married to that gringo beast, Stiles. She is dead now. I am happy for her. Death is better than his arms."

"You have another sister?"

She nodded. "Isabel. She is but a girl. I have another brother. Jorge. But he is gone. Some say he is dead. I do not know. He was driven from here."

"Why can't you leave your younger sister?"

The woman leaned close. "That swine, Stiles, has his eyes on her. Augustin thinks it will be a good match. I have fought against it, saying she is but a girl, but next week she will be eighteen. There will be nothing I can do then." Maria picked up her bucket. She studied Burr. "Senor, you have gentle manners. You are not one of these *ladrones* at heart. Get away from here. Quickly!" She turned on a heel and hurried off. Burr lit a cigar. He had just drawn his first puff when Augustin Casas lounged out of the shadows. He leaned against a post and bit off the end of a cigar. "You were talking to my wife, amigo?"

"Yes."

Augustin's hard eyes studied Burr over the flare of the match with which he lit his cigar. "About what?"

Burr grinned. "About the marriage of her youngest sister to Senor Stiles."

Casas glanced at the cantina. "She has been against it. These bluebloods! It does them good to marry a man like myself or Stiles."

Burr inspected his cigar. "I have been

here a week, Augustin. It has cost me nothing. I would like to pay my bill."

"You are leaving?"

"No. I just like to pay my bills weekly."

Casas waved a hand. "You are my guest, Señor Buck."

Burr nodded. "Gracias. Still, I would like to repay you with something." He felt in his waistband and took out a twenty dollar goldpiece. He flipped it from his thumb and caught it out of the air, slapping it against the back of his left hand. "Tails, it's yours. Heads, I keep it." He lifted his hand. It was heads. He handed it to the Mexican. "Tails. You win."

Casas took the coin. He held it in the palm of his hand and looked at it closely. "You are a brave man to travel in this country with such coins, Buck. Have you any more like this?"

Burr grinned. "Perhaps."

Casas eyed Burr. "Where did you get this?"

Burr stood up and yawned. "From a friend."

"In Arizona?"

"No."

"These coins are not common here."

Burr scratched his jaw. "Maybe. The hombre that gave me that one paid off a gambling debt. I was into him pretty far. He seems to have plenty of them." Burr walked to his room, shutting the door behind him. He edged to the window and looked out into the patio. Casas was turning the coin in his fingers. Suddenly he strode into the cantina. Burr grinned. Maybe the poison had a start at last.

Burr was asleep when the tapping noise awakened him. It was still dark outside. He sat up and reached under his pillow for his Colt. *"Quien es?"* he called softly.

"Senor Buck?" It was the soft voice of a young woman.

BURR pulled on his boots and shirt. There had been other women there in his stay of a week, but they hadn't been so polite. He opened the door. A slight figure stood there. "Come in," he said. The woman came hesitantly in. Burr lit a candle after he closed the door. He almost whistled aloud. Big dark eyes studied him. The oval features had a touch of sadness about them, but the girl was beautiful.

"What is it you want?" he asked. Surely this one wasn't in there for the same reason the others had come.

She glanced at the door. "I am Isabel Madera."

Burr couldn't help stare at her. She was a Madera all right, but cast in a finer mold than her sister and two brothers. "It is a dangerous thing for you to be here," he said.

She studied him. "I am not afraid of you."

"I did not mean myself. I know you are practically betrothed to Gus Stiles. You take your life in your hands."

She looked away. "I will kill myself before I wed him."

Burr leaned back against the wall, feeling for the makings. "Why did you come here?"

"I have seen my brother, Jorge."

"Here?"

She shook her head. "I came back here this evening. I have been with relatives down the valley. Jorge came to see me. He told me about you. He said that perhaps you would help me."

Burr lit his cigarette. "Jorge said that? Why does *he* not help you?"

She flushed. "Jorge does not dare come back here to Quatros Piedras."

"So he wants *me* to do his work?"

She walked swiftly toward the door, but Burr gripped her by the arm and swung her in front of him. "Did Jorge also tell you why I am here?"

"Yes."

He held her by both arms and looked into her dark eyes. "Then my life is in your hands, Isabel. If you open your mouth

about me, I will die, horribly and quickly."

Her eyes widened. "I would not dream of such a thing, senor!"

"How could *I* help you?"

"You are a brave man. Jorge says you are the bravest man he has ever seen."

Burr grinned. "Me? Why? What did I do to warrant such a high opinion of me?"

"You came here, in this nest of *ladrones*, to clear yourself of a false robbery charge. *Alone!*"

Burr dropped his hands. "I have spent two years in a living hell. I was willing to risk my life to keep from going back to prison."

"Jorge is sure you are innocent. There was a man killed here by Stiles whom Jorge claims is the man who was actually with Stiles and Casas in the robbery. I have also heard you killed Ramon when he tried to take your gun. That was a courageous thing to do, Senor."

Burr shook his head. "They wanted to get rid of him. I was a handy tool to do the work."

She gripped his wrist. "Why do we not run away now? I know the mountain trails but am afraid to go alone. With you beside me I would not be afraid."

He shook his head. "Tempting as it is, I have a job to do here. I've got to clear myself. If I can find out where the express money is hidden and deliver Stiles, or Casas, or both, to the authorities in Arizona, I'll be pardoned. It's a gamble, but I've got to take it."

She pulled her rebozo up over her lustrous hair. "Jorge says he will try to help you." Suddenly she touched his face. "I will try to help you too, Senor Buck." She opened the door and disappeared into the shadows. Burr snuffed out the candle and stood there for a long time, thinking of Isabel Madera. When he lay down on his bed again, he thought he detected a faint odor of perfume in the little room, as though she was still there in spirit.

In the afternoon of the next day Casas came into the cantina where Burr was playing cards with Bartolome Madera and Marty Calhoun, a hardcase from New Mexico. He leaned against the wall watching them. Burr had been losing a little, but now he deliberately went out to lose more. At last he shoved back his chair and threw down a ten dollar goldpiece. "That cover it, Marty?" he asked.

Marty fingered the goldpiece. "Yeh. Wisht it was more."

"*I* don't." Burr turned to Casas. "How about a drink?"

"*Bueno!*"

They leaned on the zinc-topped bar. Casas watched Marty stow the goldpiece in his vest pocket. "Senor Calhoun!" he called, "I will pay you for that goldpiece."

Calhoun shrugged. "Make it 'dobe dollars, Casas. I ain't thinking of crossing the border for a long time to come."

Augustin Casas fingered the goldpiece after he had exchanged silver 'dobe dollars for it. "Denver. 1885," he said.

Burr downed his drink. "Fairly new," he said.

"Where did you get it?"

"From a gambling friend," he said.

Casas rubbed his jaw. "Perhaps from Senor Gus Stiles?"

Burr grinned. "The *gambling* friend does not like to let his friends know of his losses. He wouldn't like it if I told who he was."

Casas eyed Burr. "Is this reluctant friend, the gambler, our good friend, Stiles?"

A big hand shot out and gripped Burr's shirt front. Casas had changed from a good-natured friend into a hard-faced enemy. He thrust out his head. "Is it Stiles?"

Burr looked down at Casas' hand. "Take your hand off me, Augustin."

CASAS spat to one side. "I have ten men within call, Buck. Even if you got me you wouldn't get past them." He turned

his head. "Bartolome! Calhoun! Take a look out the front and back. Keep your eyes open for Stiles." The two men got up, and Calhoun went to the front door while the Mexican went out the back. Casas released his grip. "Is it Stiles?" he asked.

Burr straightened his shirt. "If I tell you, what would happen to me? You know Gus."

Casas scowled. "Don't worry about him. Did you get those goldpieces from him?"

Burr glanced at the door. "Yes."

"Here?"

Burr shook his head.

"Where?"

Burr leaned close to the big Mexican. "I knew Gus back in the States. I did him a favor. He told me to come up here if I had to leave the States in a hurry. I was to bring him some money."

"Goldpieces?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"A thousand."

"Where did he give it to you?"

"He didn't. He told me where to get it. I went there and found it. I brought it here. Didn't he tell you?"

Casas cursed. He gripped the bottle of aguardiente and raised it to his lips. "No," he said as he wiped his mouth. He gripped Burr's arm. "There was more money where you got the thousand?"

"No. I cleaned it out."

"You lie! There *must* have been more!"

Burr shook his head. "Gus told me once he had hidden the loot in half a dozen places."

"You know of these places?"

"I think I know their general location."

Casas leaned close. "Half of that money is mine."

Burr looked surprised. "You were in on that express train robbery?"

"Yes. There were three of us. Red Dwyre is dead. He came up here to argue with Gus about the loot. Gus did away with him."

Burr grinned. "And Gus never told you where he hid the loot? *Chihuahua!* He's smarter than I gave him credit for."

Casas flushed. "No. His time is coming. I have let him live because I could not get my share of the loot from him. He holds it over my head, forcing me to keep him here safe from the law. I swore I would kill him the day I got my hands on the money."

Burr refilled his glass. "He's too cagey to let you do that."

Casas waved a big hand. "He will not fool *me.*"

"What about me? If Stiles finds out what I have told you, I won't live two minutes."

Casas placed his hand on his knife. "You are my friend. You are safe here. You will help me find that money. Stiles will be taken care of. Do not talk of this to anyone. You understand?"

Burr nodded. He watched the big Mexican walk to the front of the cantina and speak softly to Calhoun and then go out into the street. Burr filled his glass again. He knew what would happen if Casas found out he was lying. He might talk Casas into crossing the border and then capture him for the police. But Casas was too wily to be taken in so easily. At least he had set one thief against another. He scratched his jaw. Isabel Madera was another problem. She had been on his mind all day. Burr looked up as Maria Casas entered the cantina. She cleared the tables, working silently and quickly. She looked up at Burr as she carried the dirty dishes into the kitchen. How much did she know? Burr had one ally in the town. Isabel. Jorge would have been of some help if he had come secretly to Quatros Piedras, but he was in mortal fear of Casas and Gus Stiles. Maria might be willing to help Burr. Yet he did not know. He had seen women who had been beaten half to death by their husbands take issue with those who had come to protect them from their hus-

bands. Despite Maria's outspoken hatred of Casas she might still remain loyal to him. Burr must still play a lone hand.

THAT night Burr went to his room early. Stiles and Casas were supposedly playing cards in Casas' room in back of the cantina. Burr waited until it became quiet. It was close to midnight when he left his room. Many of the men who used Quatros Piedras as their headquarters were off somewhere on their illegal business. Burr waited for a time in the shadow of the ramada and then padded through the shadows to a rear window of Casas' room. He could hear the low murmur of voices through the shutter. The words were not distinguishable. He went into the cantina and walked through a dark hallway. The door of Casas' room was slightly ajar. Burr pressed himself close against the wall and listened.

"Vicente says this storekeeper in Tubac keeps much money in his store, Gus. He does not trust banks." It was the voice of Augustin Casas.

"It's too damned far over the line, Casas. *You* can go if you like."

"You have not been out of Quatros Piedras in three months. Some of the men do not like it, Gus."

"I'll go out when I get damned good and ready! Just because I do not want to go to Tubac is no sign I'm not willing to go out."

"Tubac would be easy."

Stiles laughed. "Yeh! With a thousand dollar price on my head in Arizona I'd be a damned fool to trust you or any of these hombres around here by riding into Tubac for a measley thousand dollars in that storekeeper's safe. It'd be too easy for you to have some of your boys turn me in. You don't get *me* over the line that easy, Casas."

Burr moved so that he could get a view of the two men as a draft opened the door a little more. Stiles was slouched in his chair facing Casas. Casas was hunched forward, resting his chin on his fists, his elbows set on the table. Two empty bottles were on the table. Both men seemed a little drunk. The candle light guttered, alternately lighting or plunging into shadow the white-washed walls.

Casas shifted a little. "You will go out soon then?"

Stiles waved a hand. "After my wedding."

"Perhaps there will be no wedding."

Stiles leaned forward. "What are you drivin' at?"

"I am the head of the family. If I do not wish Isabel to marry you, she will not do it."

Stiles laughed harshly. "*You?* The head of the family? God, Augustin, your mind is slippin'! If I want to marry that girl I will!"

Casas shook his head. "No! Not if *I* say you can't."

Stiles narrowed his eyes. "All right. Out with it. What's been in your craw the last two days?"

"I want my share of the express train loot."

"I've told you a hundred times it's too damned hot for me over there. I can't touch it now. You'll have to sweat it out, Augustin."

"Like you, eh?"

"I don't like your tone, Casas."

The Mexican suddenly thrust two fingers into his jacket pocket and flipped two gold coins toward Stiles. They rang on the table. Stiles eyed them and then looked up at Casas. "What's this?"

"Look at the mint dates, Gus."

"Eighteen eighty-five."

"Yes. Eighteen eighty-five! Does it mean nothing to you?"

"What should it mean?"

"You have been getting money from the cache in Arizona."

"I haven't been out of here in three months. How could I get any of that loot?"

"I did not say *you* got it."

Stiles fingered the coins. "So? How did I get the money then? *If* I did get it."

"It could be brought to you."

Stiles grinned. "You think I'd trust anyone to do that?"

Casas spat on the floor. "No. But I got those goldpieces here in Quatros Piedras."

Stiles rubbed his jaw. "There are many of those goldpieces in circulation. What makes you think they came from the cache?"

Casas leaned forward, placing his hand on his knife. "The man who gave them to me said you had told him to get them for you."

For a moment Stiles looked puzzled, and then he slapped his big hands on the table and laughed uproariously. Tears were streaming from his eyes when at last he stopped. "Casas, you damned ass! You're a fool! Who told you that whopper?"

Casas leaped to his feet, whipping out his knife. Stiles moved like a striking rattler. He was on his feet, kicking back his chair when Casas leaned across the table to swipe at him with his knife. Stiles swept up his right hand with his Colt in it. The long barrel cracked neatly just above the Mexican's left ear and Casas crashed to the floor. He tried to get up and then lay still. Stiles spat at him and then picked up the two goldpieces. He fingered them, whistling softly. "Buck," he said. "I'll bet that buzzard told old Casas that whopper."

Burr faded down the hallway. A hand came out of the darkness to grip his arm. Burr twisted his body, slamming in a right jab to the gut of the shadowy figure in the hallway, and the man grunted and bent forward. Burr stepped back and brought up a short right uppercut, snapping the man's head back. Burr drove in a left to the belly and, as the man staggered forward, clasped his hands together and smashed them down on the back of the man's neck. He caught the man as he hit the floor and dragged him from the passageway just as Stiles banged open the door of Casas' room. "What the hell is going on down there?" he bellowed just as Burr reached the outside. He dragged the unconscious man to his room and rolled him under the cot. He worked swiftly, ripping off his clothing and dropping on his bunk to pull up the blanket just as feet grated on the hard earth outside of his door. The door opened. A shadowy figure stood there with Colt in hand. It was Gus Stiles. Burr tightened his grip on his Colt, hoping that the unconscious man beneath the bunk would not make a noise. Stiles stepped back, closing the door softly. A moment later the door of the cantina closed.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Hidden Cache

BURR threw back his blanket. He barred the door and lit his candle. He dragged the man out from beneath his bunk. It was Bartolome Madera. Burr slopped water on the Mexican's face. Bartolome opened his eyes. He stared at Burr. "Senor Buck," he said, "You hit like the hooves of a mule."

Burr cocked his Colt. "What's your game, Bartolome?"

The Mexican got up and brushed his clothing. "I knew you were listening to Stiles and Casas. They told me to watch your room. I saw you go into the cantina and followed you."

Burr rubbed his jaw. "Why didn't you give the alarm?"

Bartolome leaned close. "I was one of these filthy *ladrones*, Senor Buck. At first the life seemed romantic. Even the death of my father did not seem so bad, as he was always preventing me from seeking a life of adventure. But when that man Stiles wanted my little sister, Isabel, as his wife, I swore I would stop it somehow. You, I could not figure out, until the day when you gave that goldpiece to Marty Calhoun. I listened to your conversation

with Casas. Casas is a dangerous man but he is also a gullible fool, especially when gold dazzles his sight. I knew Stiles would never trust any man to go to his cache and get the money that had been stolen from the train. I knew then that you were up to something very big. I determined to find out what it was."

Burr eyed the young Mexican. He couldn't be more than twenty years old. "It is a dangerous game, Bartolome. Your life won't be worth a centavo if you turn against these *ladrones.*"

"*You* are working against them alone, Señor Buck."

Burr nodded. "It's either that or go back to prison in Yuma for eight more years."

The Mexican looked at him curiously. "I do not understand."

Quickly Burr told Bartolome Madera the story of his imprisonment and subsequent release to track down Gus Stiles and the missing money. Bartolome nodded. "There was a man here, named Red Dwyre, who was with Casas and Stiles during the robbery. He is dead now. Shot in the back by Stiles."

Burr sat down. "Casas and Stiles had a fight in the cantina. Stiles laid Casas out. What will happen now?"

Bartolome shrugged. "For some time there has been trouble between the Americanos and my people in this village. The Americanos have been very rough on my people. Casas has the Mexican *ladrones* on his side, Stiles has the *gringos.* There has been no fighting, but it is only a matter of time until there is a showdown, as you Americanos call it."

"And the law-abiding people of Quatros Piedras will pay for it, Bartolome."

Bartolme shook his head. "No. I will fight for them, and you, because I think you will be the man who will rid us of both Stiles and Casas."

Burr stood up. "Did you know your brother Jorge was in this country?"

Bartolome looked up in surprise. "No! I had heard he was in the States. I also heard he was dead, killed by Apaches a year ago."

"No. He is alive. He guided me here to Quatros Piedras and then left me."

Bartolome nodded. "He could not come here. He would be shot down if he walked in these bloody streets."

"He is down the valley. Isabel has talked with him."

Bartolome stood up. "Perhaps there is a chance then that we can get rid of these outlaws. I am sick of them and their ways."

"Perhaps your people will not accept you as one of them, even if you help to get ride of the outlaws."

Bartolome smiled. "It does not matter. It is the least I can do to make up for my stupidity in trying to be one of them."

Burr gripped the young man's arm. "You must get Isabel out of Quatros Piedras to a place of safety."

"No! I will stay with you. You cannot fight these men alone."

Burr shook his head. "I'm not going to fight anyone right now. Fighting Stiles and Casas here wouldn't solve my problem. I've got to find out where that money is and try to get at least one of them into the hands of the law."

Bartolome nodded. "You are right. What do you want me to do?"

"Get Jorge. Together you must come back here and take care of your sisters. I will have no time to do that."

Bartolome left as Burr snuffed out the candle. Burr waited until he knew the Mexican must be clear of the town, and then he left the room to head for the little adobe where Isabel Madera lived at the edge of town. Burr came up at the back of the adobe and tapped at one of the shutters. For a moment there was silence and then feet scraped on the floor. "*Quien es?*" a voice called. It was Isabel.

"It is Burr Newell, Senorita Madera."

"I know your voice. What is it you want?"

"You must get ready to leave Quatros Piedras."

The door opened. Burr glanced behind him and then entered the dark room. She was close to him in the darkness, the faint odor of perfume clinging about her He reached out his hand and touched a bare shoulder. "Do not be afraid," he said. She stepped back hastily, and he heard the rustle of clothing. A few minutes later a match scraped and then a candle guttered into yellow life. She wore a white blouse, low over her smooth shoulders, and a figured skirt. Woman-like she touched at her lustrous hair. A nightgown lay crumpled at her feet. "What has happened?" she asked.

"Casas and Stiles have fallen out. Bartolome, your brother, has left the *ladrones* and has gone to get your brother, Jorge. When they come back, you must be ready to leave with them."

She came close. "What about you?"

BURR looked down at her. "Does it matter? If I get Casas or Stiles across the border and clear myself, I will win. If I do not I will die, and it's just as well, for I will not go back to prison."

She reached out and touched his cheek. "You must run away with us then. Forget Casas and Stiles. You cannot capture them. We will go somewhere to the south and start a new life."

He reached up to take her hand. "I can't run away," he said quietly. Suddenly he forgot about the prison at Yuma, Casas, Stiles, the money, and everything but the girl who stood before him with an emotion in her eyes he had never before seen. He drew her close. Her smooth arms went about his neck and drew him close. She pressed her lips against his and then withdrew them. "Do not stay here alone," she whispered. "I will help you to make a new life in Mexico. Please!"

He drew her supple body close and kissed her again and again. Suddenly she pushed him back. "Listen," she said, pressing a hand against his mouth. He raised his head Feet grated on the hard earth outside. A voice came clearly to them. "Marty, go around the front! Cass and I will come in through the back!" It was Gus Stiles. Burr dropped his hand and drew out his Colt, cocking it.

"Buck ain't in his room," said Stiles. "I'll bet a thousand eagles it was him set Casas against me."

"You figure we can get outa here and get across the line before Casas' men get wise?" It was Cass Winslow, an owlhoot from the Blue River country in Arizona.

Stiles laughed. "Casas is laid out cold. I bent my sixgun over his thick skull. Besides, most of his men are out in the hills. If we move fast enough we can light a shuck for the line before he knows what the hell is goin' on."

Burr ran to the front door. The bolt was shot. He gripped Isabel by the arm. "Get down on the floor!" Someone tried the front door as he spoke. Burr whirled, raising his pistol. Suddenly the back door opened. Burr had forgotten he had not bolted it behind him. Gus Stiles stepped in like a great lean cat. His eyes widened as he saw Burr. "That hombre is after your woman too, Gus," said Cass from behind Stiles. Burr fired. The slug pocked the wall inches from Stiles. The outlaw leaped to one side. His Colt roared. Burr slapped a hand down on the candle and fired at the same time. Cass grunted as the slug smashed into his gut and staggered out of the adobe. Burr leaped to one side as Stiles fired again, the flame lancing out of the Colt a few feet from him. Burr fell over a chair as the Colt flashed twice more. He was struck a stunning blow on the side of his head and plunged deep into an inky abyss.

Water splashed over Burr's face. He groaned. Again he was soaked. "Don't

drown him," said someone. Burr opened his eyes. Augustin Casas sat on a chair eyeing Burr. He held a pistol in his hand. Behind him was Porfirio Avita and Rodrigo Galeras, two of Casas' hardcases. Amadeo Diaz stood over Burr with a big olla in his hand. Burr sat up, wincing as he touched the side of his head. He had been creased. Casas reached out and shoved Burr with his right foot. "Where is Stiles?" he asked.

Burr shook his head. "I don't know."

"You lie!"

Burr looked up. "I said I don't know."

"What happened here?"

"Stiles came after me. He and I shot it out."

Casas jerked his head toward the rear door. "Cass Winslow is out re dead."

Burr stood up, leaning against the wall. Casas rubbed his jaw. "So you don't know where Stiles is?"

"All I know is that he came after the girl."

"He has headed for the border?"

"I think so."

Casas stood up, thrusting his Colt into its scabbard. "We ride then. At once. You will lead us to the money."

For a moment Burr almost blurted out that he did not know where it was, and then he nodded. If Stiles was riding for the border and Casas was willing to follow him, there was a long chance that Burr might swing things his way. Casas turned to Porfirio Avita. "Get the rest of the men. We ride in fifteen minutes. South."

Avita shook his head. "Not over the border, Augustin."

Casas lashed out with his left hand, catching the bandit across the mouth. "*Vamonos!* We ride!"

Avita turned on a heel and left the room. Burr picked up his hat and put it on his head. It seemed as though Casas' men were not too anxious to cross the line. Most of them had a price on their heads in Arizona or New Mexico.

Burr rode with his hands lashed about his saddlehorn. He glanced back at Quatros Piedras as the dawn began to show in the eastern sky. Casas rode with six of his men. Where were the Madera brothers?

They rode hard until the sun rose up from behind the eastern ranges. Casas drew rein on a ridge and pointed out a thread of dust rising far to the north. "Stiles," he said. "*Vamonos!*"

CASAS led the way down the long rocky incline. The heat had already begun to reflect from the earth. The bandit chief rode as though the devil were on his heels. Burr wondered where Stiles was heading. He knew the border country like the palms of his hands, and it was a cinch that, if he had hidden the money on the Amarican side, it would be in an isolated spot. Burr began to wonder about his strategy in setting Casas and Stiles against each other. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now with Casas and six of his toughest *ladrones* riding about Burr, he began to feel that he had made a mistake.

Casas called a halt in the late evening as the western ky began to turn dark shortly after the brilliant hues of the sunset. Burr estimated that they must be fairly close to the border, not far from Agua Prieta. Casas rode ahead with Porfirio Avita into the shadows. The rest of the Mexicans dropped flat on the ground and lit up. Burr had been allowed to get off his horse, but his hands were still lashed together, and Victor Perez had noosed a riata about Burr's neck. Now and then the grinning bandit would twitch the riata, bursting out into laughter as the hard rope chafed Burr's neck.

Casas and Avita were gone for two hours. When they returned, Casas called his men together. "They have crossed the border," he said. "We saw no Rurales and the American side seems deserted. A man told us he saw Stiles, Marty Calhoun, Virgil Easley, and the girl, riding northeast."

Juan Abeyta lit a cigarette. "What is in this for us, Augustin? I am not anxious to cross the border."

Casas grinned and waved a hand. "Many goldpieces." He glanced at Burr. "This *gringo* knows where Stiles has hidden the money from the train robbery. He will show us."

"And what if Stiles waits for us, Augustin?" asked Rodrigo Galeras. "It would be easy to ambush us in those hills."

Casas spat. "We are men! Are we afraid of a few *gringo* thieves?"

"What is your plan?" asked Pamfilo Martinez.

"Just this: we will rest here a few hours. There will be no moon tonight. After midnight we will cross the border. Then this *gringo* we have here will show us where the money is. Stiles will be there. Their horses will be worn out. They cannot travel fast with the girl. We will have them like rats in a trap."

Burr was asleep when the pebble bounced off his cheek. He winced and opened his eyes. The Mexicans were asleep with the exception of Amadeo Diaz who was swathed in his serape, seated on a rock. Burr turned his head. A bush swayed a little not three feet from him. Suddenly he could make out a human form in the brush. The man crept close. Burr stared. It was Jorge Madera. The Mexican touched a hand to his mouth and pointed toward Diaz. Burr turned to look. Diaz suddenly went over backwards and disappeared. A knife rose and fell. Jorge gripped Burr's arm. He cut the bonds. He beckoned Burr to follow him. Burr crawled stiffly after the Mexican. Jorge walked swiftly down a slope, climbed a ridge and then stopped in a gully. He gripped Burr by the shoulders. "We were afraid we would never catch up to you," he said.

"Where is Bartolome?" asked Burr as he rubbed his wrists.

"Here," a quiet voice said behind Burr. Bartolome wiped his knife on a wad of grass and then sheathed it. Burr gripped him around the shoulders. "I owe you both a great deal for this."

Jorge shook his head. "It is only part of our debt we have paid to you," he said quietly. "Come! We must ride!" He led the way down the gully. Five horses were picketed in the brush. Swiftly the two Mexicans shifted saddles from two of the horses to two others. Jorge swung up on a black and leaned down toward Burr, handing him a Colt. "We brought a horse for you and two fresh ones for ourselves. We will have the edge on Casas and his men."

"When they find out that Diaz is dead and I am gone, there will be hell to pay," said Burr as he mounted.

Jorge nodded and touched his black with his spurs. Bartolome swung up on his horse and slapped the rumps of the two other horses. The three men rode toward the border.

It was dawn when Bartolome shouted and pointed behind them. Dust was rising. They had crossed the border not two hours before. "Casas," said Bartolome, "he rides hard."

Jorge kneed his black close to Burr's horse. "Have you any idea where Stiles might have gone?"

Burr rubbed his jaw. "There is a spring ten miles from here in a lonely canyon. I once heard Stiles had a place there. It isn't likely he'd go there, but it's the best I can do."

"We have no choice."

THE sun was up when Burr drew rein on a rise overlooking the mouth of a canyon. It was in a country known only to rustlers, smugglers, and owlhooters making for the border one jump ahead of the law. A mile up the canyon, the walls of an old adobe appeared in a grove of willows. Burr pointed at it. "That's it," he said. "We'd best hide the horses and go in afoot. They'd see us coming otherwise."

Half an hour later Burr was sprawled

flat on his lean belly eyeing the adobe. There were two wornout horses tethered behind the building. Bartolome suddenly gripped Burr's shoulder and pointed up the canyon. Two horsemen were riding toward the adobe. Gus Stiles and Marty Calhoun. Sacks of blue and white ticking hung across their horse's withers. Burr felt a thrill go through him. He knew those sacks. They had been at his feet in the buggy the day Stiles had forced him to drive to where the outlaw had hidden his horse. Burr rolled on his side. "Jorge, cut behind the 'dobe. Bartolome, come with me."

Stiles and Calhoun drew rein at the front of the adobe. They swung down and pulled the sacks from the horses. Burr waited until they went into the building and then ran down the slope through the willows, drawing his Colt. Jorge slid down the slope behind the 'dobe. Burr reached the wall of the building with Bartolome right behind him. Burr edged his way to the door. He could hear voices. "We got the stuff, Virg," Stiles was saying.

"We'd best get on the way then, Gus."

"What for?"

"You know damned well Casas is on our trail."

"Let him come. We can hold out here until hell freezes over. We wouldn't get five miles on our horses."

"I don't like it, Gus."

Stiles laughed. "Listen! I've got the woman I wanted. There's thirty thousand in those sacks. You and Marty get five thousand apiece for helping me. Now ain't that worth holding off Casas and his men?"

"I suppose so."

Burr turned to Bartolome. "We'll have to work fast. Watch for Isabel," he whispered. Bartolome nodded. Burr edged to the half open door. Suddenly he leaped in front of it, kicking it open and running into the building. Stiles looked up from a table. Marty Calhoun was leaning against the wall. Virgil Easley was lighting a cigar. Stiles cursed and leaped from his chair. Calhoun slapped his hand down for a draw. Burr closed in on him, firing twice, the shock of the discharges causing Calhoun to turn sideways just as Easley fired. Easley's slug rapped into Calhoun. Calhoun grunted and went down. Stiles fired twice from the hip. Bartolome went down on one knee. The room was filled with smoke. Burr smashed a shoulder against Easley, driving him against Stiles. Stiles cursed and fired again. The slug picked at Burr's shirt. Burr shot Easley through the chest. The outlaw fell against the table and went down. Stiles leaped back, feeling for the handle of the door that led into another part of the building. Bartolome fired from the floor. Stiles jerked his head as the Mexican's slug pocked the wall, driving bits of the adobe into his face. Stiles turned toward the door just as it opened. Jorge Madera, his face like a devil's mask, fired twice from the hip. Stiles staggered back, trying to draw his left hand Colt. Burr fired. The slug sent the outlaw against the table. His clutching fingers picked at a sack. The top ripped open, spilling goldpieces to the floor as Stiles crashed down. A goldpiece fell from the table, hit Stiles' hand, and bounced off to roll across under a bunk. Jorge looked at Burr. "Isabel is in the back room," he said.

"Look to Bartolome," said Burr as he ran into the back room. She rose from a cot, holding out her arms. Burr drew her close. He kissed her again and again, running his hands across her thick dark hair.

"Burr! Burr!" It was Jorge.

Burr went to the door. Jorge was beside his brother. They were looking out toward the mouth of the canyon. "It is Casas," said Jorge slowly, "riding hard. We are trapped, Burr."

BURR snatched up a Winchester which lay on the cot. He levered a cartridge into it. "Close the door. We'll have to hold

them off, Jorge." He glanced at Bartolome. The young Mexican was pale, his right hand clasped about his left forearm. The jacket sleeve was soaked with blood.

Hooves clattered on the hard earth. Burr went to a window. Casas nervily sat his horse a hundred yards from the house. "In there!" he called. "Give up at once, or you die!"

"Come and get us!" shouted Burr.

Casas men raised their rifles and shook them. The chief leaned forward. "You have the gold in there?"

"Perhaps," said Burr.

"Where is Gus Stiles?"

"Dead, along with Calhoun and Easley."

Casas rubbed his jaw. "So? Look, amigo, give us the loot, and we'll ride away."

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you, Casas?"

Jorge came close to Burr. "We have no water. Bartolome is hit hard. We cannot hold out long, Burr."

"How long do you think Casas would let us live if we surrendered?"

Bartolome coughed. He walked slowly to the table and picked up a sack of gold-pieces. He looked at Burr and Jorge. "Adios," he said quietly.

Jorge stepped forward. "Where are you going, Bartolome?"

Bartolome smiled. "To pay a debt."

Jorge reached out a hand. Burr touched Jorge's shoulder. There was something in the young Mexican's face that told Burr to let him alone. Bartolome pushed open the door. "Casas," he said, "*I* will pay you off! I will bring the money!"

"Good!" Casas grinned widely.

Bartolome plodded forward, his left hand tucked inside his charro jacket, his right hand holding the heavy ticking sack. Casas leaned forward. "Hurry, amigo! Hurry!"

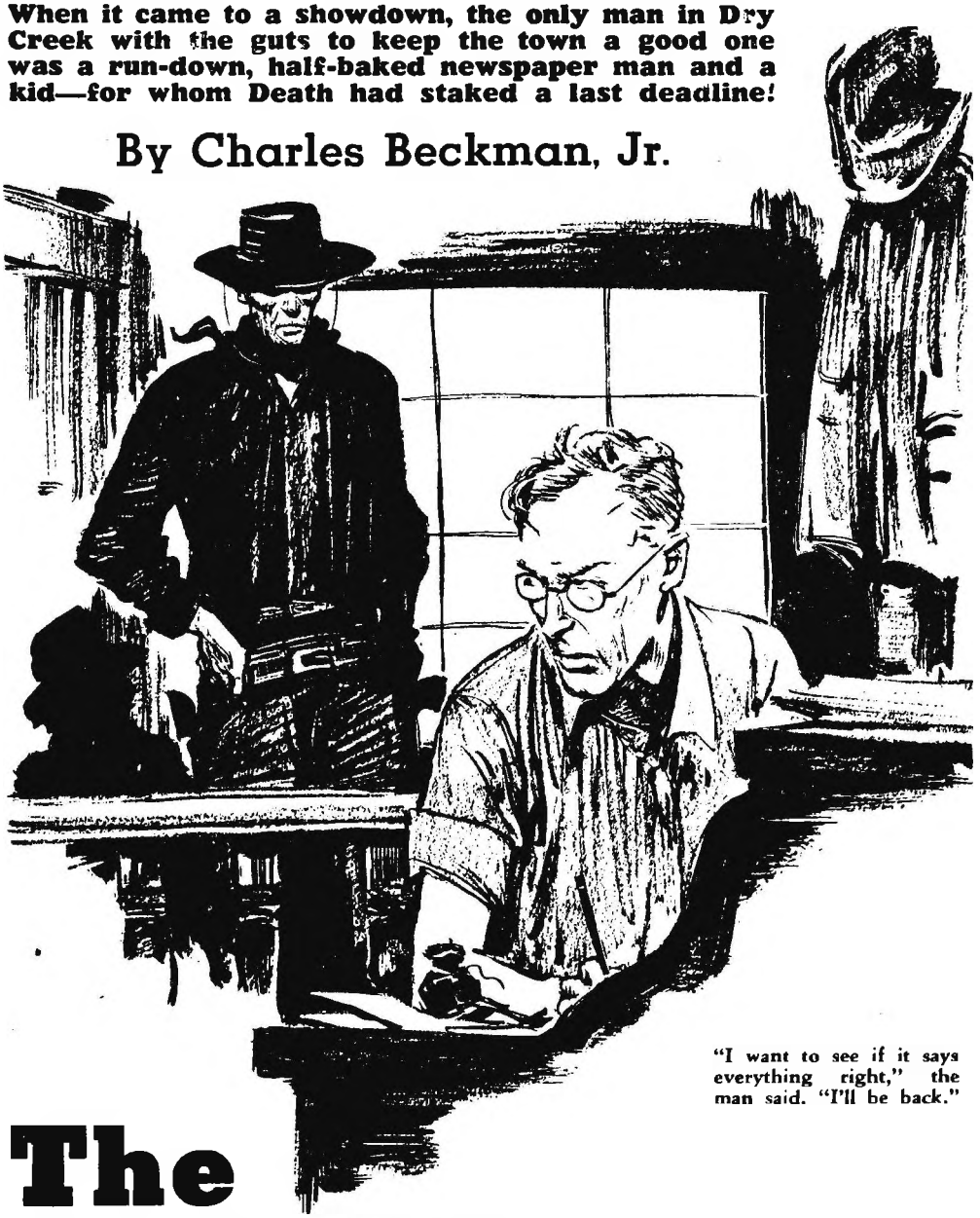
"I am coming, Casas." Bartolome stopped ten feet from the outlaw. Suddenly he whipped out his left hand. It was covered with blood, but it gripped a stubby Wells-Fargo Colt. The Colt barked. Casas grunted as the slug slapped into him, raising a puff of dust from his jacket. The little Colt spat again, and Casas slid from the saddle with his men staring down at him. Bartolome went down on one knee and fired at another outlaw. The man jerked as the bullet thudded into his chest. Burr raised his rifle. "This is our chance, Jorge," he said. He fired. Jorge raised his rifle. The two repeaters sent a hail of lead streaming from the adobe. Two outlaws went down. A horse screamed in terror and threw its rider. Burr's shot dropped the rider. Bartolome lay flat beside the body of Casas. Suddenly the remaining outlaws sank in the hooks and raced down the canyon to the south, followed by the soft whining scream of lead.

Jorge ran from the adobe, throwing aside his rifle. He knelt beside Bartolome. He ripped the bloody jacket open. He turned away and closed his eyes as Burr came up beside him. Bartolome's chest looked as though a wolf had gnawed at it. "He was dying when he came out here," said Jorge softly. "He paid his debt to the Madera family by dying like a Madera and like a man."

Burr nodded. He glanced at Casas. The outlaw stared up at the bright sky with sightless eyes. Burr turned toward the adobe. He was in the clear now. He'd take the bodies of Casas and Stiles to Tombstone along with the money. He had heard there was a thousand dollar reward for both Casas and Stiles. The Territory of Arizona would pay him something for his years of unjust imprisonment. He looked up as Isabel ran to him. With a few thousand dollars he could start life anew. Quatros Piedras was due for a change again. It was a pretty little town and would be a happy place again now that the cancerous growth of outlaws had been cut out of its flesh. Burr took Isabel in his arms. The gamble had been worth it. He had gained a new life and a new love. ■ ■ ■

When it came to a showdown, the only man in Dry Creek with the guts to keep the town a good one was a run-down, half-baked newspaper man and a kid—for whom Death had staked a last deadline!

By Charles Beckman, Jr.



"I want to see if it says everything right," the man said. "I'll be back."

The Devil's Deadline

ED BRENNAN stood at the bar in the Matamores Saloon and slowly raised a shot glass full of whisky to his lips. He was a thin man, dressed in a black suit. His brown hair was sparse, and his face had a tired spent look. The tips of his fingers were smeared with printer's ink.

He stood with the whisky glass in his hand, listening to the sounds of the saloon:

the clink of glasses, the tinny music from the piano, the rumble of men talking, the slap of dominos, the laughter of one of the saloon girls. The smell of cigar smoke and cheap perfume hung wearily in the stale air. Ed sipped his drink and looked at a single pink wild flower that one of the bartenders had put on the back bar in a whisky glass filled with water.

He was looking at the flower when Max DeVries, who owned the Matamores Saloon, came out of an office and saw him. Max was a big man who wore white shirts and smoked soggy cigars. The sleeves of his shirt were held up by garters, each one of which had a real diamond in it. He was very proud of the diamond-studded sleeve garters. Anybody, he said, could wear a diamond stick-pin. But he was the only man who owned diamond sleeve garters. He'd had them made up special in St. Louis.

Now he adjusted the garters, shoved the cigar part of the way across his mouth with his lips, and came over to where Ed was standing.

"Hello, Ed," he said.

Ed put his drink down. "Well, hello, Max," he said with a geniality he did not feel. Max DeVries was one of the advertisers in his newspaper, the Dry Creek *Advocate,* and in business matters it sometimes paid a man to be a little hypocritical with his friendship.

"How's things goin'?" Max asked.

"Fine, fine. Business good?"

"Oh, all right. Could be better. Look, Ed, I'm going to have to cut out my ad for a while."

Brennan had half lifted the glass to his lips. Now he put it down and wiped his fingers with a handkerchief. "Oh, you are, Max?" He looked over at the wild flower in the whisky glass. "That's too bad," he said slowly. "Is something the matter with it? I could change it, if—"

"Nothing's the matter," DeVries stated flatly. "But, now that the railroads have come down here and cut out the cattle trails, I don't pick up much transient trade any more. Got to cut down expenses somehow."

This was not true as they both plainly knew. The railroads had brought a lot of Irish workers to the town, and they had as big or bigger thirst than the trail hands ever had.

It was not a pleasant thing to beg from a man like Max DeVries, but Ed's newspaper needed its advertisers. Not being much of a salesman, Ed began badly, "I—I really need your ad, Max. The paper is—"

"Sorry, Ed." Max closed the conversation. "Maybe next fall. You come around and see me about it again next fall." Then he turned and went back to the office.

Ed stood there a while longer with his drink in his hand, looking at the little pink wild flower. Finally, he swallowed the whisky and walked outside. It was near sundown. He stood on the edge of the sidewalk, rubbing his stomach, feeling almost too tired to walk back to the office of the *Advocate.* His stomach had been worse lately. Today it felt as if there were a red hot coal nesting in it.

Tomorrow was Friday, and he was going to have to put the paper to bed tonight. It was all made up except for one gaping hole on the first page. He had not yet written the story, but he knew what was going to have to go in there. Max DeVries knew, too. That was why he had canceled his ad. Well, it didn't particularly matter about the Matamores ad. After tomorrow he might no longer own a newspaper anyway.

He took out a pipe, filled it, and lit it. Standing where he was, he could see the sun setting behind flat-topped buttes. While he stood there, the sky gradually turned from pale blue to indigo and then deep purple. It was an experience he had never quite gotten his fill of, watching the sun set out here in the Panhandle.

Finally, he turned and walked slowly toward the *Advocate's* office. Because he was

too tired to lift them, his feet scraped the rough boards of the walk.

IN THE middle of the next block, Peter Aims, the man who owned the livery stable came out and stopped him.

"Evenin', Peter," Ed said. He liked Aims, so he didn't have to put any false note of friendship in his voice. Peter Aims was a fine, hard-working man. He had a nice wife and three kids growing up. Usually, Peter was friendly and talkative. Now, though, he looked everywhere but at Ed's face and cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Umm, Ed, I—er wanted to tell you, that is—well, Mary and I were looking over the books last night. And things bein' a little slow right now, well . . . I thought maybe I better not run my ad for a few months. . . ."

Ed nodded. The two men stood in silence for a while as the dusk gathered around them. Ed puffed on his pipe thoughtfully. Finally, he took it from between his teeth. "Well, that's all right, Peter," he said in a tired, kindly voice. "I understand how things are."

"Yeah, Ed. A man has a wife and kids to think of. He—"

"Exactly," Ed murmured. "He has kids to think of." Brennan looked down the main street of the town. He saw the cow ponies of ranchers tied up at mesquite hitch rails, saw the only plate glass window in town—in Wilson's Dry Goods Store—reflect the last rays from the dying sun in a blinding flash. The gray, unpainted false fronts of buildings looked like somber judges staring down at the rutted dirt streets. A couple of men were sitting on the edge of the walk in front of the drug store, whittling. While Ed looked, Smoky Turner, who owned the General Store, came out of his front door and began dragging inside the harnesses, plow shares and clothes dummies that stood on the sidewalk during the day.

"This can be a nice town for a man's kids to grow up in, Peter," Ed mused, half talking to himself, "if it's kept right."

The other man's face was obscured by darkness now, so if Ed's remark had any effect on him, it was not visible. Ed put the pipe back between his teeth. "Well, goodnight, Peter," he said and started away.

"Ed—"

"Yes, Peter?" Brennan paused and turned around.

Aims' face was a dark outline. "I—oh, nothing, Ed. It wasn't anything. I'll see you tomorrow."

Ed rubbed his stomach where the fire was and moved on across the street to his office. He unlocked the door, lit the lamp in the front cubicle. It looked like one huge ink smeared waste paper basket. Papers were stacked everywhere. Posters were tacked all over the unpainted walls. The papers and the walls were ink-smeared. Ed walked through the comfortably cluttered room where he spent most of his waking hours, to the back room where the *Advocate* was printed. Here, he lit some more lamps around the Washington hand press. Johnny O'Hara, the crippled boy who ran his presses, would be down after supper to run off tomorrow's edition of the *Advocate*. Ed walked over and looked at the type boxes with their neat rows of black metal type. All the boxes were filled except the one on the first page. The gaping space stared at him accusingly. He must get the story written and set. John could be running the other pages, but he couldn't finish getting the paper out until this one was filled.

He heard the bell over the front door tinkle. He walked back to the front office. A man was standing there, just inside the door. The caller was a man in his thirties. He had broad shoulders, and he was dressed in expensive hand-tooled boots, tight levis and a black shirt and black jacket. A Stetson with its brim snapped down covered his eyes and shaded his face so that Ed could not see his face very clearly.

"Good evenin'," Ed said. "Can I help you, mister?"

The man looked around the place and hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. He was wearing a heavy Colt .45 on each hip. The holsters were tied down with leather thongs around his thighs. The gun belts that crossed his waist were heavy with shiny brass cartridges.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, you can do something for me." He had a flat, metallic voice.

"Want to run an ad?" Ed asked.

"I guess so," the man said.

Ed sat down before his roll top desk. He unlocked the cover, pushed it up. Out of one of the cluttered pigeon holes, he drew a piece of paper and a pencil. "I'll take it down," Ed told the man. "It runs fifty cents a line for—"

"I don't care about the price," the man interrupted impatiently. "I want it to go in tomorrow's paper. I want it to say, 'Fred Kemper and six other friends of Sheriff Dillon are stayin' in town over the week-end. They want to congratulate Sheriff Dillon on gettin' elected again.' That's the way I want you to write it. I want it to go on the first page with a big border around it. I want it to take up a lot of space, so it's the main thing on the first page. I want it to take up this much space worth. . . ." He drew a leather pouch out of his jacket pocket and threw it on the desk in front of Ed Brennan. The pouch struck with a metallic clinking, scattering some papers and upsetting an inkwell.

ED SAT in his swivel chair with his pencil still poised over the blank paper. He looked at the pouch.

"I just got in town a little while ago," the man said. "I'm goin' down to the cafe to get some supper. After while, I'm comin' back to see a sample of your paper. I want to see if it says everything right. You understand?" Then he left, closing the front door behind him.

Ed sat there until the bell's tinkle died away. Slowly, he put the paper and pencil away. He picked up the pouch and opened the drawer string. The bright gleam of gold coins peeked out at him. He opened a drawer and put the pouch in it. His face was lined and gray.

He sat there for a while, slumped over in his chair. Finally, he opened another drawer and took out a half empty bottle of whisky. He picked up a glass, blew the dust out of it, and poured some of the whisky into the glass. He sipped it slowly. It brought a little relief to the pain in his stomach and lightened the weariness that had settled on his shoulders like sandbags.

While he sat there thinking about tomorrow, it occurred to him that tomorrow, April 25, was his birthday. He would be forty. A wry smile touched his lips. He drank the rest of the liquor, closed his desk, put his hat on, and started out of the office. At the doorway, he paused for a moment, and looked at one of the posters on the wall. This one was a dodger he'd run off a year or two ago. It bore a likeness of the man who had just left the office. On it was printed:

WANTED FOR MURDER
FRED KEMPER
$500 Reward
Dead or Alive

The reward had been put up by the railroad, and he had printed the dodger for the railroad. Sheriff Dillon had given the matter little attention since Kemper was a friend of his and sometimes did him favors in return for the amnesty from the law that he enjoyed.

Ed stood looking at the poster for a while. Then he walked out of the office. He went down to the railroad station where he sent a wire. The night agent, old man Kajureck, chatted with him for a while. "Town sure is stirred up over tomorrow's election," Kajureck observed. He looked

through his window, across the station platform, to the cluster of lamp-lighted buildings that made up the town of Dry Creek. "You can feel it in the air like a storm brewing. You think Dillon will get in again?"

"I don't know," Ed said wearily.

"Shame," Kajureck muttered, shaking his head. "Shame folks can't get up the gumption to buck that man. He's run this town long enough."

"Maybe," Ed said, "They will."

He started back toward the *Advocate* office. But, a few blocks down the street, a man stepped out of the shadows and touched his arm. "Evening, Ed."

Brennan paused. "Oh, hello, Sheriff."

"Come in here for a minute," Dillon said. "Want to talk to you." He crossed the walk to his office . They both went inside. Dillon sat in a swivel chair behind his desk and Ed took a chair. Dillon was a heavy man with burly shoulders. His big hands were criss-crossed with tiny white scars. His face was ruddy. He stared at Ed from under bushy blonde eyebrows that had been bleached almost white by the sun.

"Ed," he began, "how long have you been in this town?"

Brennan struck a lucifer match and relit his pipe which had gone out. He looked around the Sheriff's office. A small room, one side of it was taken up by a gun case filled with rifles and side arms. A pot-bellied iron heating stove stood in the other corner of the room. "I reckon," he said, after a short silence, "that it's been near five years now, Jack."

"Before that?"

Ed pulled on his pipe. "I was in 'Frisco for a while. Tombstone a couple of years. Dodge, San Antonio. ." The towns paraded in his memory, adding the weight of their failures to his shoulders.

"Kind of a drifter, huh, Ed?"

"Oh, not exactly. Things never worked out. I'd move along. . . ."

What he meant was that he'd failed in all of those places. He'd never amounted to much of anything. A printer's apprentice, a kid learning his trade, getting printer's ink in his veins. Lord, that had been a long time ago Back when his ambitions were young and hot and failure was a hardly considered possibility. But, somehow, the years had gotten away from him without his ever really doing anything substantial. Somewhere down the line he'd faced himself with the truth: he was not, never would be a good newspaperman. By then it had been too late for him to switch to another trade, so he had drifted along from one failure to another, fired off all the worthwhile papers in the West, until he had wound up here in Dry Creek with a tiny weekly of his own. It had been a desperate struggle for five years, getting that second hand Washington press and the building paid for. Each month, he had barely been able to meet his payments on the bank note. More than once he'd gone hungry to do it. But this had been the end of the road for him. He'd had to hold onto the *Advocate*. There was no where else he could go, and, when a man got as tired and sick as he was, there was no strength left to start over. So, somehow he had stuck it out, riding all over the country on horse back, selling subscriptions to ranchers, cowpokes, Mexicans and Indians who couldn't read more than a dozen words. He was a poor salesman, but he somehow managed to sell enough ads to keep the *Advocate's* nose above water.

DILLON leaned back in his chair. Lamplight cast dark plains across the thick creases of his face. "Look, Ed," he grunted, "let's put our cards on the table. I know a few things about you. I know you've been fired off a lot of papers and gone busted more times than you can count with newspapers of your own that you tried to start. Now you've just about got the Dry Creek *Advocate* paid for. It's the first thing you've made a half way success of.

You'd hate to lose it now, wouldn't you?"

Ed's hand holding the pipe trembled. "I—I would not like to lose the paper," he admitted humbly.

"Yeah. Hmm." Dillon pursed his lips. His eyes peered at Brennan from under the thick white brows. "You lost some ads today, didn't you, Ed? Pretty big ads, too. You figured why you lost them?"

The tired lines cut deeper into Ed Brennan's face. "Yes," he said. "I can figure why. Because you went down today and told them to cancel their advertising with me. Because you threatened them harm if they refused to do as you said. They're afraid of you, so they did what you wanted. They're all afraid of you. The whole town is."

The chuckle that rumbled up out of Dillon's throat sounded like boulders rolling around in a deep cavern. He bent forward, over the desk, leaning on his folded arms. "I've been hearing some things, Ed, that got me bothered. I want to get this cleared up, what I been hearing. You know what I'm talking about?"

The newspaperman stared straight ahead at the gun case. "Yes," he said. "I think so."

"Young Jim Dowell, my deputy went to you, didn't he?"

"Yes," Ed admitted.

"Then he told you things—things that could cost me this election if they get out. He was mad at me because I took a hankering for that little blonde wife of hissen and . . . well, let's say she was generous to me while he was out of town. He was too yellow to face me down about it, so he went sneaking behind my back and told you things. He told you that it's my money behind Max DeVries that runs the gambling tables in his Matamores Saloon. Also, he told you that some of the boys who carry running irons can steal all the cattle they want so long as they kick back a healthy percentage to me. Now don't deny that he told you those things because he got drunk one night and bragged to a friend of mine about what he told you."

Brennan looked at the Sheriff. "Why should you worry, Jack?" he asked softly. "Young Jim Dowell was killed last week. Shot in the back out of a dark street. He isn't around to testify against you."

Dillon grinned. "No, he isn't. You might take that as warning, Ed. You might think about that in case you got any ideas of printing the things Jim Dowell told you. Maybe they couldn't be proved, but they'd be enough to get people to thinking and checking up on things. And maybe if they got mad enough, they'd forget they're scared of me long enough to vote the other way. Specially the ranchers who've been losing cattle to the rustlers. Most of them live too far out to bother coming to town for election day anyway. But they would come if they got wind of what Jim told you. I don't want that to happen, Ed. This job is important to me and I figure to keep it."

"That's why you brought Fred Kemper and his gunmen into town, isn't it, Red? To help you win the election. What are they going to do, keep your opponent's supporters away from the polls?"

Dillon grinned at him. "That's one of the things they're going to do, Ed. And also, tend to people who cause me trouble, like you might do. You know where Kemper's boys are now? They're down at the Matamores, getting liquored up. Then they're gonna drift down and watch you run off tomorrow's paper. Those boys get mean when they're full of liquor, Ed. Was I you, I wouldn't say anything bad about me in that paper of yours. They know I'm their friend, and Jase Monroe, who's runnin' against me ain't their friend. And they'd take anythin' you said about me as a personal insult."

Brennan sat there with the cold pipe clamped between his teeth. "Yes," he said, and the tiredness was over him like a smothering blanket. "You're their friend,

all right, Jack. And the friend of all the outlaws and killers in this end of Texas. That's why this town has stayed lawless, why it isn't safe for decent people to live here." The words came out in spite of himself. He clamped his lips shut. He had already said too much.

If his words had angered Dillon, the Sheriff did not show it. His blue eyes got smaller beneath the outcropping of white brows above them, but he continued to smile with his mouth. "That's all right for you to say those things to me here, Ed. I know you've favored Jase Monroe in this race from the start. So you go right ahead and talk. You get it off your chest. But don't you go spoutin' that stuff in your paper. It's the only newspaper in this town, and folks set quite a bit of store by what they read in it. More than one election has been won by a newspaper's support. I don't want it to happen here. If it does, Ed, then tomorrow night you're gonna be on the road with your *Advocate* gone, not a cent in your pocket, lookin' for a new place to go and start over. And you'll be countin' yourself lucky to still be alive—which you might not be."

The talk was over. There was nothing more to be said on either side. Dillon had called him in here to give him this ultimatum.

ED WALKED out of the Sheriff's office and back down the street to the *Advocate*. As the station agent had said, there was a tight, sullen feeling in the air, like the approaching tension of a thunder storm. Some men were gathered in knots in the light spilling out of a saloon door, talking politics and tomorrow's election. Far down the street, in front of the school building, pine torches were flickering above a banner which said, ELECT JASE MONROE. Jase was going to make his final, election eve speech in the school house later this evening. With Fred Kemper and his riders in town, drunk, Ed feared there would be trouble when Jase started talking. A young, honest man, Jase wasn't afraid of Satan, himself. But he was only one man. Dillon had the sub rosa support of every outlaw and night rider in the county, plus the backing of a small army of unscrupulous deputies. It was going to take more than Jase's courage to win this election. Dillon, himself, had put his finger on it when he said the people in the town would have to get so mad they'd tempararily forget their fear and lethargy—otherwise they'd take the path of least resistance and drift along with Dillon again.

They were good people, many of them, but they suffered from complacency.

When Ed walked into the *Advocate's* office, the crippled boy, Johnny O'Hara was already there. Ed heard the metallic clanking of the Washington hand press when he stepped through the front door. Johnny was a nice young man. A fall from a horse when he was a boy had given him a bent, twisted back. But this affliction did not interfere with his handling of the type boxes and the press. And he loved the work. His loyalty had helped see the *Advocate* over many rough spots. More than one month, he'd worked without pay.

"Evening, Mr. Brennan," he said.

"Evening, John." Ed put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Stop working for a few minutes. I want to talk with you."

There might be trouble here tonight, and Ed did not want Johnny to be harmed by it. He did not know how far Dillon would go to carry out his threats, but it was not the boy's fight. Ed gave his apprentice some rapid instructions.

Johnny's eyes filled with tears. "It ain't seeming for me to go runnin' off like that an' you stayin' here, Mr. Brennan. You'd best come too, or I won't go."

"Yes you will, Johnny, you must. Now I don't have time to stand here and argue with you. Help me with some of this stuff."

Together they carried some boxes out to Ed's buckboard and loaded them onto the bed. Then Johnny clambered up on the seat. He looked down at Ed and tears were running down his cheeks. "Now you take care, Mr. Brennan."

Ed waved the boy on his way. Then he went back into the building. It was quiet in there, and he felt very much alone. Tired and alone. He stood before the type set for the first page, looking at the gaping hole made by the unwritten story. He picked up some type, thought for a moment, then began filling it in, composing as he set it up. He wrote the story as best he could, which was not too well, but it did the important thing . . . it told the facts.

After a half hour, he was done with it. He boxed in the story with column rules, rolled ink on the type face and pressed out a proof. He stood there with the cold pipe clenched between his teeth, a tired, stooped man with thin, graying hair. He stood under a lamp and read the ink-smeared proof of tomorrow's *Advocate*. Across the top of the first page, in the biggest type he had, were banner headlines, blasting Sheriff Dillon. And under it was the story that Jim Dowell had given Ed. All of it. Dillon's tie-up with the gambling tables in the Matamores saloon, his allegiance with the outlaws and rustlers in the county.

He was reading the story when he heard the front door open. He looked up, at Fred Kemper, the outlaw. Again, the man's hat brim was low in front so that most of his face was obscured by shadow. Behind him were a couple of his men, hard men with the flat, cold look of killers in their eyes.

"Got my ad set up?" Kemper asked with his rasping voice.

Ed trembled. He had done a foolhardy thing, and he was frightened. These men would as easily kill him as rub out a cigarette butt, he knew. But he had already made his decision, and there was no turning around now. He had burned all his bridges behind him.

"No," he said. "I'm sorry. I can't run an ad like that. Your money is on my desk. I'll give it back to you—"

Kemper crossed the room in a couple of long-legged strides. He snatched the proof out of Ed's hand, scanned the front page story with a quick glance. His eyes narrowed, and his lips drew down. "You damn fool," he whispered softly and wiped the back of his fingers across his mouth. Then he snapped an order to his men. One of them took a whisky bottle out of his pocket, drank from it, handed it to his companion and grinned. Then he walked up to the table and upset it. He laughed flatly. The other man joined him, and they scattered boxes of type around. Then they found an iron bar in the shop and went to work on the Washington press, smashing every working part on it. Ed trembled all over, watching through a blur of tears, the things for which he had slaved, being destroyed before his eyes.

KEMPER grabbed a fist full of Ed's coat and pushed him against a wall. His face was covered with rage. He drove a fist into Ed's mouth. Pain plashed white hot across Brennan's mind. Again and again the outlaw hit his face, then his ribs. With a remote part of his brain, Ed heard himself groan. His knees buckled. He opened his eyes and saw a pair of boots inches from his face. One of the boots drew back and the toe of it buried in his stomach. Something felt like it broke inside him. Sick, cold nausea washed over him, reducing his limbs to quivering jelly.

Then the boots turned away.

Through the roar of blood in his ears, Ed could hear the men talking. A lamp smashed on the floor. Yellow flames licked up the spreading kerosene greedily. Soon the air was thick with smoke and filled with the crackling of old pine boards bursting into flames.

Ed blacked out for a while. When he again opened his eyes, smoke stung them and bit at his lungs. He coughed, awakening the devils of pain all over his bruised body. He was so tired he wanted just to lay here and go to sleep. But instinctively he made his unwilling muscles drag him to his hands and knees. He crawled, blistered by the heat, through the blanket of smoke to the back door. Then he fell out into the cool, sweet night air of the alley. He sprawled there, unconscious again for a long time.

Much later that night, Ed dragged himself into the Morning Glory Hotel. He was a sorry sight, with his bloody, bruished face, his torn clothes and his singed hair. He got himself a room and went up to it and fell across the bed. Through the window, he could see the blackened skeleton where the *Advocate* building had stood. The townspeople had come down with a bucket brigade in a vain effort to stop the fire. Now they were gone, too. The ruins of the building were alone. Occasionally, a breeze would stir the ashes and flick a glowing ember up into the night. Ed looked at it for a while, then he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

He awoke long after sun up the next morning. Through the window, he could see the men below in the streets. The usually sleepy town was stirring with election day excitement. Men were coming into town on horseback. Most of them were hard-faced men who rode with their hat brims pulled down over their eyes and their hands brushing the sixguns strapped on their sides. Men out of the brush, outlaws and renegades, Jack Dillon's friends, who had come to vote for him. He had scoured the hills for his votes. And probably, would sign many ballots with names taken off tombstones on boot hill. Dillon was using every political trick to win this election.

Ed lay there, listening to the stirring below the window, too weary to drag himself off the bed. A little later, the door opened and Sheriff Dillon came into the room. The heavy-set man pushed his hatbrim back and stood there grinning at the newspaperman. "I was down in the lobby. They told me downstairs you'd taken a room here."

Ed forced his aching body to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He was still wearing his dusty, blood-spattered suit from last night

Dillon walked to the window, looked down at the street. "Ed," he grunted, "you're a fool. A damn fool. That's why you've never amounted to anything. You were licked before you started last night. You asked for what happened, bucking me the way you did. And what good did it do? None at all. Look down there. Look at those men going to vote. I'll give you a ten dollar gold piece for any Jase Monroe vote you can pick out of that crowd."

He turned again to Ed Brennan. "Why did you do it? You knew what my boy, Fred Kemper, would do if you tried to print that story about me. Why did you go ahead and try anyway, like a damn pigheaded jackass?"

There was something else beyond curiosity in Dillon's question; there was a shadow of fear and uncertainty behind it. Ed could read it in the man's eyes. He sat on the edge of the bed, thinking about Dillon's question and wished he could answer it, because, since yesterday, he had been asking himself the very same question and got no answer.

The two men were in the room that way, Dillon blotting out the window with the hulk of his body, the tired, beaten newspaperman sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor, when the first cry of the newsboys reached them. Their voices were faint and indistinguishable at first, in the other noises in the street. But they grew louder and louder until they became a clamor.

"Get your Dry Creek *Advocate,*" the boys were yelling. "Read the truth about Sheriff Dillon in today's *Advocate*. Free issue of the *Advocate*. Read the story about crooked Sheriff Dillon before you vote!" That's what the boys cried—the boys Johnny O'Hara had hired to distribute the papers he'd brought into town with him in Ed's buckboard when he'd come back from Cherokee Flats early this morning.

DILLON listened to them while the fear that had been a shadow in his eyes grew and spread until it covered his entire face.

"Go tell Fred Kemper and his men to stop them," Ed whispered. "Kill those boys, take the papers away from them, and burn them. But, if you do, the folks in town won't like it. People will sit by sometimes and let a man like you get all kind of power, because they're easy going, and it takes a lot to get them stirred up. But there are some things they won't stand for. Stopping the freedom of their newspapers is one of those things. They'll fight you for that, Dillon. And even if you could burn all those papers out there in the street, it would be too late. We've already arranged for some men to carry papers out to all the ranches. By now, most of them will be distributed. The ranchers will be reading about how you've closed your eyes to the rustling and the thieving. They'll be coming into town before nightfall to vote. And maybe they'll be bringing a rope with them. . . ."

Dillon stood there, staring at him, his eyes bulging, his mouth open. A hoarse curse shook itself loose from his throat. He turned and walked to the door, sweating through his shirt. He opened the door with a trembling hand and ran downstairs.

Ed got to his feet. Painfully, he went down into the street. Everywhere he looked, men were reading the *Advocate*. Merchants were coming out of their stores to get copies from the boys. They were standing in groups on the board walks, gathering in the barber shops. As they read, a low angry rumbling came from them.

Ed found a tired, dusty Johnny O'Hara on the buckboard in front of the fire-gutted *Advocate* building. Tears were running through the dust caked on his face. "They burned it," he whispered. "The dirty sons. They burned our paper. . . . Burned it to the ground. . . ."

Ed patted his shoulder. "It's all right, boy. You got today's issue of the *Advocate* printed and back here in time. That was the important thing."

John nodded. "I took those extra boxes of type that you had set and carried them over to Cherokee Flats, like you told me, Mr. Brennan, just in case something like this happened. The man that has the print shop there, Mr. Browder, stayed up with me all night to get the paper printed for us."

"Did you get the boys out to the ranches?"

"Yessir. First thing I did this morning."

Johnny wiped his hands across his eyes. "But why on earth did they burn the building?"

"I had to go on making out like I was printing the paper here, Johnny, otherwise they might have suspicioned something was wrong and gone out looking for you. I guess I didn't have to antagonize them the way I did—but they plain made me mad, I reckon. A man's got a right to say anything he blame well pleases in his paper if it's the truth!"

"But—but what'll you do now, Mr. Brennan?"

The tired newspaperman looked around a little bewildered. "Oh, I'll go somewhere, John. There are a lot of other towns that need newspapers . . . there'll just have to be."

All that day he sat in front of the burned-

out skeleton of the *Advocate* building and watched the change come over the town. By mid-afternoon, men were coming in from the ranches, grim-faced men who had been too busy to vote before, but who came in now with their Winchesters across their saddles, daring anybody to deny them that privilege. Fred Kemper and his six gunmen hung around the polls for a while, but, as more of the grim-faced men gathered, they suddenly lost their taste for politics and rode hurriedly down the street out of the town.

Ed stayed up until the final returns of the election were in late that night, and he heard that Jase Monroe was the town's new sheriff. He slept a little in his room at the hotel, then, early the next morning, he saddled his horse and rode away from the town that had been his home for the past five years.

As he rode, slumped over in his saddle, he thought about the question that Dillon had asked him in the hotel room. Why had he sacrificed the work of five years? He couldn't exactly answer yet—unless it was because although he had never been a good newspaperman, he had always *tried* hard to be one. And the first job of a newspaperman was to find the truth and print it.

Ed was nearly out of town when he heard his name called. He drew rein and turned around. He saw a number of men riding after him. There were Jase Monroe, the new sheriff, Peter Aims, the livery stable man, Max DeVries, owner of the Matamores bar, Smoky Turner, owner of the general store, and other men from the town that Ed knew well. They caught up with him, and Jase said, "You aren't leaving town, are you, Ed? We went over to the hotel, and they said you'd just checked out. We're taking up a collection today to rebuild the newspaper building for you. This town needs a good, honest newspaper that isn't afraid to speak the truth, and we don't know of another man who could do the job here as well as you. We'd sure like for you to stay . . . unless you got some other place you'd rather go—"

Ed looked at the men, and beyond them, at the town, and beyond that, at the flat-topped buttes outlined against the early morning sky. "Why, no," he said softly. "I really haven't any place else to go. . . ." ■ ■ ■

Hangman's Tree

By Walt Coburn

"Place your bets on me, Smith, you can't lose," Stroud said. "We'll gather a gang of he-wolves and let out our spurs in every cowtown we hit." And die on the hangman's tree? Smith thought.

He did not hear the report of the gun . . .

AS HE rode on the trail to the Red Willow Ranch along the edge of the badlands that August night, Bill Baldwin's horse shied off the trail suddenly, nostrils quivering, spooky in every nerve. The trouble he'd been expecting was here.

He hitched his gun-belt around so he could get at his Colt in a hurry, and bent over, smoothing the horse's withers.

Ten minutes later, the dark, deserted bulk of the log-house used as a line camp for Ed Peoples' Lazy P horse ranch loomed up before him. Bill was easing his nervous mount forward when he suddenly stiffened and his hand crept toward the handle of his Colt. In the shadows of a giant cottonwood the body of a man swayed gently in the night breeze, a spatter of moonlight trembling on the man's gray-whiskered face.

Bill Baldwin recognized the hanged man —a rider named Parker, who had worked, a few months at a time, both for his father, old Gar Baldwin, and for Ed Peoples, Gar's closest neighbor and friend.

A short distance from the hangtree, in the

moon-bright dust, Bill noticed the big, three-toed tracks of a timber wolf. He watched tensely the hanged man sway on the breeze-twisted rope, and he could see his own dad, leader of the newly-formed Vigilantes, hoisting this rustler up to his last strangled breath, and then he thought of Sheriff Phil Farrow. When Farrow heard of this, hell would pop all over the place.

Suddenly, among the shadows about the dead man, Bill caught the glint of a knife blade, as if one dead arm were lifting upward its stiffened fingers to sever the rope, and then the movement of a gray Stetson. He grinned coldly.

His fingers fastened hard over the smooth grips of his gun-butt. "Stroud," he called softly.

A tall man stepped boldly out into the moonlight. He still held the naked knife, but when he noticed Bill's Colt, the tall man let his right hand drop to his side. He jerked his head toward the grisly figure swinging from the branch. "Hell of a price to pay for bein' suspected of rustlin'," he said.

"It might cost as much to cut him down, Stroud," he said. "Parker was a friend of yours?"

Stroud shrugged. "A damn sight better man anyhow than those Vigilantes. Tryin' to clean up a county by bushwackin' never brought anything but trouble. You can tell Ed Peoples that when you see him, Baldwin. An' your old man, too."

Bill Baldwin slowly swung down from the saddle. "If the Vigilantes strung Parker up, ten to one he deserved it. I don't hold with this promiscuous hangin', but there's no man livin' that can say either my old man or Ed shot another man in the back."

"No? You can see that bullet hole in Parker's back right now. Bled plenty—then some pleasant son strung him up here, after brandin' a Lazy P on his forehead. I happen to know that Parker was told to get the hell out of the country by Ed Peoples himself. His name was on the list tacked to the bunkhouse door. He give him a start—an' then caught up with him."

Bill glanced from the bullet hole between the dead man's shoulder blades back again to Stroud. He wondered whether Stroud knew more than he was letting on. There'd been no friendship between them since they'd first set eyes on each other.

HANK STROUD had quit cow-punching to take on that bounty-hunter's job—wolf pelts. He had his own hours of work, took no man's orders, and made twice what he would have riding range for any outfit in Montana. Stroud had the reputation of being a tough hand. He liked to hear that, almost as much as he liked whisky and cards.

A year ago, Bill and Stroud had tangled horns behind a feed barn in Chinook. Stroud had passed a remark about Ed Peoples' daughter, Cherry, and Bill had learned of it and taken Stroud to a licking. The wolfer had never forgiven him. He'd ridden away, promising to nail Bill Baldwin's hide to the fence some day.

Now, the wolfer stood for a moment in the moonlight, silent and unspeaking, with the grisly shadow of the hanged man between him and Bill. Then Bill caught an almost imperceptible stiffening in the wolfer.

Bill's eyes shifted. There, not twenty yards away, full in the moonlight, stood a black shadow, statue-still. It was old Three Toes, leader of the raiding timber wolves; his teeth were bared in a snarl.

A moment later Bill realized that the wolfer wasn't going for his gun. For some fool reason Hank Stroud wasn't collecting the five hundred dollars bounty on the pelt!

There was the faintest sound as the big wolf whirled and vanished again into the shadows of the scrub willows. Bill realized

suddenly he could have shot old Three-Toes himself. Why he didn't, he never knew, maybe because he was waiting for Stroud to shoot first, Stroud, who after all made his living at that game.

Stroud's bearded lips twisted in a grin, and he muttered in a low-pitched, flat voice, "No need to be scared, you damn ol' outlaw. We're branded with the same sign now. Good huntin', till they get yuh . . ."

Stroud, like many men who lived alone and worked in the big, still places, did a lot of his thinking out loud.

"Trailed his old lady for five years, in storm and snow and heat," the wolfer explained sullenly to Bill, "an' all they give me is a lousy hundred for her an' twenty-five for each of her pups. Hell, that ain't even whisky money. She was worth a thousand if she was worth the trouble of rippin' off her pelt. To hell with this wolfin' job! I swore down in Chinook that I wouldn't pull a trigger if I met Three Toes on the trail. No sir! If the fool ranchers want his hide, they can raise the ante or go to get him theirselves!"

Bill Baldwin nodded. "Mebbe they'll raise it, Stroud. You could do worse than to bring in that pelt."

Hank Stroud said nothing, but his gray-green eyes looked mean. He was figuring maybe he'd pay back Bill Baldwin some other day for that year-old licking, for some other things, too—mostly for hangin' around that black-eyed daughter of old Ed Peoples'. But some other time—not now—later maybe—when Bill Baldwin wouldn't expect it.

But Bill Baldwin wasn't going to wait around until Stroud made up his mind. He had ridden from Chinook, where word of the Vigilantes' most recent activities had come to him. There'd been a meeting of the ranchers at his father's spread, and Ed Peoples, so the talk had run, had slammed out the door and ridden away alone, blustering that the only way to deal with stock thieves was to string them up wherever they were found. His views were widespread.

Old Gar Baldwin, from whom Bill had inherited his easy-going ways, wasn't in favor of promiscuous hangings. Gar's Vigilantes had caught one horse thief named Smith, had given him a taste of the hemp noose about his neck, and then run him off the range. Smith had ridden hard, white-faced and frightened, believing that he'd been lucky to escape with his life. Gar Baldwin had been satisfied, but Ed Peoples, his Texas blood hot, had sworn that Smith or any of the men he thought were mixed up with him wouldn't live to leave that range.

Ed's getting mad like that might cause a lot of harm, and a man couldn't get very far any more taking the law into his own hands. The law was coming into the badlands, and sooner or later the names of the hanging Vigilantes would become known. They'd have to answer in court. Bill had a notion that it would be a good thing to have a talk with Ed at the Lazy P. And maybe visit Cherry, too.

He slowly turned his horse now, and rode off slowly. He could feel Hank Stroud's hatred staring after him; he half expected to get a bullet in the back, but that was part of the game he'd decided to play—a desperate, lone-hand gamble of life and sudden death.

AS HE watched Bill Baldwin ride off, Hank Stroud drew his hand away from the sixgun at his hip, took one last look at the the hanged man, shrugged, got on his own horse, rode off into the badlands remembering the tall, slender-limbed breed girl, Cherry Peoples, who—so folks whispered—loved Bill Baldwin.

Stroud camped that night with the horse-thief, Smith.

"String your bets with me, Smith, and you can't lose. We're pickin' up the cards Parker laid down. We'll ride Lazy P horses, and we'll fill our bellies with Circle

beef. We'll gather a gang of he-wolves that'll carry a hard ridin' rep from Canada to Mexico. We'll let out our spurs to the town notch in every cow town we hit."

"You talk big, Hank. You didn't feel no rope around your own neck. You didn't start to do no dead man's dance."

"Lost your guts, Smith?"

"No, but I know how it feels to be lifted off your feet, stranglin', chokin', how it feels to have the rope jerk tight."

"We'll do some rope tricks on our own hook, Smith. Some boys are meetin' me at a camp across the river on Crooked Crick. Me and my partner has hand-picked them top hands, and we're out for the high stakes. I'm askin' you if you want to throw in with us. To hell with how you almost done the rope dance."

"I guess so, Hank," Smith said. "Who's your partner?"

"That's for him and me to know."

"Phil Farrow?"

"You ask too many questions, Smith."

Late into the night, after Smith had gone to sleep, Hank Stroud sat by the fire making and discarding plans, and into these new plans moved a tall, slender girl with soft brown eyes and blue-black hair.

Back in the badlands a lone wolf howled at the moon. Hank Stroud smiled grimly. Only one wolf in this part of Montana howled with that deep throated tone, old Three Toes, last of the timber wolves, battle-scarred, mateless and alone. Into that howl was the mingling of lonesomeness and defiance and hatred. The cry of a lone killer.

Hank Stroud's hand touched the butt of his six-shooter carelessly.

CHAPTER TWO

Rattlesnake Lawman

BILL BALDWIN hadn't gone very far along the brush-lined trail toward Ed Peoples' ranch when he stopped, putting his hand over his horse's muzzle, and held his breath to listen. Very faintly came the sound of Hank Stroud's horse riding off.

Bill waited a moment longer, and then cautiously rode back. There wasn't one rancher or one cowboy that he knew who'd shoot even a gent like Parker in the back. It wasn't like Ed Peoples either to burn his brand into a man's forehead.

Suddenly, he stiffened, his nerves tingling, and he heard horsemen riding down on the clearing from the other side. Now they came into view—four men with carbines across their saddle-bows. The moon was bright enough for him to recognize them—Sheriff Phil Farrow and three of his henchmen. Phil Farrow never rode alone.

Bill held up one hand, and rode down to meet them and dismounted as they came up.

Phil Farrow was a slightly paunched, red-faced man with a neatly curled, reddish mustache, bloodshot blue eyes, and strawberry roan hair. He always smelled of whisky and bay rum, considered himself a ladies' man, and always dressed the part. But in spite of his fancy trappings, he sat his horse badly, never well-balanced.

The dead man, Parker, was a friend of the sheriff's, in spite of his being suspected as a horse thief. Sheriff Farrow had more than one friend like that. He was a politician, who tried to keep on the right side of almost every one.

But he said to Bill, "What'd you kill Parker for, Baldwin?"

"I might have killed him for several reasons," said Bill evenly, "but I didn't."

"Hand over your gun to one of my men. I'm arrestin' you."

"Goin' off half-cocked, aren't you, Farrow?"

"Take his guns, boys. If he shows fight, kill him. He shot Parker in the back. Take no chances with him."

Bill let them take his six-shooter and saddle gun. He grinned widely as the law officer brought out a pair of heavy handcuffs. Phil Farrow swung off his horse, the handcuffs in one hand, six-shooter in the other, and Bill's grin became an audible chuckle.

The sunlight caught the flash of bright steel as the sheriff struck his prisoner across the mouth with the heavy steel cuffs, knocking him back a step, blood trickling from his mouth. The cowboy lunged out with a piledriver swing that caught the unwary sheriff square on the jaw. He went down like a shot beef. And Bill jerked his own gun from the startled deputy who had it and covered the sheriff's men.

He turned to the man who had so eagerly disarmed him a moment ago. "Lock those handcuffs on Farrow's wrists and hand me the key he carries on that fancy gold watch chain." When the sheriff's hands were manacled behind his back, Bill took the key from the deputy, put it in his pocket, and said, "In case he wants to be unlocked, he'll find me at the Lazy P ranch."

BILL stepped up on his horse and rode away, without bothering to look back across his shoulders. Not one of the deputies had the nerve to shoot at him. Perhaps because they were too near the Lazy P ranch to risk bringing out some of Ed Peoples' cowboys, they let him ride out of sight, preferring to brave the terrible, almost apoplectic wrath of the handcuffed sheriff who had awakened.

When he rode up to the Lazy P, Ed was nowhere in sight. The ranch looked deserted of cowboys. Nor was there any sign of Cherry.

Bill halted at the bunkhouse, but the bunkhouse was empty. Tacked to the door was Ed Peoples' horse rustler list. The second name from the top was that of the dead man, Parker. He read the half-dozen names. The last name, that of Hank Stroud, puzzled Bill. Hank, for all his faults, had never been classed with the rustlers, though Bill had never trusted the wolfer. He reckoned Ed Peoples must have proof of Hank Stroud's guilt, or the name wouldn't be there. With a cartridge from his belt, Bill ran a heavy line through the name of Parker.

"Don't tell me," sounded a voice behind him, "that you're adding your name to dad's list."

Bill whirled. Cherry Peoples stood there, a smile on her bowed, red lips and in her shining black eyes.

"Moccasin Tracks," he said, grinning, "you'll slip up on me some day like that and scare me into takin' a shot at you. You're too old now to be playin' Injun."

"You're jealous because I'm Injun and proud of it."

"Where's Ed?" grinned Bill. "Seen any sign of his while you were out scoutin'?"

Cherry did not reply. She was looking at the list of names.

"Bill, why did you cross out Parker's name just now?" she asked.

"Parker's dead, Little Injun."

"Oh." Her voice was barely audible. She hadn't looked up at Bill. Her dark eyes kept staring, fascinated, at the list of names tacked to the door.

"That's why I wanted to know where Ed was," Bill said slowly.

"Dad—Dad killed Parker?"

"I don't know who killed him, youngster. But he's dead. Whoever hung him ran the Lazy P brand on his forehead. Parker's been shot in the back before he was strung up."

"And you came here to ask dad if he'd shot a man in the back?" The girl's voice was tense.

"Gosh sakes, don't turn wildcat. Nobody says Ed shot Parker."

"Nobody can say my dad shot a man in the back." Cherry's temper softened under Bill's grin. "You talk like Phil Farrow."

BILL chuckled, and took the small handcuff key from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Love token from the sheriff. If he's an Injun giver, he might be ridin' up and want it back before long."

"What is it, Bill? What does it unlock?"

"Women can't keep a secret it's claimed, so I ain't tellin' you. But keep it handy in case purty Phil Farrow comes a-sparkin'. It might be the key to his brave heart."

"If the key belongs to that big-mouthed sheriff, I wouldn't be caught dead with it." But she put it in the pocket of her short leather divided skirt.

"Where are Ed and the boys? Phil Farrow is ridin' around with some of his pet rattlesnakes."

"I don't know, Bill. The horse wrangler came up from the lower pasture this morning with about half the horses and the bad news that the pasture fence had been cut in half a dozen places and a lot of horses had turned up missing. Dad and the boys didn't stop to eat breakfast. Got their guns and pulled out."

"Hear any shooting?"

"It might have been a shot I heard about midnight out in the tepee down the creek. I had Lobo with me, and he kept growling and acted uneasy, keeping me awake. About the middle of the night I think, when I thought I heard a shot."

She fondled the ears of the big gray wolf Bill had given her three years ago. Hank Stroud had fetched the wolf pup in to the Circle ranch, together with the small pelts of its brothers and sisters. Against the advice of Gar and Ed Peoples, he and Cherry had kept the wolf pup and made a pet of it.

"Lobo knew something was wrong last night, all right," Bill said. "The rustlers would head for the badlands. Ed would trail 'em. Little Injun, what do you reckon Sheriff Phil Farrow and his gun toters were doin' there on the ridge this early in the mornin'? Forty-odd miles from Chinook where Phil Farrow should be havin' his late town breakfast of beefsteak and whisky? Now that I recall, their horses looked like they'd had a hard ride, but the sweat marks were dry. They'd made the hard ride durin' the fore of the night or before daylight, I'd say, then holed up and rested a few hours. I met 'em where I found Parker's hanging body. What do you make of it?"

"Dad didn't shoot Parker here in the bunkhouse when one of the cowboys fetched him to the ranch just after supper last night. Dad talked to him here in the bunkhouse. Then Parker left about nine or ten o'clock, alone. And he hit a high lope. I heard Dad tell him he'd kill him if he ever caught him again on the Lazy P range. He must have thrown a scare into Parker, from the way that rustler beat it."

"He never got further than the gate of the lower pasture. Or else he disregarded Ed's warning and came back. Yonder come some riders. That'll be Sheriff Phil Farrow and his rattlesnakes. Give my regards to the law and tell him I couldn't wait. Little Injun, you don't know anything. How many riders do your young eyes count?"

"Eight."

"He's picked up a few more rattlesnakes, then."

Bill Baldwin rode away at a long trot, headed for the badlands.

CHAPTER THREE

Guns Behind the Blanket

IT WAS getting dusk when Bill met Ed Peoples and his Lazy P boys. Ed was in a bad humor. He had recovered his horses but not the rustlers.

"I told Gar that we was fools to let that Smith rustler go when we had him foul," Ed said.

"Was Smith one of the gents that cut your pasture last night?" he asked.

"I figure so. Smith was wearin' a yellow

(Continued on page 94)

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(Continued from page 92)

silk neck muffler when I seen him last. Here it is. Picked it up near where the fence was cut. I told Gar these fellers won't scarce so easy."

"Yet you turned Parker loose last night."

"Who told you that?"

Bill ignored the question. Watching Ed Peoples covertly, he spoke quietly, carelessly! "Parker's dead."

"The hell he is!" Ed looked sharply at Bill. "Who killed him?"

"I don't know. Phil Farrow and some of his men rode up while I was there."

"Then mebbyso Parker wasn't lyin', after all. He said Farrow would kill him if he suspected him of talkin'."

"I thought you kept a man at the Red Willow ranch, Ed."

"I had a man down there named Joe Raymond. But he throwed in with horse thieves, near as I can make out."

"Who do you reckon killed Parker?"

"Phil Farrow. Parker was caught on my range and fetched to the home ranch. When I talked rough and showed him his name on the rustler list, he begged like a yaller dog. Said if I'd promise not to hang him, he'd tell something I'd give plenty to know. He told me Phil Farrow was standin' in with the rustlers, that Farrow and Hank Stroud are all the same as brothers in the same lodge. I only half believed him. Kicked him off the ranch and told him to quit the country.

"I'll bet a purty he run slap-dab into Farrow and his snakes. They killed him, put that brand on him, makin' it look like the Vigilantes had done it. Or that I'd done it, personal."

"He tried to arrest me for it," said Bill.

"Which amounts to the same as accusin' me, us bein' neighbors. Nobody knows what Parker told me exceptin' you," Ed Peoples said. "I aim to catch that badge-toter redhanded, Bill. I don't want him to suspect that I'm onto him."

"The Vigilantes should know, Ed."

ED PEOPLES spat disgustedly, his voice harsh when he spoke. "You ain't for handlin' Phil Farrow with gloves, are yuh?"

"Not with gloves, Ed. Handcuffs."

"Huh? What you grinnin' about?"

"The Little Injun will tell you. But we'll need proof Phil Farrow's in cahoots with the rustlers. Let Farrow post a reward for my hide for killin' Parker. If he gets careless, we'll trap him."

"You'll get it the same way they killed Parker."

"Parker got careless. He'd squealed, and Farrow put him out of the way. You say Smith was one of the rustlers. Right now Smith thinks you or the Vigilantes killed Parker. But before many hours he'll know that Phil Farrow did it."

"What difference will that make?" Parker squealed. "He was a traitor."

"And he was Smith's full brother. Smith worked for the Circle for two years. He got hurt by a bronc and nearly died. When he thought he was dying, he asked me to get word to his brother, Parker. Smith's real name is Parker. He's an escaped convict. And he seems to think I saved his life that time when the doctor gave him up for dead. Smith figures he owes me a debt. And he owes Gar a debt for takin' the rope off his neck when the others were ready to string him up. It will be through Smith that we'll hang Phil Farrow. But I'll have to play a lone hand, and the hangin' will be accordin' to law. If you want me in case of a fight, I'll be holed-up some place near the Frenchman's."

"Frenchie's? You must be loco. That whisky peddler is as tricky as a wolf. He'd sell out his own mother for ten dollars."

Ed Peoples swore to himself as he caught up with his men and the horses. Ed thought a lot of Bill, though Bill was too easy-going and never took things seriously. Still, Bill showed signs of being sharper than he let on. Like that Smith business. And his studyin' law.

Cherry had let slip that Bill Baldwin

had passed some sort of state examinations. But what good were law books in a country where a man's gun was the only law he could fall back on?

The Frenchman's name was Alex. He was an undersized, wizened, rat-eyed man who was as quick as a panther on his moccasined feet and deadly with the knife he carried in his gay-colored Hudson's Bay sash. He made and sold good moonshine whisky and loved to play the fiddle when he got drunk. He lived alone in the badlands, and his place was a way station for rustlers and all manner of hunted men.

His heart was warped with strange hatreds, steeped in treachery. But he never neglected the care of two graves covered with wild roses. The larger grave held the bones of his squaw, the smaller grave his baby boy. They had both died one winter of smallpox. He had cursed God for robbing him of the only things in life he had ever loved.

Bill and Cherry were mere children when they had found the place. And because they were children and brought back memories of his little boy, he made them welcome, give them food and a night's shelter, and made them promise not to tell where his place was.

They had kept that secret, sharing it only with Cherry's mother. It was Ida, Cherokee wife of Ed Peoples, who had given them two young rose bushes to take to the Frenchman for the graves. And that simple, childish gift had bought the friendship that gold could never buy from bitter-hearted Frenchman.

Bill left his horse in the brush and approached the Frenchman's cabin in the moonlit little clearing. The door of the cabin stood open, and Bill walked boldly inside. He knew that the old Frenchman's sharp brown eyes were watching him from beyond the grimy blankets that divided the room into kitchen and sleeping quarters. The blanket moved aside, pulled by a lean,

clawlike hand, and the small figure of the Frenchman appeared, a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his left arm. He leaned the gun against the wall, then shook hands.

"Bo' jou', my frien'. Long tam no see."

As his lean hand gripped Bill's, the young cowboy felt the clawlike fingers tighten twice. And he read a warning in the little breed's sharp black eyes. He knew that there was someone behind the blanket partition. Someone who, no doubt, had them covered. He had carelessly walked into a trap. And it was a sure bet that whoever was hiding on the other side of the thick blanket wall would shoot to kill.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hang-Tree Echo

BILL'S nerves tightened. The Frenchman's fingers had tightened twice. Did that mean two men were watching? Two guns covering him? He returned the quick hand pressure, grinned easily, and let go.

"You're all alone, French?" he asked in a low tone.

"Oui. Shore theeng, Beel."

"Good. I have news to tell you that I don't want heard by any outsiders. Remember Smith, that trailed with some of the rustlers?"

"Oui. Shore theeng. She's quit de country, I bet."

Bill nodded, interpreting the swift message in the Frenchman's eyes to mean that Smith was behind the blanket.

"But he might come back if he knew that Parker had been shot in the back, then strung up by a man he trusted. Smith thought a lot of Parker."

"Who kill Parker, Beel?"

"I rode here to warn you that the same man that killed Parker and is goin' to double-cross Hank Stroud is out to get you. You've always treated me white, and I'm tryin' to pay you back for past favors."

"Ed Peoples ees after me, Frenchy?" The French breed's hand was on his knife hilt with a caressing gesture and his lips twisted apart in a noiseless snarl.

"Who said anything about Ed Peoples?"

"Ed Peoples keel Parker, no?"

"No. Whoever told you that either lied or believed the lie that was told him. Parker was killed last night, before Ed Peoples knew anything about the plan to run off some of his horses. I know what I'm talking about, Frenchy. Parker left the Lazy P ranch, scared as hell. He was makin' his getaway when he met some men near Ed Peoples' line camp. One of these men was a Lazy P cowboy named Joe Raymond. Raymond was talkin' to Sheriff Phil Farrow. He and some of his picked men were hid out near the lower pasture to cover the rustlers in a tight. Knowin' Parker was yellow, Farrow doped it out that Parker had squealed to Ed Peoples. And he gave orders to Joe Raymond to kill Parker. Farrow, pretendin' friendship, pulled a bottle and offered Parker a drink. It was while Parker was drinkin' that Joe Raymond shot him in the back."

Bill's foot kicked over the table, upsetting the lamp. His crouching leap knocked Frenchy down, as the roar of guns behind the blanket filled the small cabin. There was the scream of a wounded man cutting through the roar of guns. Bill's left arm had Frenchy gripped in a bearlike embrace.

"Easy, Frenchy," he hissed in the breed's ear. "I had to do it. I knew who was behind there. Lay still."

Then from the darkness a man's groaning voice. "Gawd, Smith, don't shoot again'. You done got me. I'm dyin'."

"You killed Parker, damn you, Raymond! I'm killin' you!"

"I didn't, Smith! Gawd's my judge, I didn't. Farrow shot Parker. Phil Farrow shot Parker!"

The blanket partition had been pulled down. Crouched in the darkness, his gun ready, Bill spoke! "Strike a match, Smith, or I'll fill you full of lead! Strike a light."

HANGMAN'S TREE

The match flared in an unsteady cupped hand.

"Drop your gun, Smith, and act peaceful or I'll kill you. Frenchy, if there's another lamp handy, or a candle, light it. No tricks or I commence shootin'!"

AS SMITH'S match went out, Frenchy lit a candle. Its yellow light showed a bullet had cut Bill's cheek, covering his face with blood. He was grinning faintly as he stood over the wounded Joe Raymond.

"You almost got me, Raymond, didn't you? Should have aimed at my belly. Then Smith shot you. Smith, you won't need your gun so let it lay where it is. Raymond ain't hurt as bad as he lets on. He'll live to hang at the end of a law rope. Your one hope of not swinging, Smith, is to obey orders. Work fast. We're leavin' here before Stroud or any of the others get here."

Bill cleansed his cut cheek with raw whisky and fastened a bandage over the wound. The bullet had not done any real damage. He called Smith and Frenchy beyond the wounded man's hearing.

"I'm playin' a dangerous game," he told them. "If you double-cross me you'll get what Smith here almost got. So remember that. I'm takin' Raymond with me. You two dig a grave somewhere and bury a length of cordwood or something in it. Then fill in the grave, cover it, but not too well. When Hank Stroud or Phil Farrow show up, tell 'em that Smith got Raymond in a drunken fight. You buried Raymond and covered his grave to hide it. Hank Stroud and Phil Farrow'll be ready to believe him dead. Especially Farrow, because it will be Joe Raymond's testimony that will hang Farrow for the murder. The law holds Farrow as guilty as Raymond."

"Unless I kill Farrow first," said Smith.

"Wouldn't you rather see him hung, Smith?"

"I'd like to be on the end of the rope that jerked him to hell," said Smith.

"Then don't get the trigger itch. Phil Farrow plans to double-cross Hank Stroud and all of you before next election day."

"By gar!" exploded the Frenchman. "I bet you're right!"

"You keep on with Stroud, Smith, and let me know when he plans to make a big haul."

"Stroud will kill me if he catches on."

"He won't catch on."

"I'll take your orders, Bill! But it's dangerous as hell."

"You won't lose in the end. You let Frenchy know when Stroud makes a move. I'll manage to get in touch with Frenchy."

"Oui, by gar. I'm play weeth you always, Beel!"

It was sunrise when Bill and his sullen pain-racked prisoner reached the Circle ranch. Gar Baldwin, lean, gaunt and white-haired stared at his big son and the prisoner. Raymond swayed drunkenly in the saddle, half-conscious. Joe Raymond, traitor, was tough.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Wolf Howls

NO PRINTED reward notice publicly declared a big bounty on the scalp of Bill Baldwin. But by word of mouth it was known that the killer of Gar Baldwin's son could collect one thousand dollars in cash, posted at the Longhorn Saloon in Chinook, Phil Farrow's town headquarters.

The sheriff's hired killers cleaned and oiled their guns. Down in the badlands, Hank Stroud and his men smiled grimly. A thousand dollars was more than just whisky money. It was more than Hank Stroud had ever gotten for a wolf scalp. And he counted the thousand as already earned. He'd get paid plenty for paying off a grudge. Many another man in that part of the cow-country wanted that reward money and would take big risks to collect it.

Bill Baldwin, when he heard of the reward on his head, laughed a little

"Farrow's more dangerous than you give him credit for young feller," Gar said thoughtfully. "Don't ride anywheres alone."

Bill grinned. "The man who needs a guard around here is Raymond. He's tough, boss, and he's tricky, and he knows that shootin' is an easier way to die than hangin'. He'd rather be shot tryin' to escape."

"You have a lot of faith in the law, Bill. It's never hung a horse thief yet. The Vigilantes had to do the job for John Law."

"Election ain't far away."

"What's election got to do with it?"

"Did I forget to tell you that I'm goin' to run for judge? How does Judge Bill Baldwin sound to your ears?"

"Huh? How's that, again?"

"I forgot, Gar, to mention it, I reckon. I passed the bar examinations."

"Didn't know you'd took any examinations."

"Last Spring, in Helena, when I went up there to buy those bulls."

Gar Baldwin scratched his head. Like Ed Peoples, he hadn't ever given the cowboy credit for going at his law studies seriously. He was of the opinion that a man had to be white-haired before he was fit for a big job like that of a judge.

But the ranch wouldn't be the same without Bill. Gar had gone through all manner of sacrifice and hardships to build up a big outfit to hand down to his only son and heir. Now Bill talked of quitting it for the law business.

Bill knew the workings of Gar's cowman's mind, and he sensed the deep hurt and disappointment behind Gar's grin.

"Don't think I'll be quittin' the ranch, boss. Directly I've used the law to smash the rustlers, I'll be back ramrodding the Circle outfit. But Ed Peoples' ways won't

make for peace in Montana, and Vigilante methods are just a stepping stone. Law has to come, Gar."

Gar sat silent, staring into the glowing embers of the hearth. Then he said. "If you want that judge job, I'll do my damnedest to put you in office."

"Thanks, mister." Bill's voice was a little husky.

"Calls for a drink, Bill."

In his heart, Gar Baldwin knew that Bill was right. Even as the Vigilantes had organized to wipe out lawlessness, so would state law, as enforced by honest, fearless men, take the reins from the hands of the Vigilantes. Law was bound to come.

RIDICULE is a sharp-edged, dangerous weapon, if properly used, far more effective than a gun. Sheriff Phil Farrow was writhing in agony from its sharp-pointed, razor-edged blade. His own men had witnessed his humiliation and defeat. He had lost face.

He had ridden, his hands manacled behind his back to the Lazy P Ranch, to be laughed at by that breed brat. She had stood there in the doorway of the blacksmith shop while one of his men filed off the handcuffs. And after that humiliating business of releasing him was over, damned if she hadn't produced the key to the handcuffs. She'd said that Bill Baldwin had given her a key but hadn't explained what it unlocked.

The story of the handcuffs had spread like a prairie fire.

No matter what Phil Farrow could do, nothing ever would blot out the story of the handcuffs. He was branded with it, earmarked by it. He wanted the people who'd caused it to happen.

Election time was nearing. The Longhorn saloon was campaign headquarters for Phil Farrow and his men. Whisky and cigars and a little money here and there, he had always found, could get him votes.

But he was shrewd enough to know that, if a strong man ran against him, he could be licked. That damned handcuff story would lick him at the polls. Who would vote for a man so blatantly ridiculed? A slip of a half-breed girl and a big, grinning, joke-playing cow-puncher had made him look like a clown wearing a tin star. Phil Farrow was not going to take a licking lying down.

Hank Stroud, the wolfer, was Farrow's best bet. Stroud had guts but little brains. Stroud wanted to be a notorious rustler. And in a moment of drunken confidence Hank Stroud had made the threat to Phil Farrow that he'd tame Cherry Peoples and Ed, and Bill, before he was done with them.

Sheriff Phil Farrow smiled to himself. Hank Stroud wanted the girl, did he? All right, let him go after her, then. He'd back Hank's play, all right. Stroud could take the big risks of getting the breed girl. The wolfer needn't know that he wasn't the only man in the cow country who wanted the daughter of Ed Peoples.

Hank Stroud got word by the rustling of the leaves—undercover whispers along the outlaw trail—to meet Phil Farrow at the Frenchman's. Phil consulted his almanac and picked a moonless night for the meeting. It wouldn't do to be seen with a wanted rustler like Hank Stroud. The Frenchman's place was safe enough. Lucky, to boot. Hadn't Smith killed Joe Raymond there, saving Phil the trouble of wiping out the only eyewitness to Parker's murder? Or, rather, wiping out the hired killer who hadn't lived to collect on the Parker killing, thus saving Phil five hundred dollars. According to law, he was as guilty of Parker's murder as the man he had hired to pull the trigger. And Smith had killed Joe Raymond. Yeah, the Frenchman's place was lucky.

HANK STROUD met Sheriff Phil Farrow at the Frenchman's one night, during the dark of the moon.

"It'll be easy as shootin' fish, Phil," Hank Stroud bragged. "I'll git the girl here. Frenchy kin hide her out where Ed Peoples and all his cowboys will never find her. Him and I done talked it over. And while Ed Peoples is huntin' for her with all his men, I'll have them Lazy P horses down in Wyoming before he even misses 'em. Frenchy will hold the girl till I come for her. Do you get the idea, Phil?"

"I couldn't plan it better, myself, Hank," Phil Farrow truthfully agreed. "When do you figger on pullin' the trick?"

"Quick as I kill Bill Baldwin an' collect that thousand dollars bounty for my honeymoon. I'm givin' that little hellcat Bill Baldwin's scalp to tan for a honeymoon present. Somethin' to remember her sweetheart by."

"Marryin' her, Hank?"

"Marry a damned half-breed? Not Hank Stroud. Hell!"

"If you could get Bill Baldwin into the badlands, Hank," said Phil, "get him to come here to Frenchy's . . ."

"Get de girl," said Frenchy, coughing loudly to cover the sound he'd heard outside, "den fool Beel Baldwin into come here. Use de girl for de bait. Lak' trap de wolf. Eh, by gar?"

"You always was foxy as hell," said Hank Stroud. "You got a head on you, Frenchy. Phil, the damned li'l' ol' whisky peddler has brains."

Phil Farrow eyed the Frenchman with a cold, suspicious eye. He didn't trust the little breed and his knife.

"How much money for me?" asked Frenchy, aware of Phil Farrow's suspicions, and, by his apparent cupidity, partly succeeded in disarming the wily sheriff. Greed was a thing Phil Farrow could understand in any man.

"You'll get paid enough," he growled, "but you'll have to earn it. Double-cross us, and I'll cut your guts out with your own butcher knife."

"Oui," chuckled Frenchy. "Shore theeng, by gar. De knife, she's plenty sharp, I'm—"

From outside in the darkness, came a sound that brought the three men inside from their chairs. For that sound was a man's sneeze.

Frenchy blew out the lamp flame with a single puff. Hank Stroud and Phil Farrow leaped toward the closed door, their guns in their hands. They tore open the door and leaped outside. Their six-shooters sprewed flame as the figure of a man, like a shapeless blot in the dim starlight, quit the side of the cabin and ran for the brush beyond.

Frenchy heard the sharp outcry of pain and saw the running man go down in a heap, twisting and moaning in agony, there on the ground. Hank Stroud and Phil Farrow emptied their guns into the man who begged in a croaking voice for them to quit shooting.

Farrow and Stroud, cautious, fearing perhaps that the wounded man had friends, had hidden behind the woodpile.

"Light a lantern an' drag his carcass in," the sheriff said. "No damned foolishness, Frenchy, or you're a gonna."

Frenchy lit a lantern and crossed the open clearing to where the dying man lay groaning. He needed no lantern light to identify the evesdropper as Smith. Blood poured from Smith's mouth and nose and ears. His eyes were glazing. Frenchy leaned over him.

"Play my hand, Frenchy," he whispered. His eyes squinted shut. A shudder swept over his bullet riddled body. Smith was dead.

Frenchy carried the dead man into the cabin. Then, at Farrow's gruff bidding, prowled around outside for nearly half an hour with his lantern. Farrow and Hank Stroud watched with ready guns, satisfied that no other men were hidden out there, they called Frenchy back and went inside the cabin

THEY took a few drinks together, then Stroud and Farrow searched the dead outlaw's clothes. But the search gave them no clue as to why he had risked his life to spy on them.

"He was listenin' to what we said," Farrow kept repeating.

"Follered me here," nodded Hank Stroud.

"You damn sure you didn't tell him t. trail you, Stroud?" said the ever-suspicious sheriff, who had for once come without a bodyguard.

"Trail me? What would I want him to foller me for?"

"Protection, mebby."

"Protection against what?" he sneered. "You? Listen, mister, I'm not scared of you nor any man that walks on two legs. I make it a habit of travelin' alone."

"Mebbyso," suggested Frenchy, "Smith come for de jog. He don' know you are here. He wait, mebbyso, till you go because he don' want you to see heem."

"Anyhow," said Phil Farrow, "Smith is dead. And nobody left behind to shed a tear about it."

"He was a coward," said Stroud. "Never tried to put up a fight. Plant him next to where you buried Joe Raymond. He kin keep Raymond company."

"Oui. Shore theeng." Frenchy picked up his lantern, shovel and pick that he had fetched in a few minutes before.

"No need in my staying here," said the sheriff. "Get word to me, Stroud, when you aim to nab the girl and Baldwin and run off the Lazy P horses. Time counts. I give you a week."

"You do, eh?" sneered Hank Stroud. "We're partners, Farrow, but that don't make you my boss. I don't take any man's orders. Savvy that?"

"You can't get far without my protection, Stroud," snapped Farrow. "Remember that. And if Ed Peoples suspect what you're plannin', he'd go into hell after you—or any man that harmed Cherry."

"Who'll tell Ed Peoples anything? Not you, Farrow, because I kin talk some, myself. Gar Baldwin and Ed Peoples would give a lot to get proof that you stand in with the horse rustlers. Pull in your horns, Sheriff. I'm the he-wolf that's leader of the outlaw pack."

Phil Farrow got on his horse and rode back to town, nursing his hatred for Hank Stroud. He had figured on using the man, then killing him. But Stroud had gotten out of control. He'd have to kill Stroud first.

As for Hank Stroud, he was carried away by his own importance. A few weeks ago he had been a wolfer who sold pelts for the bounty. Now he was an outlaw leader with a bunch of tough men taking his orders. He was the fighting he-wolf of the badlands. He told Frenchy so as they buried Smith, and the wolfer began drinking. Hank Stroud got so drunk that he had to sleep it off in Frenchy's cellar.

Frenchy could easily have killed him, but by helping Bill Baldwin he would get enough reward money to retire on and at the same time getting even with Stroud and Farrow whom he hated. He'd taken a lot from Farrow and the whisky-guzzling Stroud. But his time would come.

HANK STROUD slept off his jag, got a new jug, and pulled out for Crooked Creek, across the river. It was a long ride, and he took his time. He'd cross at the Red Willow ranch. He had not taken it since he had found the dead body of Parker hanging there at the river bank. He was still half-drunk when, near dusk, he reached the Red Willow ranch.

At first he thought his eyes and whisky-soaked brain were playing devil's tricks on him. With staring, bloodshot eyes he looked up at the two dead men hanging from the low limb of the giant cottonwood where he had found Parker. Hank Stroud knew who had fastened ropes around the necks of two of his outlaws. Ed Peoples didn't mark his

corpses. They had been hanged with their saddle ropes. One rope was new, hardly broken in. Hank Stroud recalled that its owner had said only a day or so ago that his new rope needed stretching to get the kinks out of it.

He made sure that he was not being watched and cut down the two hanging bodies, got a shovel from the cabin, and buried the rustlers in a shallow trench. It was almost dark when he finished, and, as he mounted his horse, he suddenly stiffened, his hand jerking his six-shooter. But he did not thumb back the hammer. Three Toes, the huge, gaunt-flanked old timber wolf, had halted its skulking gait to crouch, gray ruff bristled, broken, yellow fangs bared in a snarl.

"Standin' your ground, eh?" the man said, his voice harsh. "Damned if I don't believe you know I swore not to kill yuh, yuh three-toed ol' son of hell!"

Hank Stroud spurred his horse into the river, into swimming water. It was dark now. Stars thickened in the velvet black sky, and the faint breeze brought to him the deep, mournful howl of the timber Three Toes. He wondered whether Three Toes had dug open the shallow graves.

CHAPTER SIX

"I'm Killin' Bill Baldwin!"

THERE were three graves under the giant cottonwood now, three graves, their fresh soil marked by the tracks of the timber wolf, but the graves were otherwise undisturbed. And so was born the tale that Three Toes guarded the graves, and the giant cottonwood at the Red Willow ranch was given the name of Hangman's Tree.

And two more names on the list tacked to the bunkhouse door at the Lazy P ranch were duly crossed off with the lead of a .45 cartridge. And daylight, a few mornings later, found a heavy line run through

the name of Smith. The list grew shorter.

Bill Baldwin, who had ridden over to the Lazy P to see Ed Peoples, stared at the crossed-out name.

"You got Smith?" Bill asked Ed.

"Nope. The name of Smith was crossed out last night by somebody. I questioned my men, but nobody admits knowin' anything."

"I had Smith fixed so that I could use him, Ed, as a sort of spy. If your men didn't kill him, then he was killed by Hank Stroud. I meant to get over here sooner, but I've been busy."

Ed Peoples nodded, grinning. "Heard you was out to run for judge, Bill. Count on all the Lazy P votes. Never heard of a good cowhand turnin' lawyer, but I'll help put you in the judge's office, son. How does Gar feel about it?"

"Like you do, Ed. And I don't reckon that you and I are goin' to see things alike if I get into office."

"No more than Gar and me agree about hangin' these rustlers. Hell, if I waited fer the law to git busy, I wouldn't have a horse left in my iron. Two rustlers had tough luck the other evenin'. But this Smith wasn't with them. I didn't cross Joe Raymond's name off the list either. I lacked proof of him bein' dead. I got no proof that Smith is dead, either. That's why I'd like to know who crossed off his name.

"The only men here last night outside my own cowhands was Sheriff Phil Farrow and two of his damned deputies. They'd bin down investigatin' the hanging's at the Red Willow ranch. I let him and his two men stay all night, then told him to git to hell off the ranch, that I'd let 'em stop only because I felt sorry fer their horses. Told him never to set foot again on the ranch unless he come a-shootin'. And I didn't like to have a good file spoiled cuttin' off handcuffs."

"Then it was Farrow that killed Smith and crossed his name off the list. In a way, I'm responsible. I'd ribbed Smith into playin' the spy. They caught him and killed him."

"Dawg eat dawg, Bill, and a good riddance."

"Cherry home?"

"She rode off with the boys to the far end of the range, down in the badlands. They'll be down there three-four days. She's in a huff about them rustlers gettin' hung. She's as bad as Gar. I told her to join the Vigilantes. And she said she'd a mind to; she was gittin' votes for you, right now."

"You ain't goin' to the Vigilante meetin' tonight at our ranch?" asked Bill.

"Not tonight or any other night," snapped Ed Peoples.

Bill grinned faintly, then stared hard at the list on the bunkhouse door. He stared longest at Smith's name, crossed out with a heavy black line.

Bill had promised his father that he'd be back at the Circle ranch to attend the meeting of the Vigilantes. But that crossed-out name now changed his mind.

About sundown, Bill Baldwin reached the Lazy P horse camp at the edge of the badlands, about ten miles from the Frenchman's place.

"Where's Cherry?" he asked the cowpuncher.

"Reckon she went back home, Bill," said the wagon boss. "Her and Ed had a fuss an' she loaded her bed on a pack horse and started out with us. She was over it by the time we got half way here, and was about ready to go back to the home ranch to tell Ed she was sorry. Along come her pet wolf Lobo, and that settled it. A horse round-up is no place fer a big timber wolf, even if he is tame. So she started back home. It give her a good excuse to go back an' bury the hatchet with Ed."

The old wagon boss chuckled a little. Bill grinned. He knew all about the Little Injun and her quick temper and her remorse after her temper had cooled off somewhat.

HANGMAN'S TREE

BILL caught up a Lazy P horse and pulled out and rode with his thoughts into the starlit night. He had struck a dim trail through the badlands to the Frenchman's when his horse suddenly jerked to a halt, snorting. Bill jerked his gun, peering ahead into the darkness. Something lay there on the trail. Bill quit the saddle and cautiously advanced.

A moment later he was bending over the thing. It was a dead wolf. By the collar around its neck Bill knew it was Lobo, the pet wolf he had given Cherry. The wolf was stone dead, its huge head matted with blood. There was blood along the trail where the mortally wounded animal had dragged itself. The gray carass lay in a mess of clotted blood.

The lighted match in Bill's cupped hands showed the tracks of two shod horses on the dim trail.

Bill vaulted into his saddle and hit the trail at a long lope, his gun in his hand. He threw caution to the winds now. The dead wolf and the tracks had struck fear into his heart—fear for the slim, black haired girl he called Little Injun.

Reckless, desperate, he spurred his horse on, until he was across the open clearing, his horse sliding to a halt in front of the Frenchman's cabin.

The cabin door was open. A light burned inside. As his horse slid on its haunches, Bill quit the saddle.

He did not hear the report of the gun. He did not feel the bullet that struck his head. He went down in a crumpled heap and lay there without moving, his big body twisted grotesquely, his gun clutched to his hand, while blood oozed across his face. . . .

Hank Stroud stepped from behind the woodpile, a smoking six-shooter in his hand. He kicked the motionless form of Bill Baldwin and dragged the bleeding man inside the lighted cabin.

"Best pelt I ever gathered," the wolfer spoke aloud. "What till Frenchy gits back

an' sees what I got to show him. The breed girl's locked in the cellar an' her dead lover laid out cold! It took six shots to kill that damned pet wolf. But only one bullet to git Bill Baldwin. I reckon, Hank, that it's drink time."

He had the jug to his mouth, the fiery moonshine trickling down his throat, when the blood-covered head of Bill Baldwin moved. Bill groaned faintly, and Stroud's six-shooter covered the wounded man on the floor.

Bill managed to sit up groggily. Stabbing, red hot pains shooting through his head. His eyes were filled with blood, and he was hardly conscious. Hank Stroud's voice sounded blurred, indistinct.

"Tough, are yuh, Bill? Too tough for one bullet to kill? Well I'm goin' to let you live long enough so you'll know who's goin' to kill yuh and what's goin' to happen to your little breed sweetheart that clawed my face an' set her damn pet wolf on me when I rassled her fer a kiss. I got her tied up in the cellar. I tamed her with my fists. And she's goin' to belong to me, till I git tired of her. . . ."

A sound outside caused the wolfer to leap behind the blanket. His six-shooter covered the man who came through the door.

"Frenchy! Drop your gun, Frenchy. Drop it, I said. Or I'll kill you like I'm killin' Bill Baldwin. Drop that gun. Are you loco?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Through the Smoke

FRENCHY let his gun drop to the floor and looked at the wounded man on the floor.

Bill, his brain a red, pain-twisted whirl, could not make out the Frenchman. The bullet had creased his skull, ripped his scalp, scrapping the bone, momentarily paralyzing and blinding him. He tried to move but his muscles responded sluggishly, and he slumped, face downward on the floor.

"By gar, you keel heem, Hank!"

"I'm not sure." Hank Stroud glared suspiciously at the Frenchman. "Look him over. If he ain't dead, cut his throat."

"Not yet," Frenchy, his cunning brain working. "Mebbyso you use him to get de girl."

"I done got her. This jasper walked into the trap without an invite. Cut Baldwin's throat, and I'll give you ten dollars of the reward money."

A cunning glitter crept into the Frenchman's eyes. He looked at the blood-smeared Bill in a motionless heap on the floor. Dead already, perhaps. It was no crime to slit the throat of a dead man. He slid his keen-edged hunting knife from its gay-colored sash. His unsightly, snaggle teeth showed in a crafty grimace.

"She's wort' one thousand dollars bounty, dat Beel Baldwin. You geeve me two hundred dollars, I keel heem for you. Plant de carcass, to boot. Eh?"

"One hundred dollars, and, if there's a big holler afterwards, you'll take the blame of the killin'. And after Phil Farrow sees the carcass, you weight it with rocks and dump it in the river . . . Listen!"

"Somebody come!" whispered Frenchy, dragging the inert form of Bill Baldwin in behind the blanket curtain. "Unlock de cellar door. Queeck!"

A small trapdoor, ingeniously hidden under the bunk, was unlocked and lifted. Frenchy dragged the limp form of the wounded man down the short flight of narrow steps into the black cellar, leaving Hank Stroud above to clean up the blood-stains on the dirt floor.

"Beel!" whispered the whisky peddler. "You alive?"

Frenchy slipped a short-barreled gun into Bill's hand. "I'm leave de trap door unlock. Miss Cherry she's down here tied up. . . ." He scrambled up the few steep

steps and closed the trap door after him.

Bill's head was splitting with pain, and he was still a little groggy. What was it Frenchy had said about Cherry?

He fumbled for a match and struck it. And by its dim, uncertain light he saw the bound and gagged girl in the corner of the cellar.

A moment, and he had cut the girl free. And love that had, since he could remember, been that of an older brother for a smaller sister, had, by some miracle, become love of another kind. Cherry, too, had been touched by the same miracle.

For a long moment they clung to one another. Then loud voices overhead tensed them.

Frenchy's voice came, answered by Hank Stroud's snarling, drunken tones. And then there was the louder voice of Sheriff Phil Farrow and the voices of other men.

"Pay me over that thousand I got comin', Phil," Bill and Cherry heard Stroud saying in a harsh, triumphant voice, "I got Bill Baldwin."

"One hundred for me, Hank," added Frenchy loudly, as if he wanted Bill and the girl to hear. "I cut Beel Baldwin's t'roat when I git heem down dere."

"How about the girl, Hank?" boomed Phil Farrow's voice.

"I got her on ice. And that ain't all. My boys is holdin' more'n a hundred and fifty head of Lazy P horses at the box canyon acrost the river. They're waitin' fer orders to shove 'em into Wyoming. Fork over my thousand, Phil. Me and my gal is in a rush."

"I don't pack that much money on me, Hank."

"Don't lie. Your money belt is plenty stuffed. Pay me off."

"It'd be a good joke on you, Hank, if I arrested you an' Frenchy right here an' now, wouldn't it?" He laughed a little too loudly. "I got three men with me and some more waitin' down at the river."

"The joke," snarled Hank Stroud, "would be on you, mister. I got a little derringer pistol hid here in my right hand, and you'd never live to git much of a laugh out of a joke like that."

"Drag out your proof, then. Show me Bill Baldwin's carcass, and I'll pay you off. You know I was just joshin'."

"Drag Baldwin's carcass outa the cellar, Frenchy," said Hank Stroud. "I'll ride herd on the sheriff an' his money so it won't git away." Then he added, "I'll git the little gal after the pay-off."

Bill whispered in Cherry's ear. "Back in the corner behind the barrels, Little Injun. Stay there till I come back after you." And he made his way to the stairway as the trap door above opened slowly.

FRENCHY made enough noise to cover Bill's progress up the steep steps. Still groggy, he climbed up on all fours through the opening while Frenchy held the trap door up. Then the Frenchman let the trap door back into place. They were under the bunk on their hands and knees, Bill with a short-barreled Colt .45, Frenchy with his long-bladed knife.

The gray, grimey blankets shut them off from the room beyond. Bill, erect on widespread legs, wiped the blood from his eyes and peered through a hole in the blanket.

He saw Hank Stroud leaning against the wall by the open door, a long-barreled six-shooter in one hand, the blunt, deadly little derringer in the other. And his tanned face with its stubble of beard was twisted in a mocking, sardonic grin. His bloodshot, merciless eyes watched Phil Farrow and the other three men. Farrow was nearest the lamp that was on the end of the bar.

"Better dig up the bounty money," Hank Stroud said flatly, his six-shooter dangling carelessly in his hand.

"Don't be in any rush," called Bill, jerking down the blanket and throwing it aside. "Reach for the sky, the whole bunch of you!"

In his right mind, Bill Baldwin would never have made such a foolhardy, bold move. Hank Stroud's bullet caught him in the shoulder. Bill returned the fire in the same split second. Then the light was knocked out. Guns blazed in the darkness. The roar of gunfire blotted out the sound of shod hoofs outside as Hank Stroud, wounded, leaped on the back of the nearest horse and raced for freedom.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the shooting in the saloon ended. Frenchy's voice, from somewhere near the doorway, cut through the blackness that was thick now with powder fumes.

"I got de sawed-off shotgun. I'm keel de man dat makes fight. Dat Stroud, she's mak' de getaway. Somebody light de match. I'm theenk de sheriff she's hurt bad, by gar! Light de match!"

One of the deputies struck a match. Bill saw the Frenchman guarding the doorway with a sawed-off shotgun. Another sprawled, face downward on the floor, dead. The other was wounded. Phil Farrow lay on his side, his heavy face gray with pain and terror. Frenchy's long-bladed knife was buried to its hilt in his right shoulder.

Bill's left shoulder was a mass of blood and his blood-smeared face made him look horrible. The shaking deputy lit a candle with fingers that could hardly hold the flaming match.

Frenchy disarmed the deputies, threw the guns into a far corner, and pulled his knife from the sheriff's shoulder. Farrow fainted as the blade was jerked free. He slumped to the floor and lay in a widening pool of blood. Frenchy handed Bill a tin cup filled with whisky. Bill gulped it down. Cherry had come up through the trap door, and her eyes were wide with horror.

"I'm all right, Little Injun. Help Frenchy tie up my shoulder. That'll give you somethin' to occupy your mind. Patch me up, Frenchy, I'm goin' after Hank Stroud." Then he swung around to face the unhurt deputy.

"Get your horse and ride like hell to the Lazy P Horse Camp. Tell the boys to take along their saddle guns and head for the box canyon near Crooked Creek. It's your one chance to save your hide from bein' hung on the fence for horse rustlin', murder, and trailin' with skunks like Phil Farrow. Tell the Lazy P wagon-boss or Ed Peoples, if Ed's there, that Cherry is safe and to go after the rustlers. Now hit the trail. Git!"

"Patch Farrow up good, Frenchy," said Bill. "I want him alive. And if you let anything happen to Cherry I'll skin you alive."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Badlands Vigilante

GAR BALDWIN and his Vigilantes were in the saddle mounted on the best horses in the Circle remuda, their carbines in saddle scabbards and Gar riding in the lead, setting a fast pace, because the rustling of the leaves had fetched word to the Circle ranch that Hank Stroud's bunch of horse thieves had crossed a big bunch of Lazy P horses and were holding them in the box canyon near Crooked Creek.

About the time Gar Baldwin led his Vigilantes into the rough hills, Ed Peoples had reached his horse camp. Ed, though he had no intention of admitting such a weakness even to himself, had made that long ride to patch up his quarrel with Cherry. It was the first time he and the daughter he worshipped had ever really quarreled. And he was making the long ride to tell her that he reckoned he'd been in the wrong, that he'd try to look at the rustler situation as Gar Baldwin and the Vigilantes did. He had even ripped the list of names from the bunkhouse door and it was in his chaps pocket now. He'd hand it to her when he found her at the horse camp.

But he had found here, instead of Cherry, only a bunch of sleepy cowboys. Then Ed Peoples became a madman. Cherry knew the country as well as any cowboy. Something had happened to her. He was giving dazed, confusing orders when the deputy from the Frenchman's rode up with his startling news.

"Head for the box canyon in the Crooked Crick badlands," Peoples told his men. "I'm goin' to the Frenchman's. I'll meet you before you git to the box canyon. If I don't, you know your orders. Kill 'em like you'd wipe out a nest of rattlers. To hell with Vigilante ways!"

Alone, riding like a madman, he headed for the Frenchman's place. His spur-marked, lathered horse was almost played out when he reached the Frenchman's. He found Cherry safe with old Frenchy, the sheriff, and a wounded deputy held prisoner, and Bill Baldwin gone on the trail of Hank Stroud.

Ed Peoples changed horses and rode away, leaving Cherry in Frenchy's care.

If it had been daylight, Bill Baldwin would have seen the blood marks on the trail Hank Stroud took. Stroud was desperately wounded in the groin, and the blood from the ugly bullet hole trickled down his leg, dropping unchecked along the trail.

His luck had turned bad back yonder, but he wasn't quitting. He'd get his men and run those Lazy P horses out of the country.

Stroud kept looking back over his shoulder. He hadn't seen Farrow get the knife in his shoulder, and he thought the double-dealing sheriff and his deputies were following him.

His horse suddenly shied, jumping sideways so abruptly that Stroud, who had been riding with the foot of the injured leg dangling unstirruped was thrown heavily.

Hank Stroud lay on the trail, dazed a little by the fall, his six-shooter in his hand. The fall had hurt his crippled leg, and, when he tried to stand erect, he fell. Wounded, afoot, the rustler was caught in the grip of panic. Fear crept into his killer's heart.

Then he saw what had scared his horse. Not more than a score of feet away stood a wolf, a huge black shape in the darkness. He made out the furry shadow and heard the snarling growl of the beast—the deep, hair-bristling growl of the old timber wolf, Three Toes!

Three Toes, old, crippled, gaunt flanked. Too old and crippled to pull down a calf or colt, too weak from hunger and too stove-up to fight the younger, faster, stronger prairie wolves. Mateless, last of his timber wolf pack, he was not afraid. What was there to fear about the man who lay there, crippled, smelling of blood. Fresh blood. He stood on his four legs, growling, snarling, watching the fallen man. Three Toes, crouching, advanced, step by step, ready to rush the fallen enemy.

HANK STROUD understood the ways of the timber wolf, and he cocked his six-shooter. His helplessness had made a coward of him. He would rather have faced any human enemy than that big old wolf that was creeping toward him.

He sat up, leveled his gun, and, even as he shot, the big wolf sprang. Three Toes was on top of him as he shot the second time. The broken, yellow fangs ripped at his face and throat, and a horrible, terrified scream tore from the wolfer's throat. Man and wolf rolled over on the ground, tangled in a fighting mass, the wolf's jaws snapping, the man clubbing and shooting, screaming with terror.

Bill Baldwin heard the shots, ahead in the darkness, the horrified screams of the man, and spurred his horse along the crooked trail. The frightened animal leaped ahead, snorting, spooky, lunging in an effort to whirl about and stampede.

The work of controlling the horse tore Bill's wounded shoulder open. He was

dizzy and sick with pain. His horse was trying to buck, and Bill had to shove his six-shooter back in its holster and use his one good arm to handle the bridle reins.

Two or three hundred yards ahead, in the darkness, Stroud and the old wolf fought to the death. Bill heard a scream that was suddenly choked into a harsh, rattling moan. Then a snarling, growling noise, as blood-curdling as the man's screaming. Bill's horse got its head and pitched, snorting, bucking, off the trail, under a low branch that knocked Bill loose from the saddle, throwing him heavily. Bill lay there, sick, pain racked, half conscious. He groped blindly for the gun that had been knocked from his hand by the fall. Then he stiffened, motionless, shuddering.

Within a hundred yards of where he crouched on hands and knees, there came a sound that chilled his blood—the death howl of a timber wolf.

There in the badlands, through the moonless night, that deep throated howl that voiced a nameless something that embodied all the things that go to make the wolf life. Tragedy, lonesomeness, hatred, fear, bravery, death. The wail thinned into distant echoes, died. And the badlands night was still as death.

Ed Peoples found Bill Baldwin lying unconscious on the trail, his gun still clutched in his hand. A stone's throw beyond, was a sight that chilled the heart of the tough old gun-fighter. It was the lifeless, torn body of Hank Stroud, wolfer, and the blood-smeared, bullet-ripped carcass of a dead timber wolf. The broken, yellow fangs of the dead wolf were sunk deeply into the torn throat of the dead man.

Law had come to the cow country. Judge Bill Baldwin stood for that law. Bill looked a little pale and gaunt from the weeks in bed while he fought for his life. In the end his strong will and powerful constitution won against big odds, and the badly

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see them. Though not a Murphy-Dolan man he feared these two. MacSwain talked fast, most of it in whispers that were too low even for Brewer. The justice shook his head negatively. He paled. He whispered back excitedly. MacSwain's whispering grew more emphatic. At last the justice sighed and nodded his head in agreement.

They called Dick Brewer closer, and the justice swore him in as a special constable. A sheaf of warrants were made out against the men on the list charging them with wilful murder.

That night the eleven met again and in secret. In his new capacity Brewer deputised each of them, though he had no authority to do so, and most of the new deputies suspected as much.

Two nights later eleven men rode silently but rapidly toward the Pecos river. They halted at John Chisum's South Spring ranch only long enough to change horses and then continued on toward the Penasco where they had learned Bill Morton and Frank Baker, two on the list, were holding up for the coming cold spell.

It was mid-afternoon when they sighted their quarry, but their prey spotted them just as soon and were off toward their prepared dugouts where they might make a stand even against eleven men. Both groups lathered their horses, but Morton and Baker managed to reach their goal a scant three hundred yards in advance.

Morton was the first to fire from his shelter. Four guns answered his. Then Baker challenged and all eleven replied. For the next three hours shots broke the otherwise wild stillness. The besiegers husbanded their shells, the besieged, fearful the eleven were closing in on them as indeed they were, did most of the shooting. By nightfall Morton and Baker had but six shells between them. They called out into the stillness asking for a parley.

MacSwain, fearful that the firing which had been going on for three hours would attract help from Murphy-Dolan ranchers in the neighborhood, advised Baker to risk it. Moving slowly and taking advantage of cover Brewer moved nearer the dugout.

The two outlaws agreed to surrender if they'd be given safe conduct back to Lincoln and a trial there. Brewer agreed. Only Billy the Kid wanted the two killers shot.

The posse and its two prisoners, disarmed but unbound, rode hard, fearful of interception by Murphy-Dolan men. Again they paused at Chisum's. Chisum promised to send some men out at once to guard their rear and again he provided the mounts.

Expecting any minute to receive the same treatment they had accorded Johnny Tunstall, Morton and Baker watched their chance. It came as the party was moving thru the Bonita canon. One of the prisoners, as though having trouble with his horse, edged close to Jim McCloskey. With a lightning move Morton had McCloskey's gun out of the latter's holster and had sent a bullet through the unsuspecting horseman's throat. Before the sound of the shot had died Billy's Winchester cracked twice. Morton and Baker buckled in their saddles and slumped to the ground, dead.

Be sure to be with us next issue when we'll be back with another great collection of Western stories. Don't miss the big March issue of .44 WESTERN. It'll be on your newsstand December 18th.

The Editor.

THE West never has admitted the East was good for much. One Eastern item, however, used to be prized—eggs from the chicken farms on the wrong side of the Mississippi. These sold so much better than the Western product, in spite of their greater expense, that a man to whom the point was made, readily admitted the East's superiority in this respect. "Them Eastern men," he generously conceded, "will always lay eggs better'n we do."

(Continued from page 111)

wounded young cowboy, before he was able to get around, was told that he had been elected judge, elected by a unanimous vote.

Judge Bill Baldwin on the bench, Phil Farrow was duly tried. The evidence of Joe Raymond and Frenchy would have convicted the ex-sheriff, even if he had not confessed. It was while the jury was casting its one and only ballot of guilty that Phil Farrow grabbed a guard's gun and killed himself. Joe Raymond was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Judge Bill Baldwin served one term. Then he refused to run again.

"Town is too lonesome, Little Injun," he told his young wife. "Ed misses you, and your mother is plumb lost without you, when she goes out to the ranch to look after Ed. And Gar can't fool me when he says he ain't lonesome out at the Circle ranch. We're movin' out to our own ranch on the ridge between the two outfits, where the yearlin's can grow up like we did."

They stood there, their arms around one another, looking down at two small heads that showed above the hand-made eider-down quilt in the wide crib. These were "the Yearlin's"—twin boys, Gar and Ed. Age exactly one year.

From the front part of their town house came sounds of gaiety, for this was the first birthday party of the yearlin's. The house was a scene of merriment tonight. Cherry's handsome mother was busy in the kitchen; the two grandfathers toasting the health and happiness of the twins.

"They'll get tight as two fiddlers," grinned Bill. "Let 'em. Gosh knows they have the right to celebrate. What do you say we turn the yearlin's over to their grandmother to ride herd on 'em. We'll slip out and saddle up our horses and take a ride. Come on, Little Injun."

Together they rode away, along the moonlit trail that once had known the beat of Vigilante hoofs. ■ ■ ■

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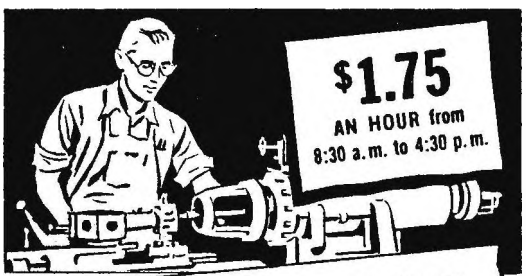

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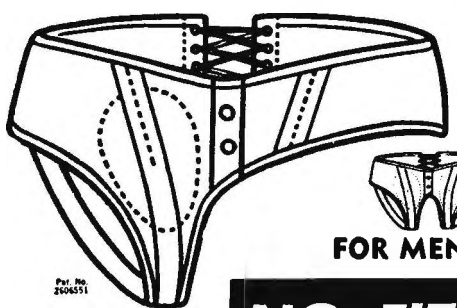

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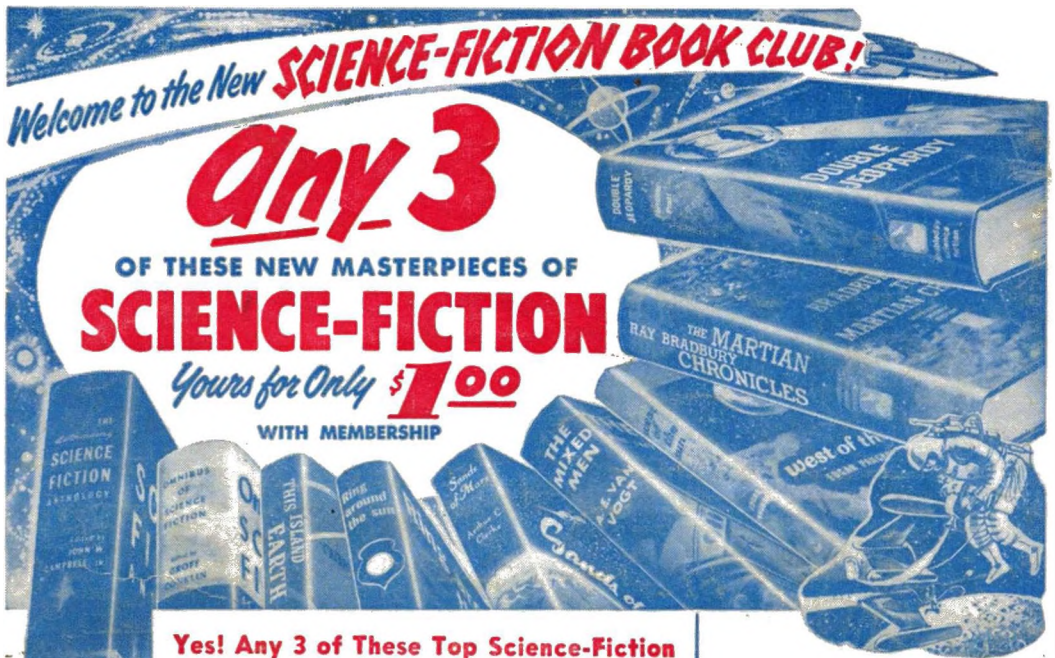

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