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5 WESTERN Novels

MAGAZINE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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25¢



**TEXAS
MAN**

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

OUTLAW HILLS

By L. P. HOLMES

WHITE WOLF

By SYL MACDOWELL

THE DEVIL'S DOUBLE

By HERBERT A. WOODBURY

ROMANCE RIDES THE TRAIL

By ROBERT DALE DEN

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5 WESTERN Novels MAGAZINE

Vol. 1, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

November, 1949

TEXAS MAN

Sam Barr moseys up from the Panhandle, all heeled to settle an account in gunsmoke when it's showdown for his dangerous land-grabbing enemies!

H. BEDFORD-JONES 11

OUTLAW HILLS

Dave Carson rides into the perilous country of lost men — where a girl helps him to find himself amid the fury and turmoil of flaming battle!

L. P. HOLMES 34

THE DEVIL'S DOUBLE

When Drake Kennedy steps into the role of his notorious outlaw cousin and joins Mabry's wild bunch, his real motive is clouded by gunpowder!

HERBERT A. WOODBURY 62

ROMANCE RIDES THE TRAIL

Hard-bitten cowboy Smoke Darrell risks outlaws' bullets and a storm in the desert to rescue the herd of the girl in the crimson neckerchief!

ROBERT DALE DENVER 90

WHITE WOLF

On the savagely-contested Frontier, blood brothers clash in primeval combat while Shirley Anne, prairie blossom, waits to meet her destiny!

SYL MacDOWELL 111

THE PACK SADDLE (A Department)

John A. Thompson 6

SIX-GUN "COLLECTOR" (A True Story)

Hamilton Craigie 58

ONE MAN TRAIN ROBBER (A Fact Feature)

Franklin Reynolds 85

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A Department for Western Fans Conducted by JOHN A. THOMPSON

WELCOME to "The Pack Saddle" and to the first issue of *Five Western Novels*, everybody! All of you, we hope, will come to be steady readers of this new magazine and guests at our get-togethers. So let's be real friends! These are *your* pages—and this is *your* magazine of the fascinating, glamorous outdoor West!

You know, to almost everyone, city dwellers, country folks and the great host of people who live and work in smaller towns, there comes a time when the chores of daily living grow wearisome. Familiar sights and smells and sounds have lost their savor. A restless urge is felt to get away, to get into the great outdoors, even for a short time, and taste the unfettered wilderness.

This instinct for a free life in the open is thoroughly natural, completely wholesome. It is Nature giving the horse-laugh to the complex cities we have built and calling us back ever so briefly from the stress of civilization to the simple life she intended for us. Back to where there are forests and streams, cool green glades and the awesome might of towering, silent mountains. Away too for the moment from the busy business of dollar chasing and back to the wide outdoors and the solitary places where somehow or other life's spiritual values take on a deeper meaning.

The West Is Ours!

Ever camped beside a high mountain stream and wondered how many centuries that crystal clear sheen of water had been cascading over those selfsame rocks and boulders? Or how long it took to make a waterfall? Or sat beside the dying embers

of a smoking greasewood root desert camp fire and tried to figure out how many eons of time had been required to wear away those mountains behind you into the gillion gillion grains of cactus-dotted sand that stretched away for miles and miles beyond you on the desert floor?

We don't know the answers either, if they really matter. But we do know this. The West is still our prime outdoors country. For fishing, hunting, hiking, packsaddle trips, vacation camping or real roughing it in the majestic solitude of forest wilderness or desert sand, you can't beat the thousand and one outdoor possibilities or the breathtaking beauty of our former frontier western States.

On the by-roads and highways you can visit little known back country mining camps, ghost towns and old-fashioned board sidewalk, false-front oldtime cattle towns. Hidden away from more modern western cities they retain all the glamor and color of the early West. Visiting them comprises a never-ending catalogue of fascinating trips—if you know where to go and how to get there.

First-Hand Information

That also applies to outdoor camping in the West. It is, in fact, the real reason behind this department.

"Make it," the Boss told us, "meaty, entertaining and above all chock full of first-hand information regarding the outdoor West. As one issue follows another give our readers the lowdown on western travel trips, camping, the gear and equipment to take along on pack trail trips, vacation

(Continued on page 8)

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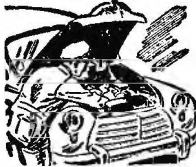
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THE PACK SADDLE

(Continued from page 6)

auto-camping and the dope on food supplies, camp cooking, and living off the land where, or if, that is possible."

We got so durned enthusiastic, as time goes on some of these pieces will probably be written right from the field—if we can hie ourselves down to the nearest post-office and drop them in the mail in time to meet a deadline.

Meantime let's take a look-see at some of the finest outdoor camping country in the West, our widespread National Forests. For extent, variety and interest in the opportunities they offer for outdoor recreation the National Forest reserves in the United States are probably unequalled anywhere in the world. Moreover the opportunities are inexpensive and open to enjoyment by everyone with a longing to go camp-tripping in the great outdoors.

All told these National Forest areas comprise more than 176,000,000 acres, mostly mountainous, in 160 separately set aside forest reserves in 36 of our 48 States. Though the reserves extend from the hardwood areas of the southern Appalachians to the spruce forests of the White Mountains in New England in the East, the major portion of this grand camping country lies in the vast, still wilderness sections of the West.

Western Forests

Out West our National Forests reach from the pinon and juniper stands where tree growth begins in the southern Rockies of New Mexico to the forests of pine and fir near the Canadian border in Montana and Idaho.

They now embrace much of the brush-covered foothills of southern California, and include large portions of the huge conifer stands of the Olympic and Cascade Mountain ranges in northern Washington.

Even Arizona, deep as it is in the desert Southwest, has eight National Forests spread down the central mountain backbone of the State. All of these forest areas are scenically interesting, wonderful outdoor playgrounds and well worth visiting. They have accommodations for the outdoorsman that extend from set-aside picnic ground and fireplaces for the casual visitor to camp grounds and special pack trails for

the back country outdoorsman to follow at his leisure. And each individual Forest has its own combination of outstanding attractions.

Arizona's Playgrounds

Which one is my favorite? It's hard to pick and choose, so much depends on the type and length of vacation trip involved and the features that have most appeal at the moment. Therefore we'll give as best we can a compact digest of all of them, listing Arizona's eight National Forest areas in their alphabetical order. Then you can decide which one you would like to visit first.

APACHE National Forest: Reachable by car from U.S. 60 and 620. Has 1,350 miles of forest roads, 480 miles of pack trails. Headquarters, Springerville. Excellent for big game hunting, fishing, saddle and pack trail trips. Special features are the Blue River Cliff Dwellings and Blue Range and Mount Baldy wilderness areas. Available in the forest are 24 camp and picnic grounds and some rental cabins for those without their own tents and equipment.

COCONINO: On U.S. 66 and 69. Has 1,560 miles of forest roads, 210 miles of forest trails. Headquarters, Flagstaff, Arizona. Good big game and turkey hunting country. Fair fishing. Good skiing and winter sports in season. Extremely scenic with excellent photo possibilities for the camera enthusiast. Notable attractions are Mormon Lake, largest natural lake in Arizona, San Francisco peaks (12,611 feet), highest in the State and some 1,000 miles of fascinating drives through Arizona's little known "big timber" belt where large scale logging and milling operations can be witnessed. Camping facilities include 33 improved forest camp and picnic grounds.

CORONADO: On U.S. 80 and 89. Has 490 miles of forest roads, 460 miles of forest trails. Headquarters, Tucson. Some big game hunting. Excellent for packsaddle camping trips. Features detached mountain ranges rising up abruptly from the cactus-studded desert floor. Camping accommodations, 20 improved camp and picnic grounds. Warm winter climate in low country, but sometimes skiing, even snowshoeing in the higher mountain altitudes.

CROOK: On U.S. 60 and 70. Has 500 miles of forest roads, 590 miles of forest

(Continued on page 140)

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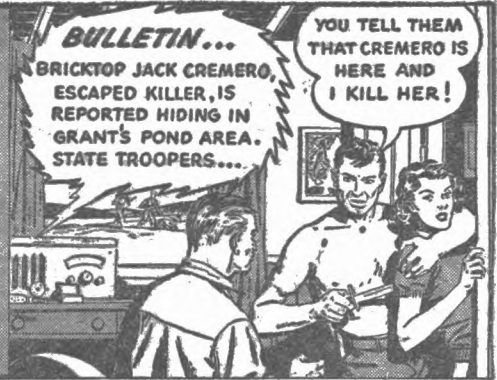
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QUICK

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FETCH THAT
KNIFE



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ON GRANT'S
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GOOD WORK,
SERGEANT! THE
VAN WILL BE THERE
ABOUT DARK



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HUNGRY,
MISS
ELTON.
HE'S BEEN ON
THE TRAIL
SINCE SUN-UP

WHY YOU MUST
BE STARVED
TOO! DAD, SHOW
THE BOYS WHERE
TO FRESHEN UP
- I'LL FRY SOME
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ARE JUST THE
TICKET FOR
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EASY SHAVES



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RELATION?

RELATION?
WHY BILL
ELTON IS MY
BROTHER!



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CAN YOU COME OVER
THIS WEEK-END?

COUNT ON ME!
AFTER TODAY'S
JOB I'M A CINCH
FOR TIME OFF

THE MOON,
A GIRL, A THIN
GILLETTE
SHAVE...
Mmmmm



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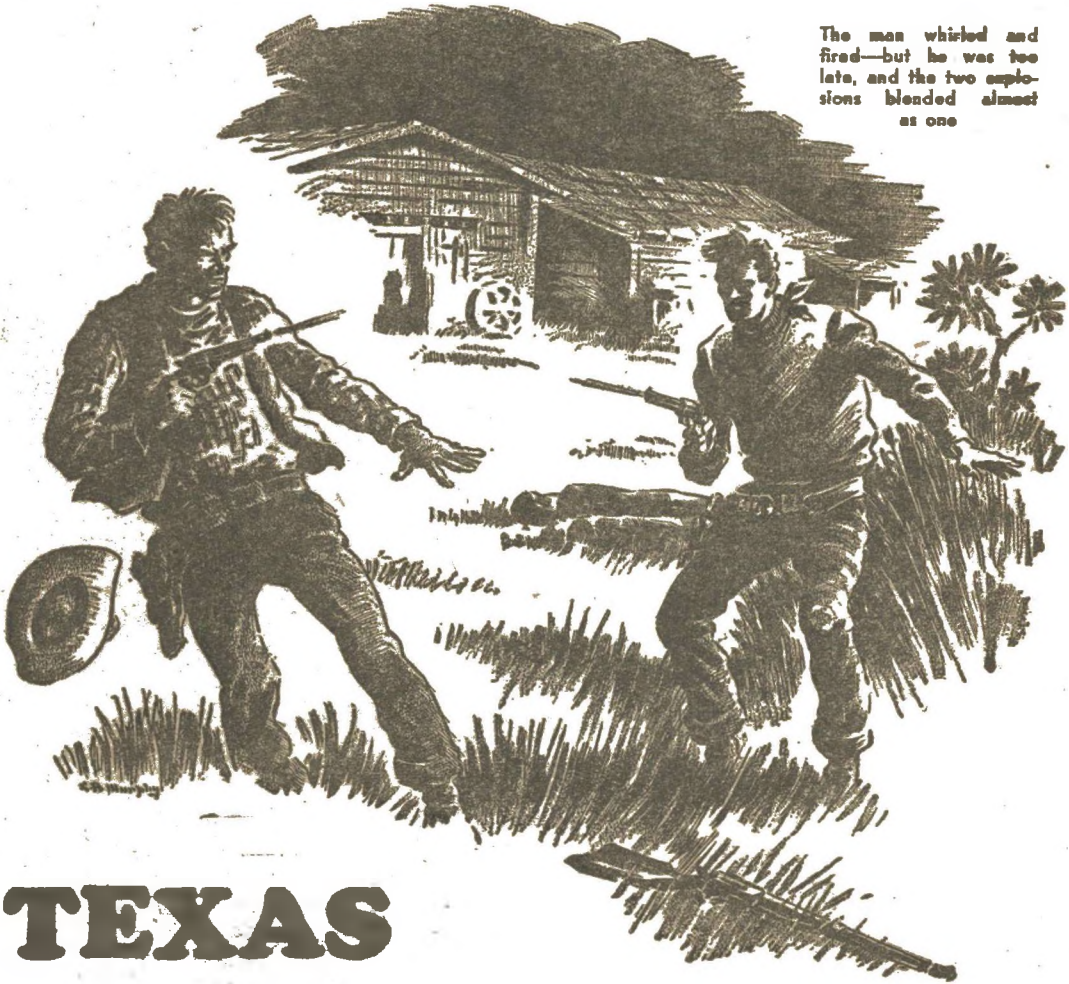


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NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

A Novel by H. BEDFORD-JONES



The man whirled and fired—but he was too late, and the two explosions blended almost as one

TEXAS MAN

Sam Barr moseys up from the Panhandle, all heeled to settle an account in gunsmoke with dangerous land-grabbing enemies!

I

SOME miles outside Hartville, a wagon was jouncing along the dusty road. Two riders were spurring hard to overtake it; brown, gaunt, grim-eyed men with rifles in their saddle-boots.

A young woman drove the wagon.

Under the flopping straw brim of her hat could be seen a firm profile, cool poised eyes, a dimpled mouth that had certainly been designed for kisses. Her trim figure was garbed in khaki, with a gay blue and yellow kerchief about her

M

When Jane Campbell Protects a Fugitive It's

neck. She handled her team with some difficulty, for the horses seemed half wild.

Obviously, she was bringing a load of supplies out from town.

The girl glanced around at the two horsemen, now splitting to overhaul the wagon from either side. Uneasiness flashed in her eyes. She reached for the blacksnake lying at her feet, then checked her action.

THE two riders came abreast. The man on the left, a dark, rangy man of thirty-odd with long black mustache over a heavy chin, lifted his hand and spoke in greeting.

"Beg pardon, ma'am. Mind pullin' up fer a minute? I'm Joe Hardy, deputy sheriff down in Mesquite County, below the Texas line."

"You're a long way from Texas," the girl lifted her voice to reply. "What you want with me?"

"No harm, ma'am. Official business."

She eyed Hardy and his companion warily, then, deciding all was well, relaxed.

"Wanted to ask, ma'am, if you'd seen anything of a feller along this road. No hoss. Old clothes. Brownish sun-bleached hair, blue eyes, no hat, bullet-wound in one arm."

The young woman's face was startled. "Why, no! A man on foot? Who is he?"

"Ain't from around here, ma'am," rejoined Hardy. "Sam Barr, from Texas. Killer. We got him cornered in town, but he give us the slip and one gent seen him headin' out this road."

"I haven't been clear in town," said the girl. "I've been loading up at the Corners—the crossroads four miles out of town. No such person was around there that I know of, and I haven't seen him anywhere on the road this side. Have you any right to be hunting a man in this state?"

Hardy's eyes flicked to her, and he grinned. "This ain't entirely official, ma'am," he said. "We're here to get that feller, and we aim to get him, that's all. Well, I'm sorry if we've been a bother to you."

"Hey, Joe!" The other man had approached the wagon. "We'd better look under that tarp. Might be laying in there. I'll just take a look."

Like a flash, the girl was up and around, the blacksnake flicking out so close that the man withdrew hastily.

"Get out of that! You lay a hand on my wagon and I'll give you something to remember!" she exclaimed hotly. "Think I'm a liar, do you? Well, I'm hiding no murderer; and I'm taking no impudence from you, either!"

"None intended, ma'am," and Hardy chuckled in delight at his companion's discomfiture. "Mighty sorry we troubled you. This makes it certain Sam Barr took another road at the Corners. Come on, feller!"

The two wheeled their horses and were gone with a plunge and a yell. The team took fright and started out hell-bent for home. The reins slid away and were gone before the girl could catch them, and dragged down in the dust. Unchecked, free of restraint, the team decided to go places—and went.

The wagon gathered momentum; so did the team, careening wildly down the empty road.

"If you ask me," observed a whimsical, untroubled voice, almost at the young woman's ear, "one good turn deserves another. Correct?"

A STARTLED gasp broke from her. She glanced hurriedly around, to see a figure emerging from beneath the canvas.

Laughter-wrinkles framed his eyes—lazy blue eyes, under sun-bleached brown hair. His features were deeply bronzed, high-boned, lined with weather-seams, rough with windburn. His voice had a deep, soft drawl that spoke of the southern ranges. The hand clutching the seat beside her was brown with dried blood.

"Reckon I'm correct," said Barr, laughing as he met her frightened gaze. "You sure are a blessed liar, ma'am! Well, I ain't anxious to get my tongue bitten off, so I reckon we'd better talk to them horses a bit."

With a lunge and a thrust, he was over at her side, as she shrank away. Then, more cautiously, he gained the unsteady wagon-tongue, caught up the dragging reins, and flung himself astride one of the horses. No lost motion anywhere. Those dangling arms and wide shoulders might look awkward in

the Signal for Showdown Time in Hartville!

repose, but here in action they were swift and incredibly deft. He looked back at her with an impish grin.

A killer? A fugitive, whom she had unwittingly brought clear of pursuit? After she had loaded the wagon, while she was back in the store going over the bill, he must have come along and taken cover. Well, that other man, Hardy, looked much more like a killer than did this man!

The mad run was eased down. As she



SAM BARR

watched, she suddenly caught her breath. That left hand, extended with its firm, steady pull on the reins, was no longer brown, but crimson. Blood, soaking the shirt-cuff and dribbling down over the hand.

A bullet-wound in the arm, Hardy had said. This exertion must have opened the wound.

The team slowed down and halted by the bridge. This was the turn-out, the road home for the girl. Five miles down the creek lay the YB spread. Sam Barr slipped to the ground and looked up at her.

"There you are, ma'am! I reckon you can hold them the rest of the way. Much obliged for the ride."

She looked at him for a moment. Sun-faded shirt, empty gun-belt, tattered, sweat-stained leather chaps — and a smile. She urged the team to the road-

side and jumped down, then turned to him.

"Let's see that arm, now. Never mind any protests! Hold it out."

Barr frowned a little, then obeyed. She bared the forearm of the soggy sleeve.

"Good heavens! We'll have to take care of that wound!"

"Never mind, now," cut in Sam Barr. "Honest, it's nothin' much. A bullet just ripped acrost the skin, see?"

"I see. You come along over to the creek." She was brisk, businesslike, efficient. Barr chuckled and accompanied her to the water's edge. He squatted here, while she removed the bandage, bathed and cleansed the torn flesh and skin, then tied it up anew and added her own gay kerchief to make all secure.

"So you're a killer, are you?" she asked as she paused.

"Depends on how you look at it, ma'am," he rejoined. "I reckon I am."

SHE eyed him almost with disappointment. "Where's your gun?"

"With my hoss, back to Hartville," said Barr. "Or just outside. They were laying for me. I figured I was ahead of 'em, but I figured wrong. And," he added, squinting at her seriously, "it sure doesn't pay to figure wrong, sometimes."

"Had anything to eat today?"

"Plenty, thanks." Barr rose. "Well—"

"You're not leaving, so make up your mind to it," she observed, calmly. Her air was cool, dispassionate; a little warmth crept into her eyes as she regarded him. "I want to know more about this. Is that man Hardy really a deputy sheriff?"

Barr began to roll a cigarette. "Yes'm, he sure is," he replied reflectively. "And let me tell you, it ain't a very good thing for you to get tangled up in this business. Texas is a long ways off, and up in this country there ain't a whole lot of law. I hear they got a sheep war on up north, and this district around Hartville can absorb two or three private wars without drawing much attention."

"So my father says," the girl said. "He used to be down in Texas a while back. You might have heard of him—Ira Campbell."

Barr shook his head. "Texas is a right

big place and I haven't seen a lot of it, ma'am."

"Stop calling me ma'am, will you?" she exclaimed. "My name's Jane Campbell."

The blue eyes twinkled at her.

"I sure admire that name Jane," said Barr with his soft drawl. "Your dad won't appreciate you meetin' a badman like me, though, so I'll be leavin' you whether you say yes or no. By the way, did you ever hear of a feller up in these parts called Chuck Dwight?"

Her dark eyes lightened a little, and widened.

"What?" Her voice was sharp with surprise. "Do you know Chuck?"

"Well, I used to know him."

"Never mind being cautious. You don't have to be afraid of me," she broke in, impatiently. "Chuck Dwight has a half section about four miles from our place."

"Has he got any cows on it?" Barr demanded.

"Some. Not too many."

"Has he got a wife or anyone around?"

"No, he hasn't." A little red came into the girl's cheeks. "If you know him, ride along home with me, get a horse, and go on. We won't get home much before supertime, either, so don't stand around gawking."

Barr smiled. "Gawkin'? That's a right healthy occupation, Jane. I could sure gawk at you all day, and then some. Yeah, Chuck pulled out of Texas two years back. I heard he'd made good up in these parts. By the way, I suppose you never ran into a feller of your name who's got red hair and a limp in the left leg?"

She eyed him suspiciously.

"Yes, I have," she said. "And I'm about tired of answering your questions. That feller, as you call him, is my Uncle Jeff. And I wish that he wasn't."

"You and me both, Jane," said Sam Barr quietly.

She met his gaze, then nodded. "I begin to understand you a little, Texas man," she said. "Now, listen, just to stave off any more questions. Nobody's home except Sing Toy, the cook; and if I tell him, he'll be deaf, dumb and blind. Now do you figure it's safe to come along with me and get a horse?"

Barr's blue eyes danced. "Well—how about you?"

She stamped her foot. "More questions! You think I'm going to go running to Uncle Jeff and tell him that someone he knew down in Texas is over at Chuck Dwight's place?"

"All right," said Barr. "Come along, an' I'm glad of the lift. I been ridin' two days."

THEY returned to the wagon and rode on in company.

Once arrived at the YB—back in the old days the ranch had formed part of the Ybarra land-grant—Sam Barr found the place empty, except for the cook.

That Jane Campbell bore her Uncle Jeff no love, Barr could very clearly guess, although she had said no more on the subject. In fact, she said very little until she departed with the team for the corral, leaving Barr to absorb some coffee that Sing Toy produced, and a hasty sandwich. It was no meal, but as Sam Barr had eaten nothing this day, he was too ravenous to insist on saddling his own horse. Sunset was still an hour away. At her cheery hail, Barr stepped outside to find a saddled horse awaiting him, while she occupied another. At his expression, a merry burst of laughter came to her lips.

"What's the matter, Texas man? Think I was going to let you go without a guide?"

"You'd better."

"Not much. I've got some mail here for Dwight, and a few things he wanted. You didn't think he was a well man, did you?"

"What's wrong with him?"

"Hurt his knee a couple months back," she said. "Riding comes sort of hard for him. Horse fell on him. We usually do any errands for him that we can," and she indicated the parcel strapped behind her saddle. "Well, are you going or not?"

Barr swung up into the saddle, frowning. "That's not so good," he observed curtly. "I could take the stuff to him."

"You won't," was her cool rejoinder. "I intend to sit in on your talk with Chuck Dwight, if you want to know. And I'll get supper for us all while I'm listening. So that's that."

Sam Barr, with some difficulty, repressed a curse. Then he dug in his heels and followed in the wake of her laughter.



Barr felt the wind of the bullet, heard it thud into the horse [Chap. IV]

II

CHUCK DWIGHT was big and blond, and it looked very strange to see him hobbling around with the aid of a stick. When the first delighted greetings were past, he brought his guests into the house—a mere two-room place, of no particular looks or merit.

"I ran into your friend on the road and fetched him along," Jane Campbell said, with a look of sly mischief at Barr. "Now you pitch in and gab, while I get supper."

Barr rolled a cigarette, eyed his friend, and knew he was in for it.

"Why, last I heard from you," blurted out Dwight, "you were a Ranger and going good. Ain't up here lookin' for somebody?"

Sam Barr grinned. "Not a chance. I'm bein' looked for. Nope, I quit the Rangers last month."

"My heavens!" exclaimed Jane Campbell, swinging around. "Were you a Texas Ranger?"

"Tend to supper, young woman," Barr retorted. "If you're so danged anxious to sit in on this here palaver, you got to keep your mouth shut or I'll quit right now."

"But how come you quit the force?" exclaimed Dwight.

"Got on my folks' nerves," Barr confessed. He was none too proud of the fact. "My dad's all right, but my mother got to worryin' so much that I quit. If I do say it, I've been kind of active the past year. I got to goin' too good, in fact. Some folks were out gunnin' for my scalp. I hate to say it, but I turned in my badge and quit the outfit."

"Good for you!" interjected Jane Campbell. "Never mind me. Go right on. Do you want your eggs hard or medium?"

"One hard on one side, the other on the other," said Sam Barr. "Well, Chuck, I ran into some hard luck. The worst yuh ever heard of. I aimed to get clear out of the state fer a spell and let things simmer down, get me?"

"No hard luck about that," said Chuck Dwight. He shoved back his curly yellow hair, stuck a cigarette in his face, and lighted it. "You were wise, feller. Especially for comin' up here. Some feller was here three days ago askin' if you were around; it was all news to me, and I said so. He was a salty-lookin' gent."

"Yeah," Barr admitted. "They got ahead of me all right."

"Huh?" Dwight stiffened. "Who did?"

"It's a long story." Barr cocked an eye at the stove, and winked at Chuck Dwight. "We might go hungry if I stopped to tell it now. Doggone, feller! We're bein' overheard."

"Mind your own business," snapped Jane Campbell. "What's my Uncle Jeff got to do with it?"

"Yuh hear her?" Sam Barr waved his hand resignedly. "With that woman around, Chuck, we're positively helpless. Can't even lie decently."

"My gosh! Are you crazy or what?" demanded Chuck Dwight, staring at him. "Say, what's wrong with your arm?"

"Huh? My arm? Nothin' at all," said Barr. "A horse bit me."

"You crazy Piute, talk sense!" exclaimed Dwight. "Are you in any trouble?"

"I was in worse today, but climbed out of it," and Barr's blue eyes twinkled. "If I were you, I'd relax. It's bad for your knee to look so strained. By the way, got an extra gun you ain't usin'? I lost mine, and my hat, and my horse and some of my self-respect today. Danged if Hardy and his outfit weren't blockin' the roads! Yes, sir. And they got me. Shot my horse and missed me, but got me all the same. I had a job gettin' away."

"Who's Hardy?" demanded Dwight.

"Deputy sheriff down below the Line. His brother was the sheriff till I had him sent up for murder. He got life, and Hardy's out to get me."

"So that's the kind of murderer you are—oh!" burst out the girl. "And I let him stand there and lie to me about it and call you a killer!"

"Well," demanded Dwight, with a puzzled air, "why not keep your shootings down in Texas? What are you doin' here? What's Jane talkin' about, anyhow? Who called you a killer?"

"Hardy." Barr grinned widely. "I was hid in her wagon and she didn't know it."

"But what you doing here?"

"Tidin' out with you. Got any objections?"

"Yeah. Why didn't you pick a time when I was in shape?"

"Oh, that's on account of her Uncle Jeff. You know him?"

DWIGHT grunted, keenly alert now. "No," he said.

"Jeff Campbell," Barr rejoined. "He's the family here. Six-foot-two, red-haired, gimlet eye—that's him. He's got brains, that gent has. He's been back of half the deviltry in Texas; everythin' from land-grabbing to plain and simple rustling. He's had agents workin' different places, fast workers too. He owns a lot of land, but he had to leave Texas in a hurry. Partly for his health."

"Yeah?" asked Dwight with interest. "You got somethin' on him? You after him?"

"No, dunce. Partly for his health, but mostly for his fortune. So you haven't had any letters from me lately?"

"Of course not."

Dwight was beginning to get angry now.

"Sent you four." Barr held up his hand, ticked off fingers and thumb. "Five—that's me, Sam Barr, special delivery. I got the papers, but I ain't gettin' at 'em while that woman is in the shack. I got some modesty. They're sewed inside my pants, to be exact."

"Jane, give this hombre somethin' to eat," complained Dwight. "He's clear off his head. Sunstruck, I expect. He used to be a sort of decent gent, too."

"Still is," said Jane Campbell. "Stick around, Chuck. Something back of his loco talk, I reckon. Want your bacon crisp, Texas man?"

"One side crisp, thanks," said Barr. "All right, Chuck. Ever hear of a female who called herself your Aunt Julia?"

Chuck Dwight sat up straight.

"My gosh! I ain't heard of her in ten years or more! She had a fight with the family and expelled 'em from her midst. Where'd you hear of her?"

"Death notices. She died about six months ago and left five thousand acres of land in the Panhandle. A ranch, feller; a real ranch worth real money, not to mention all kinds of happy cows and horses and things on the ranch."

Dwight's eyes bulged. "Huh? You mean she left it to me? My gosh! I'm rich!"

Sam Barr eyed him compassionately. "You ain't—not yet. Not by about fourteen days or two weeks."

"Huh? Didn't she leave the outfit to me?"

"Yeah; providing you were located inside of six months, which is about

done past. Two weeks to run. If you don't file any claim to it by then, the whole shebang goes on the block to be sold and the money given to the cause of temperance. Which means that Uncle Jeff buys in the works for a song, by connivance with a crooked lawyer who is runnin' the estate. He ain't been huntin' for you any harder than the law allows. I got onto the business through one of those jaspers who went to the pen. No letters answered, none received."

"What a sink of misery!" yelled Chuck Dwight, gripping his chair-arms hard, his eyes blazing. "You mean some ornery coyote has robbed my mail? That's a Federal offense, feller!"

"Prove it and calm yourself," said Sam Barr. "You begin to savvy, do you? There's a lot of money out of Uncle Jeff's pocket if you file any papers claimin' that estate."

"It don't matter—I'll claim it, all right," cried Dwight, exuberantly. "Hear that, Jane? By golly, I'm a rich man! I can throw this danged ranch clean away to the dogs and be done with it. I can ask any girl to marry me!"

Jane Campbell paused to light the lamp, then regarded him.

"Don't ask me, Chuck Dwight; you've done that once too often," she observed. "I happen to know about that girl down in Texas, because Sam Barr told me about her. And you're not rich yet. You don't know my Uncle Jeff and I do. If you knew him, you'd go out and feel sorry for yourself. True, Sam?"

"True as Gospel," approved Sam Barr, and the laughter was gone from his face: "Get wise to it, Chuck. I've got the papers here for you to sign and send, but don't mail 'em from Hartville. And if Uncle Jeff knows I'm in your midst, somebody will get shot quick. I'm surprised you're still alive. That's only because Uncle Jeff ain't got organized yet in these parts."

"You mean it?" asked Dwight soberly. "I see you do. Gosh! As bad as that?"

"Worse," said Barr. "I got to be out of this shack before sunup."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere. The woods, or under a bridge, or up a tree if you got one. Can't make any plans or talk things over tonight. I'm shaky. Done up. All gone. I mean it," and Barr looked longingly at the bunk in the other room. "I want to

eat, then I want to sleep; and boy, I got to sleep or go wild! Ain't slept except in the saddle fer three days."

THE girl shook her head as she glanced at Barr's drawn face.

"Not to mention your left arm looking like a plough and a harrow had gone over it," Jane Campbell said. "You'd better sleep; you need it, Texas man, and you can let me make some plans with Chuck."

"You?" Barr looked up at her. "If you play those chips, your Uncle Jeff loses."

"Uncle Jeff!" To his amazement, she flashed out in a burst out of furious anger. "If I could hate anybody, it'd be that man! You don't know how he's preyed on Dad and Mother, how he's milked them and lied to them and held them under his thumb—oh, rats! Sit down and eat. I'll have the coffee right on."

She turned away abruptly. Barr caught a warning gesture from Dwight, and with a nod, made no comment.

They pulled up to the table. Jane Campbell joined them with the coffee, and Sam Barr ate like a wolf. Between hunger and sheer dog-weariness he was in no shape for any consultation or plans. His brain was dead, his body was one solid ache.

"One cigarette," he said, pushing his chair back from the table at last. "Then I hit the hay. Jane, sorry about ridin' back with you."

"Forget it," she said emphatically. "I'm no tender infant, Texas man. If I'm taking chips in this game, as you said, then I play my own hand as a partner. Yes or no?"

"Done," Barr agreed promptly, and lit his cigarette. "Chuck, I'll hand out those papers pretty quick. The places to sign are marked. You sign. Have Jane sign as a witness. I've already signed as the other witness. Wake me up about three o'clock and I'll light out with a blanket and finish my sleep somewheres. Most like, some gent will be watching this place about sunup to see if I'm here. Where's your spare gun?"

"Over the bed," Dwight frowned. "But we got to talk things over."

"Tomorrow. Sign those papers and hide 'em. Let Jane take 'em home overnight. Can you trust her, bein' a Campbell and so forth?"

"Can I?" Dwight looked at the girl,

his gray eyes kindling. "If you hadn't lied to her about me and some girl down below, we'd have been married tomorrow, feller."

"You ain't got a chance. I aim to marry her myself, but don't tell her." Sam Barr yawned, pitched away his cigarette, and rose. "Yeah. I been lookin' for that girl a long while and ain't ever met her before. But now I have. Well, so long and pleasant dreams—don't forget to wake me up. You got trouble comin' along about daylight, if I'm any judge."

He staggered off, collided with the door-jamb, and stumbling into the other room, disappeared from sight. After a moment a large envelope hurtled into the room and fell on the floor.

"There you are!" mumbled Barr's voice, and droned off into a groaning snore.

He was, indeed, fast asleep the instant he dropped on the bunk.

He wakened to a wonderful, marvelous memory of something—Jane Campbell, of course. Then the voice of Dwight reached to his brain.

"I ain't Jane, durn you! Come on, wake up. Three o'clock and dark as the devil. And don't be callin' me Jane. Danged if I don't think you got that girl on the brain!"

"Why not?" asked Barr sleepily, as he sat up. He struck a match, found gun-belt above the bunk, boots under it, and before the match flickered out, was in shape to grab up his blankets. "So long. I'll wake you up later."

All dark outside. He felt stiff, sore, sleepy. A few trees were growing around the house and the shed behind it. An old barn loomed like a black mass, an old windmill creaked up into the sky. Trees. He remembered now, a few trees in a clump somewhere back of the windmill. Enough to conceal him from sight.

He stumbled toward them, located them presently, and cursing his way into the midst of them, rolled up and was asleep once more.

"It's your job, so 'tend to it. Jeff says to get one or the other."

Sam Barr came wide awake all at once, the words ringing in his ears. The trample of a horse, the creak of leather as another man dismounted. Somewhere so close that he could hear the panting of the horse, could hear the other horse departing. One man had left the other

man here. With orders from Jeff Campbell.

BARR did not move a muscle. The gray misty darkness just preceding dawn overspread the sky. A growling oath; the bushes above him moved, the head of a horse appeared, then jerked sharply back with a snort.

"Quiet!" growled the man with a curse. "Just for that, I'll tie you up."

The voice was close, very close. The click of a breech-bolt sounded, and again. Inch by inch, Sam Barr laid his blanket aside, came to one side, then to his elbow. The horse was munching away, to his vast relief. The slight champing drowned any sound he himself might make. Birds were already twittering and chirping at the dawn.

Barr came to his knees. Carefully, cautiously, he raised up to full height.

Six feet away from him a man was sitting, profile in view, rifle across knees.

Barr's hand crept to the revolver at his hip.

"All right, feller. Up! Up, you durned fool!"

The man came to his feet like a shot, let the rifle fall as he turned, whipped up his gun even before he saw who stood behind him.

Even before he saw Barr, he fired at the voice so close at his back. But he fired too late.

Even so, it was a close thing. The two explosions blended almost as one.

Barr thrust away his gun. His blue eyes flickered. Despite all he knew about this wild beast who lay dead, it hurt to kill like this, in cold blood. Yet an instant more and he would have died himself.

"Hey, Sam! Sam! Where are you?"

Chuck Dwight was hobbling out of the shack, gun in hand.

"Sam! What were you shootin' for?"

"Told you I'd wake you up, didn't I?" answered Barr. "Got me a hat, a gun, a rifle and a horse. Good horse, too; stolen down in Texas, by the brand."

Presently he was striding toward the house, leading the horse behind him. As he joined Dwight, he jerked his head back toward the trees.

"Thousand dollars blood money laying there—want it?" he said, and smiled grimly. "No? You and me think alike, feller. About time to eat, ain't it?"

Dwight allowed that it was.

III

YELLOW-STREAKED sunrise saw the thing among the trees buried, and the two friends at breakfast.

"You danged Ranger!" said Dwight very affectionately. "I don't know how you're alive and kickin'. Your brain must be workin' all right this mornin'."

"No complaint," said Barr. "Did you and Jane settle any program last night?"

"Only that we're to meet up this morning over on the creek. She wants to take out those papers herself to Fargo or somewhere and mail 'em. Says they'd be safer."

"I don't get the picture," said Barr, frowning. "About her uncle and all."

"I don't know him, but she loosened up last night," Dwight declared. "Campbell, her dad, is a queer gent. Mild, honest, sober little feller. All the good run into him, all the bad and the fighting blood run into his brother Jeff, looks like. Jeff has got something on him. He's plumb scared of Jeff; so's his wife, Jane's ma. Jane says her uncle has deviled 'em for years. She sure hates his shadow. Jane just about does what she likes and no objections."

"So I gather." Barr's gaze bit out, level, frank, warm. "Tell me—you got your mind set on that girl?"

Dwight grinned, and a weight lifted from Sam Barr's spirit.

"Not me. She's gone around some with me to keep fellers in these parts from too much anxiety. She knows about Sally Blaine, down in Amarillo. Remember her?"

"Sure! You still thinkin' about Sally?"

"She's waitin' for me," said Dwight, with a nod. "Well, now to business. I take it we got to get those papers off safe, then I've got to follow 'em my own self. Right?"

"Correct, feller. You being laid up like this is bad medicine. Where's Fargo?"

"Thirty miles west. County seat. Hartville ain't so much. You goin' south with me?"

"I reckon not. I should, of course; I figured on it. But I sort of hate to let this feller Hardy run me out. He ran the crooked work down below, Jeff Campbell being the brains. Looks like they got a sweet bunch."

"You ain't a Ranger any more,"

Dwight urged. "Forget it. If I get away, then you've beat 'em out, ain't you? An' besides, remember why you quit the service—to save your folks worry. If you go run your head into a trap up here, you do nobody any good."

"Never mind; I quit bein' ten years old quite a while back," said Sam Barr.

"But I got a bum knee, feller. I need company. I can ride all right if I take it easy."

"Save your breath," said Barr. "Where's the nearest railroad point?"

"Fargo. Spur line runs from there down to the S. P. One train a day."

"Take it. I'll go that far with you, anyhow. What time of day?"

"Along about sunup."

"All right. If those papers get through and you don't, then your estate gets the ranch; better make out your will and send it along with the papers. We got to check off the Hartville post office, I reckon. We can't take a chance on carrying the papers with us. Where else could Jane mail 'em from?"

Dwight considered. Despite the lazy drawl and curt speech of Barr, he had been much impressed by the morning's incidents. Finding himself slated to be killed was no joke. Had not Barr arrived the previous night, he himself would now be stretched out with a rifle-bullet in him.

"No place, dang it," he rejoined at length, with a worried frown. "Not within reach, that is. There's the Half-way, a hotel halfway up Bottleglass Mountain. If we could get up there late this afternoon before the stage comes in, they'd take the letter and put it in their mailbag and it'd go through all right. Or Jane might do it fine."

"When you goin' to meet her this mornin'?" queried Barr.

"About ten. You are, that is. I ain't. If I got to do any riding, then I'd better save this here leg."

"All right." Barr nodded. "Where's your horse?"

HIS friend jerked his head, in a vague gesture.

"Under the shed. Ain't fed him yet."

"I'll do that. Rig out there too?"

"Yeah. Say, ain't you scared that horse you got will be recognized?"

"No quicker than I'll be," and Barr laughed shortly. "Or you. What's your rifle? Good; same caliber as mine. Give

me some of those cartridges."

"You fixin' for war?"

"War?" Barr's eyes glowed. "You'd better believe it. And then some. If you weren't crippled I'd strike out north, ride a hundred miles around, do anything! By gosh, this here looks like plain suicide to me."

"Shucks!" Dwight stared at him. "You're feeling ornery. They ain't goin' to so much devilment for the sake of a little old five-thousand acre ranch."

"Yeah? I didn't tell you the ranch and the stock on it are worth close to sixty thousand—that includes only part of the stock. One feller told me it came closer to a hundred thousand all told. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

This information finished Chuck Dwight's doubts for good and all, left him dazed and astounded. His bantering ceased. He began to realize the actual situation, which until now must have seemed unreasonable indeed to a large extent.

Barr brought in the two horses, and Dwight offered no protest at the rolls strapped on behind. There was nothing here to worry over leaving—especially with such a gamble in sight. Dwight got into the saddle with some assistance, and they were off.

They followed the brush line of the creek for an hour, at unhurried pace. Then Dwight drew rein and pointed ahead.

"See that fence line yonder? That's where the YB hits my range. She aims to meet us there at the fence. They got a trail down along the creek; she'll most likely come that way. But we got a spell to wait."

"Hop off and rest your leg, then. You can enjoy the scenery."

When he had made Dwight comfortable, Barr took the rifle from his boot, inspected it, and went to the fence.

"See you later," he called back. "I'm playin' a hunch. Lay low."

Once through the fence, he went into the brush beyond, found a faint trail and then hit off away from it. He settled down to wait, with Indian patience. If he was wrong, he would be out nothing.

He had waited a long time, when Jane Campbell came.

Barr peered through the cover, his blue eyes narrowed to slits as he sighted her. Something had happened. She had a slicker-roll strapped back of her sad-

dle and rode with head high, eyes ablaze, a flush in her cheeks.

Then she was past and riding on. Barr cocked his rifle and sank back. He had chosen his ground well, if his hunch were correct. He had a fair view of the trail by the creek, almost to the fence-line.

Suddenly he started, froze, every sense acute. Something was moving back there on the trail. It developed into the figure of a man, leading his horse, coming cautiously along. Neither Jeff Campbell nor Joe Hardy, to Barr's intense disappointment, but a stranger: a young fellow with a vicious, slanting face, nondescript costume, and gun tied down about his thigh ready for instant action, an ominous sign.

Those beady, glittering eyes peered ahead and reminded Barr of the eyes of a snake. Halting abruptly, the stranger fastened his horse to a tree. A YB horse, from the brand. Then he plucked out his gun and stole forward.

He had caught sight of Jane and Chuck Dwight at the line fence, no doubt.

Sam Barr waited grimly.

The slinking rascal halted. An unholy grin of exultation spread across his face. Staring at the scene ahead, he brought out his .45, clicked back the hammer with his thumb, lifted the weapon for steady aim.

The explosion of Sam Barr's rifle split the morning stillness. A scream burst from the assassin as his gun fell. He whipped around, his right arm dangling, caught sight of Barr standing there, and plunged headlong into the brush.

SAM BARR stepped out, loosened the horse and took it in tow. He heard a shout from Dwight, and made re-

sponse, reassuringly. After a moment he came upon the two of them, standing at the fence. The girl had brought a wire-cutter, with which Dwight had snipped the strands to make an opening.

"What's up?" demanded Dwight.

"Nothin'." Barr met the girl's startled, questioning eyes and smiled. "Winged a feller and took his horse. Mornin', Jane! Maybe you know a young jigger with snaky eyes and a spotted blue handkerchief?"

"Yes!" she broke in quickly. "He came back from town with Uncle Jeff last night and stayed. I don't know his name."

"Don't matter," said Barr. "He's got a smashed arm and is safe for a while." "He'd been trailing you, just like I had a hunch somebody might. No time for palaver now; we got to be moving out of here. How far you ridin' with us?"

"All the way," she said quickly. "The letter's safe."

"All right. Let's go; looks like we take the road for Fargo. I'll take this horse along for a ways, so that skunk back yonder will have to walk. Come on, Chuck."

He got Dwight into the saddle, stowed away the long wire-cutter for future use, and after a moment the three of them were riding away, with the YB horse following. They went across the creek and headed for the mountains that guarded the western sky.

"You shore look like storm warnings were cut," Barr observed, closing in beside Jane. "We've decided to head for Fargo and get Chuck on a train there. Got anything better to suggest?"

"No," she rejoined. "That suits me, too. I'm going to visit a friend of mine at Alamitos. I was goin' next week but I'm goin' now." [Turn page]

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"Ain't got your trunk along," said Dwight. She tossed her head with a laugh.

"Don't need one, thanks. Well, I might as well give you the bad news. Uncle Jeff suspected something. He'd heard about the wagon and so forth, and of course I didn't conceal that I'd been over to your place, Chuck. We had it hot and heavy, I can tell you. Then another scene this morning. Dad took my part and Uncle Jeff got ugly, and I hit him twice."

"Huh? You hit him?" repeated Barr. "My gosh! What with?"

"My hand, silly. He came for me as though he meant business—trying to find out about Dwight and whether I'd seen anyone else around, and so forth. I got scared that Mother would get her dander up and then Dad would get hurt. Well, I decided to clear out, that's all, for a week's visit down at Alamitos. It might save trouble."

"You're in bad company," said Dwight.

"And glad of it."

Sam Barr met her eyes for an instant, and read deep things in her gaze.

"Gosh, Jane!" he said gently. "Wish I could help! Maybe I can. What's that feller got on your dad, anyhow?"

She bit her lip and looked away.

"I hate to talk about it, but no use trying to keep covered up, I guess. Bound to end in tragedy sometime. If I had had a gun, I think I'd have shot Uncle Jeff this morning. A long time ago poor Dad was desperate for money and signed Uncle Jeff's name to a check, and admitted it in a letter to him!"

"The skunk calls it forgery, huh?" said Barr, as she paused. "And has held it over your dad ever since, huh? Yeah; that'd be about his style, all right. Well, next time you meet up with him, you'll be fixed. Take this for a souvenir."

She accepted the gun he extended, a small, beautifully finished weapon, with carved bone plates on the grip.

"Where'd you get it, Texas man?"

"That young feller back there dropped it. We'll get you a belt for it later on, maybe. Hope you know where we are?"

"She knows more about this country than an Injun," said Dwight. "We're cutting across to reach an old wagon-road that'll take us into the Fargo road at the foot of the Bottleglass grade. Get there maybe the middle of the afternoon, and the Halfway Hotel by dark."

"That stage house?" The girl's eyes widened. "Heavens! That old dump used to be a regular robbers' roost years ago. It's plenty tough even nowadays—mostly a drinking and gambling place. The stage business doesn't amount to much; a change of horses."

Sam Barr shrugged. "We ain't aimin' to camp there, so cheer up. Want to get that letter mailed there, savvy? If it don't get through, Chuck will, and vice versa. You can hand in the letter and we'll move on. Chances are fair that we'll be ahead of any trouble, unless somebody's planted there to block the road."

"Nice horse you got. Find him wandering loose? And the hat, too?"

Dwight grinned at them. "Feller donated 'em early this morning, Jane. Real nice gent from Texas he was. Public-spirited and generous. He wanted to give us a thousand dollars, too, but we figured we didn't need money, us being rich. A nice feller with whiskers."

"I've seen that hat before." The girl eyed it sharply. "Why, the man who was with Hardy wore it! Yesterday, when they wanted to search the wagon and I pretty near used the whip on him! I remember that snakeskin band on the hat. You say he was at your place this morning?"

"Still is," Barr drawled. "Thousand dollars reward on him down South. We didn't want it."

"Oh!" she said, looked at him for a moment, then looked away. "I see."

Barr flinched a little at her words, and the look in her eyes.

IV

LATE in the afternoon, three hilarious cowpunchers came riding down the twisting, winding grades. They greeted Dwight with recognition, greeted Jane Campbell with awkward delight, greeted Barr and his mount with curious stares, and went their way without even pausing.

"Three riders from the Hashknife outfit," commented the girl.

"And if anybody asks 'em, they've sure seen us," Dwight added.

"When does the stage from Hartville come along?" demanded Sam Barr.

"Hits the Halfway place about dark, for supper and a change of horses,"

Dwight rejoined. "Not to mention a couple of drinks for the driver. He's a funny old galoot."

"Who keeps the hotel?"

Dwight grimaced. "Annie—Wildcat Annie they call her. I don't know her last name. She's an old hellcat for sure. Dresses like a man and acts like one. Her husband died last year. They were old-timers out here and a tough pair."

"Pleasant company you keep," Barr commented. Jane Campbell gave him a glance.

"At least," she said, "they're straightforward about things. So's Uncle Jeff. "Meaning I'm not?" Barr asked without evasion.

"I don't know. What are you in this whole thing for, if you don't enjoy it? What are you getting out of it? Just the chance to shoot other men?"

Barr flushed under his bronze. Chuck Dwight stared at them in utter amazement.

"My gosh, what's the spitting all about?" he demanded.

"Schoolteacher notions," snapped Barr. The girl's eyes flashed.

"Indeed! Then you are in this just for the game!"

"If you think so, suit yourself," Barr replied coldly. "I got more to do than educate you out of half-baked silly-girl ideas. It's about time you had a grown woman's slant on things."

"Oh!" White with anger, the girl drew rein. "Silly girl, am I? Sam Barr, I'd like to—oh! Never mind. If it wasn't for helping out Chuck, I'd drop this whole thing here and now. Anyhow, I won't ride another step with a man who has that low an opinion of me. I'm going on. Chuck, want to come with me or not?"

"My gosh, Jane!" Dwight shoved back his hat, surveying her in dismay. "You ain't quitting us?"

"I'm going on and I'll mail that letter at the Halfway place as I pass. Coming or not?"

"I reckon not," said Dwight.

"So long, then."

She slapped her horse, touched him with her spurs, and rode away from them without a backward look. Barr, silent, rolled a cigarette. Dwight turned to him, after watching her out of sight around the next bend.

"What in time got into her?"

"Thinks I'm just a killer," said Barr.

"Aw, shucks! She'd ought to know better than that. Why did you fly out at her?"

The blue eyes flashed for an instant, but Barr only shrugged and struck a match.

"Darn women's notions anyhow," said Dwight, with a worried frown. "We hadn't ought to have let her go on alone, dang it. That Halfway place is no place for her."

"Go on and catch up with her," said Barr. "I'll follow along as rear-guard."

"You and me stick," Dwight declared.

They rode on, but saw no more of Jane Campbell than a moving dot at intervals of the winding road as it mounted the steep slopes ahead. The afternoon died out.

IT was slow progress up the grade, especially toward the summit. Dense masses of pines clad the slopes shaggily. The sun was down behind the mountain-flanks when Chuck Dwight waved his hand, pointing ahead.

"There's the last rise, feller. That joint lays up at the summit—half a mile yet. Hope she waits for us there."

"Anybody else live there?"

"Nope. Lots of folks in the hills, though. Always somebody hanging around the place. Had we better go on together?"

"Why not? Still, might be as well. Let me go on ahead. I'll stop in and make sure Jane's come and gone. If there's any fuss, you ride for Fargo."

"Huh? I will not!"

"You loco horntoad, I'm in this game to shove you through!" snapped Barr angrily. "You'd be no good to anybody with your game leg. Do as I say."

Dwight nodded sullenly, and Barr pushed on without more ado.

The long final rise was sharp, straight and tree-masked. On the summit, a huge swinging pole painted white barred the way. This was a toll-road. On the right, set back a little from the road, was an enormous, ramshackle structure whose weather-beaten sign indicated the Halfway Hotel.

In front was a hitchrack where several horses were standing. One of them was Jane Campbell's horse.

Barr went to the hotel entrance, thrust it open, and walked in.

No sign of Jane here. A counter was at the rear, a grille before it. Behind

the counter an elderly woman with seamed, deeply lined features and stabbing black eyes. In front of it, a man who held a long envelope in both hands, in the very act of tearing it open at one end. Barr recognized the envelope instantly. The girl had posted it, then. This man was a stranger to him!

Sam Barr wasted no time on talk.

As the man half turned to glance at him, Barr lashed out. So sudden and vicious was the blow that it gave no warning whatever. Barr's fist sank in just above the sagging gun-belt, his weight behind the blow. The man staggered back against the wall, dropping the envelope. He struck and rebounded into another crack that took him on the point of the jaw—a crushing smash, turning him half around and dropping him, to lie sprawled and senseless.

All done in an instant. Sam Barr stooped and picked up the envelope. As he came erect, he looked into the muzzle of a shotgun extended through the opening of the grille, the savage black eyes over it.

"Up, stranger!" crackled the woman's voice. "Or I'll blow yore fool head off!"

Barr looked into the seamed lined features, into the stabbing black eyes.

"So you're Wildcat Annie, are you?" he said. "Watch your step, woman. You turned over this letter to that feller—caught you in the act. Never mind that scattergun; you ain't using it. Where's Miss Campbell? Speak up and do it quick!"

There was a silence. Consternation and startled dismay fought in the face of Wildcat Annie. Suddenly Barr broke into a laugh, and his blue eyes twinkled in warm friendly fashion.

"Why, ma'am, it's all right," he drawled easily, to complete her uncertainty and confusion. Swift as a flash, his hand thrust the shotgun barrel aside, and he crowded forward to peer into her face.

"So Jeff Campbell had you all primed, did he? Well, ma'am, I'd sure hate to have to use force against a woman, but after killin' Jeff I wouldn't worry none about you. If you don't speak up right quick, I'll take you and your outfit apart, and the hotel into the bargain. Where's Miss Campbell?"

The old woman, wildcat or not, knew when a man meant business.

"She—she's in the back room," came her hoarse accents. "You say you done killed him? Then you must be that feller Barr."

"Yeah, I'm him," said Barr. "Give me that gun. Come out of there and show me where Miss Campbell is, and move fast."

She offered no resistance as he took the gun from her and thrust it to one side.

"All right," she said, sniffing. "I didn't mean no harm."

Barr knew better. That man holding the letter had revealed everything. He must be one of Jeff Campbell's men. The road had been blocked. And Jane had no sooner handed over the letter for posting, than—what? Decoyed, trapped somewhere in this ancient shack.

Barr went to the open door and looked out to see Dwight sitting his horse at the white pole across the road.

"Ride on, you fool!" he called angrily.

"Ain't got wings," rejoined Chuck Dwight. Sam Barr swung around to the woman, who was coming out from behind her post office counter.

"Go swing that bar and do it quick," he ordered. "We ain't paying toll. What room is Jane in?"

The old woman pointed down a corridor.

"First door," she said in a whine. "Here's the key."

Barr caught it from her and then turned down the corridor. Another room off to the left was evidently the hotel office. It was empty. He glanced over his shoulder to see the white barrier swinging aside and Dwight riding on. Evidently the old crone had given in without a struggle. When it came to killing or being killed, she backed down.

"Jane!" His voice lifted as he came to the first door. He caught faint response, but not from this room. She was farther down the hall. Wildcat Annie had lied to him. With an oath, he strode on.

"Where are you? Speak up, Jane!"

"Look out, Sam—look out!" Her voice came sharp and clear, shrill, frantic. Then it was cut short and muffled.

THE corridor was dark, for the daylight was fading rapidly by this time. With the envelope thrust inside his shirt, Barr jerked out his gun, found a door standing ajar, and kicked it open.

A blast of flame answered him, the roar of an exploding shotgun almost in his face. He threw himself forward with one leap, became mixed up in a mass of wires, and with a wild and frantic feeling of chaos, went plunging down across a shotgun fastened in a vise.

As he floundered, the hair rose on his neck with horror. A shrill, cackling voice sounded beside him. He was dimly aware of hands at his throat, and flung them off, struck out with the gun still in his grip, felt it hit something. That cackling laughter ended in a shrill cry, there was a patter of feet, then silence. He groped around and found himself all alone.

"Sam! Oh, Sam! Where are you?"

It was Jane's voice from somewhere close at hand. Barr gained his feet, groped in the obscurity, stumbled against a door, and it opened to his hand. Another room, whose window admitted fading daylight. He saw Jane Campbell sitting in a chair by the window, motionless.

"Well?" he demanded, trying to get his bearings. "Come on out of this!"

"I can't, Sam. Help me! He tied me in a chair."

"Who did?"

"That dreadful old fellow—her brother, I think he is. He fixed up a trap with a shotgun. He said every room here was fixed that way. I tried to warn you and he—he choked me!"

Barr was fumbling at strips of cloth that tied her ankles and wrists to the chair. He was suddenly conscious of a tramp of feet, of loud voices; he closed the door hurriedly.

"What is this place anyhow?" Barr demanded. "There. Got your gun?"

"I lost it," she confessed. With a feeling of wild delight, Barr was aware that she was clinging to him.

Barr held her tightly for a moment. "I saved the letter anyhow. Chuck has ridden on. We got to get out of here somehow. Let's have a look at that window."

He tried it, flung it open, just as a tramp of feet came from the adjoining room. Without hesitation, he jerked up his gun and fired at the door, twice. Yells, oaths, and a wild scramble ensued.

"Quick! Out with you."

"Going," she panted, halfway through the window. "All right. It's a short drop. Come on!"

Barr followed, fell among thick brush. A breath of relief escaped him.

"Here's a trail. Come along." Holding Jane by the hand, Sam Barr found the trail and guided her into it. "I'm scared Chuck won't keep going," he muttered to her. "It'd be like him to come back and see what was wrong. We'd better get our horses, get after him, and see him on his way. Here, you take the letter again. Mail the danged thing at Fargo, if you get there. Don't matter, if Chuck gets through, but I ain't so sure he will."

He hurried her along the path, then checked her abruptly. A door directly ahead of them had opened, emitting a stream of light. Two men stood there. One spoke excitedly.

"Naw. Nothin' stirrin' out here. I tell you, he half killed Bill! Reckon that shotgun missed him. The gal's gone too. The old woman says a fellow rode on through—she swung the bar for him. If that was Dwight, we got to nail him or Jeff will sure as the devil kill us."

"Leave Jeff find it out his own self," said the other man. "Let's get after them two. They're out here somewheres. Let Bill do the reporting, when he's able."

The speakers plunged out. Barr crouched, holding Jane close, as the two went crashing away.

"What now?" she breathed. "Which way?"

"We're around at the back. Heard what they said, didn't you? Your Uncle Jeff's on the stage. We got to get off. They ain't after Dwight yet. Got to warn him, savvy? Looks like this door might go through to the bar—take a chance! Come on!"

He rose, leaving her to follow him into the building, which she did.

AN untidy sleeping room with a lamp on the table. An open door, with light beyond. A shrill, excited voice. Another room at one end of the bar.

Standing back, Sam Barr took a cautious look. The bartender was lighting lamps. A scrawny, gabbling old man was cackling away excitedly to Wildcat Annie. They stood at the other end of the bar. Otherwise, the place was empty. "Come on," said Barr, and walked out, gun in hand.

At sight of him, the old crone straightened up with a gasp. Barr now saw that she wore man's apparel. The cackling

old caricature of a man beside her took one look at Barr, let out a shrill yell, and dived for shelter through another doorway. Stalking across to the outer door, Barr was aware of Jane following him closely. He stepped outside and found himself almost at the hitchrack. The gray-haired bartender stared at them slack-jawed, evidently not to be feared.

"Climb aboard," Sam Barr directed. "I'll be right along. Got the letter safe?"

"Yes," she responded, and slipped past him. She was down the steps and at the hitchrack. "The gate's open," she exclaimed excitedly.

Inside, Wildcat Annie had begun a frantic screaming. As the girl mounted and swung her horse toward the road, Sam Barr descended the steps and jumped for the horses.

A shot crashed out from the building. Barr felt the wind of the bullet, heard the deathly thud as it smacked into the horse before him. The animal erupted in frantic plunging. Another shot.

Sam Barr felt himself knocked sideward, then everything ended in a shower of stardust.

V

TWO men were talking. Barr lay quiet, comfortable enough except for the ache in his head. He did not try to open his eyes.

"Lucky thing that horse kicked him and knocked him out. I'm going on by stage, soon as it's ready."

"But what about that feller Chuck Dwight?" asked another voice. "And the gal?"

"They've gone on, sure, but the stage gits to Fargo ahead of 'em. And I'll go with the stage. And when they drift in to Fargo half an hour or so later, I'll be there with bells on, savvy?"

"I don't savvy," grumbled the other. "Why do we stay here with this gent?"

"Play your hand, Hardy. Here, give me a drink."

Hardy, eh? So this was the other man. "Now," went on Jeff Campbell, "this old rats' nest of a place, and the old rats in it, ain't to be depended on. You know that from seeing 'em. We want no more fuss with this feller Barr."

"I aim to settle him."

"Correct—but not in public, you fool," crackled the dominant voice. "You and Bill stay here. Feed him this coffee—

that'll settle him. Play deputy sheriff—he's your prisoner. Take him along toward Fargo and lose him. We don't give a darn what happens up in this country; once rid of him and of Dwight, we'll head back for Texas and all be on easy street."

"I get you," assented Hardy. "Well, then, what about the girl? You know what you promised me."

"I know, Joe, I know," came Campbell's reply. "That's all set. She's gone to visit a friend of hers. Won't be missed for ten days or so. But let me tell you, she's one hellcat!"

"I know that," growled Hardy. "Me, I tame hellcats, Jeff. But how's it goin' to be worked, huh? You aim to head 'em off, you and the other two boys—don't you?"

"They won't never get into Fargo," said Jeff Campbell. "Leave that to me."

Sam Barr ventured a look about. He had never encountered Hardy personally until the other day near Hartville, and knew little about the man. One cautious glance showed him Hardy and Jeff Campbell sitting at a table three feet away. He closed his eyes again on the instant.

That glimpse of the two men was etched into his brain. Hardy, black-browed, resolute, long-jawed; Jeff Campbell, long and lean, red-haired.

"So I was right about the letter they're sending out," Campbell said. "Ain't on Barr; he must have given it to Jane again. If we didn't need Bill so bad, I'd take the hide off him for messing things up the way he done. We got to stop the man and the letter both."

"Better to put a bullet into this hombre here and now."

"No; lose him in the woods. I'll give out that him and Jane have run off together; it'll help cover up everything."

"Fine," approved Hardy. "Danged if you ain't got a brain, Jeff!"

"Go wake that galoot up. I want a word with him before I go."

Hardy gripped Sam Barr and shook him. He was lying on a cot; when Hardy finished with him, he was sitting up, his head in his hands, engulfed in a wave of pain.

"Hold up your head, you coyote!" growled Hardy, and slapped him heavily. "Here's a gent to see you."

With an effort Sam Barr looked up at Jeff Campbell, who, grimly amused, was

watching him intently.

"This time, Barr, you aren't getting away till we're done with you," Campbell said. "Where's Dwight?"

"Gone on to Fargo, I reckon," mumbled Barr.

"Yeah. What's that niece of mine barging into this business for?"

"She told you that herself, didn't she? When she put her fist into your face this morning?"

A spasm of fury transformed Jeff Campbell's face into a livid mask.

"So she told you about that, huh? Barr, you been in my way quite a while. What are you gettin' out of it if Dwight gets that ranch?"

"Nothing," said Barr.

"Don't lie to me. You ain't in this for your health." Campbell looked suddenly at Hardy. "Clear out of here and shut the door. Go find Bill and be ready to take over when I call you."

HARDY strode out, and the door slammed. Campbell whipped out a gun and held it on the table before him.

"Barr, I got a proposition to make you. I got money, as you maybe know. Once I get that ranch, I'm setting pretty for life."

He paused. Barr managed a faint grin.

"You're a longer ways from gettin' it than you figure, maybe."

"And maybe not. But I got you—and you know what Hardy'll do to you if I let him. Here's your chance. Throw in with me. I'll ditch him and the rest of the outfit and start clean down there. You and me together can whip the world, Barr. You get ten thousand in cash right away, and manager of the ranch under me. Think it over."

That the man meant his words to the letter was shown by his intent gaze, his low, earnest voice—by his offer, indeed.

"I sort of like that niece of yours, Jeff," said Barr slowly.

"Yeah? I'll put her into the jackpot," said Jeff Campbell quickly. "She has taken Joe Hardy's eye, but no matter. She's yours if you want her!"

Sam Barr laughed shakily.

"You got me wrong, Jeff," he rejoined. "I do like Jane, sure. I like her so much I'd hate to have her think me an ornery lowdown rotten skunk like yourself. Hope I make the matter plain?"

The pale eyes glittered with a deadly light.

"Yeah. All right, it's your funeral, feller."

A hammering came at the door. It was flung open and Hardy appeared.

"Stage is ready to leave, Jeff," exclaimed Hardy. "Our three men are aboard and they're waiting for you."

"All right, push it through!"

Campbell rose, and without another look at Sam Barr, was gone. Hardy went with him. The man Bill came into the room, gun in hand, and gave Barr a malevolent glance. His jaw was swollen.

"You sidewinder, I'd like to blow your brains out!" he growled.

Barr made no response. Voices, the crack of a whip, the rattle of wheels—the stage was off.

After a moment Hardy swaggered in.

"Now, by gosh, I got you where I want you!" he declared.

"And Jeff ready to throw you overboard if I'd chip in with him," said Sam Barr quietly. His hope of causing disunion was vain, however.

"Throw me overboard, huh? None of yore lies will work on me, feller. I got his orders in writing on that there Socorro bank job, savvy? Yeah, stowed right away in my holster where he can't get at the letter. It'd send him up anytime he doublecrossed me. But he won't. Bill, keep yore gun on this gent. I'll see about the horses."

Hardy swaggered out. Sam Barr lay back and closed his eyes.

The Socorro bank job! That had been an unsolved mystery of a year's standing. Cashier and teller shot down and the bank looted. No mystery now. Barr's pulses hammered at the realization. Jeff Campbell, safely in the background, had planned the job. And Hardy had the goods on him. And he probably knew it. No wonder Jeff had been willing to pitch Hardy overboard!

There was a quick lithe step, a new voice in the room. Wildcat Annie had come in, bearing a cup and saucer.

"Brought me some coffee?" spoke up Bill. "Thanks."

"Not for you," she snapped. "Fer this poor feller here. Doggone, I feel sorry for any prisoner, I sure do! Here, you drink this coffee. It'll hearten you a lot!"

Barr had his warning about that

coffee. It was drugged.

"Thanks," he said weakly. "Too hot to drink right off. Mighty kind of you, ma'am."

She patted his shoulder and rose. "No hurry, I reckon. It'll do you good."

BARR slumped down. The woman turned to Joe Hardy with a question about payment for his liquor bill. With an oath of surprise, he said that Jeff Campbell had settled. There was a brief altercation which ended in Hardy paying.

With attention thus momentarily diverted from him, Barr gently spilled the hot coffee over the cot.

Wildcat Annie went out. Barr sat up, with a groan, put the cup down.

"Sure tasted good," he observed. "Somebody give me a cigarette."

Bill tossed him papers and tobacco. The other two men spoke together, low-voiced.

"Less'n five minutes, Jeff said," came in Hardy's growl. "If that old witch slipped up, I'll skin her alive."

Having lighted his cigarette, Sam Barr eased himself back on the cot and blinked at his two captors.

"You jaspers," he stated amiably, "only made one mistake. If—if yuh'd got that there wad of money that was hid in—in my saddle pocket—my gosh, I'm terrible sleepy! I'll just rest my eyes a minute."

His voice trailed off in a grumble of words. His arm fell over the edge of the cot. The cigarette dropped from his limp fingers.

Hardy picked up the fallen cigarette and with a sudden prod jammed it against Sam Barr's throat. For an instant Barr did not move. Then he twitched his head, mumbled something, and ended in a snore. Satisfied, Hardy straightened up.

"He'll keep. Look over his saddle later on. Right now, we'd better get off with him and be on our way. I'll fetch the hosses and a rope to tie him on with. You stick here. Don't go to fumbling around or you're liable to come on that old fool and one of his shotgun traps."

To his blank dismay, Sam Barr found himself as helpless as ever.

True, he was accounted down and out. But at his first move, before he could get across the room to where Bill sat, he would have a bullet smashing through

him. Through meshed eyelids, Barr watched him and lay motionless, but with desperation rising in him.

A cackle of shrill laughter resounded from somewhere. Bill jerked around nervously, and his fingers fiddled with his gun.

Then a low, startled gasp came from his lips.

He was looking up, at the window above Sam Barr. He came up out of his chair, his unshaven face suddenly white, his eyes distended, his jaw falling. He stood there, frozen stiff with terror of something that was out of Sam Barr's sight.

But Barr cared nothing about the cause of that terror. His moment had come—and he seized it. His muscles gathered and ready, he was off the cot and on his feet, and hurtling at the other man.

VI

BARR landed with both fists and feet. His weight knocked Bill sprawling. For an instant Sam Barr paused to clear his eyes. In that instant the other man, coming to one elbow, dragged out his gun. Then Barr was into him, mercifully. It was not pretty; but it was efficient. Before that savage assault the man went to pieces. A boot under the jaw rocked back his head and stretched him senseless.

Sam Barr picked up the fallen gun, staggered around, and looked up at the little window.

The white face of Jane Campbell was staring in at him, eyes dilated, mouth half open, like some unearthly apparition. With that, he caught her voice and realized that half the pane of glass was broken out.

"Quick, Sam! Come around in front!"

The face vanished.

Barr turned to the door. He gripped the knob—then paused. The quick, heavy tread of Hardy was coming down the hall.

No help for it now. He stepped aside and waited. He wondered grimly how long Jane had been there at the window, what she had overheard. An impatient frown came to his face. Had Dwight returned with her, then? Sheer folly; yet it was just as well, perhaps. Now he could warn them, concoct some measure to circumvent Jeff.

The heavy tread rang close. Under Hardy's hand the door flew back. He strode into the room and then checked himself.

"Up with 'em!"

Hardy's hands lifted. He had already seen the figure in the corner. He swung around, his face black with rage and consternation.

Sam Barr took a forward step, and paused.

"You're done, Hardy; mind your step," he warned. "Higher! That's right. Lucky I ain't your brand of murderer."

"Shoot, blast you!" Hardy spat forth. "Shoot! You haven't got the nerve!"

A torrent of foul abuse poured from him. Sam Barr, more confident now, smiled a little as he stepped forward. He reached out to get the other's gun, leaned forward to grip it.

Hardy's knee whipped up, unsuspected, unseen. It rammed into Sam Barr's abdomen, deflected the ready gun. The explosion roared, the bullet went high. Hardy's hand flashed down like things of steel.

Half-crippled by that knee-punch, his head knocked back by a ripping right to the jaw, Barr staggered. He fired, and fired again, desperate, with blind, instinctive aim, as he half fell against the wall. He leaned there, his gaze clearing.

Hardy had his gun out, but could not lift it. His hand sagged. His head fell forward, and he drooped over, sprawling down on his face. Both bullets had passed through his body.

Barr turned away, gun falling from his hand as he reached for the door. It eluded him. He caught at it, held himself from falling, then he remembered something. He needed a gun. That of Hardy was unused.

He got the man's belt and holster off, buckled the belt on over his own belt, thrust the gun into the holster.

With a subdued groan, he came erect and staggered out into a dark hallway. He must get out in front. Jane was waiting there for him. He emerged into the cold night air.

"Hey, Jane! Jane!"

Her voice made response, anxious, urgent. He stumbled blindly. After a moment he felt her hand, knew she was beside him.

"All right," he exclaimed, himself for a moment. "Where's Chuck?"

"Down the road. When the stage went

past, his horse was frightened and hit a tree. I couldn't get him back in the saddle again."

Barr repressed a groan, then was climbing into a saddle. He felt the girl tugging at him.

"Sam! Those shots? What happened?"

A hoarse laugh came from him. "Just couldn't repress my instincts. Come on, no more talk."

"You're hurt, Sam?"

"Kind of sick. Lead my hoss."

HE reeled in the saddle, clung desperately to the horn. The lights of the Halfway Hotel were swallowed up behind.

He was aware of her voice beside him.

"Couldn't go on without you, Texas man. I made Chuck keep quiet by coming back to take a look. He hurt his knee when he fell off. He was crying—not from pain, but from anger at himself. He thinks he's let you down. He's furious about it. Hang on, now. We turn off here. Oh, Chuck! All right?"

"Yeah!" came the quick, eager response. "Where's Sam? Who was shoot-in'?"

"Shut up, galoot," responded Barr, with an effort. "We're comin'."

In among the trees at last, Dwight's horse was tied, Dwight himself lay half propped up. Barr started to dismount, and choked back a groan. He turned it into a caricature of a laugh as he came to earth and let himself drop near Dwight.

"Hit?" asked Dwight in a low voice. Jane was tying the horses.

"Nope. Hardy give me a knee punch. Then mighty near knocked my head off. Got to rest for a spell."

"Anybody after you?"

"Nope." Barr's grim intonation told its own story.

Jane came over and sat beside them.

"How long were you up there?" he asked her.

"Quite a while." She was silent for a moment. "Twice. At that same window. I went back and joined Chuck just before the stage left. That's when he fell off. Then I went back."

Barr closed his eyes. He was feeling better already. The girl's hand touched his forehead. She was wiping away the sweat. After a little she spoke, gently.

"Sam. You know there's a whole lot I never realized." Her voice was low, distinct with emotion. "I never stopped to figure things out, I guess. I never ran up against men like—well, like Hardy. I didn't understand what Uncle Jeff was really like, until I heard him talking to you tonight!"

"Gosh!" exclaimed Sam Barr. "You were outside then?"

"That was the first time, yes. Before you woke up, and when you were talking with him. What you said about me was nice."

Barr grunted uneasily. "By golly, you shouldn't have listened to talk like that."

"Good thing I did. It woke me up. I know now that you were right this morning when you called me a silly, half-baked girl."

"I never did!"

"It was true, anyhow. I'm sort of humble about it, Texas man."

Barr put up his hand, found her fingers in the darkness, and clung to them. After a minute Dwight spoke up, plaintively:

"Perhaps I'm plain dumb, but as I lay here a-lookin' at the stars and tryin' my darndest not to mix in other folks' business, I got a sort of idea that there's a whole lot I don't savvy. About Uncle Jeff, for instance. If he's up yonder, alive and kickin', why kill time?"

"He ain't," said Barr. "He went to Fargo on the stage. Three of his gang went along!"

"Holy smoke! No wonder I fell off my horse."

Barr broke into a laugh, and recounted what had happened, or enough of it to relieve Dwight's curiosity. And then from the road came the rapid drum of hoofbeats.

"That's Hardy's friend Bill, gone to tell Jeff what's happened," Barr said. "Which gives Jeff four men to help him block the road."

"Shucks! It's only fifteen miles on to Fargo," said Dwight. "Those gents will have to get horses in town and ride on back to meet us. When Jeff finds what's happened up here, he's liable to come straight back up the road. We'd ought to be able to miss him easy."

"The moon's close to full, and will be up in an hour or so," put in Jane. "If we're going ahead, we'd better move."

Barr came to his feet. "All right. Come on, Chuck."

So the decision was reached.

Not easily, however. Barr was stiff and sore and tender, but made light of his condition. The gun in his holster—ah! He shoved the gun into his own belt, took off that of Hardy, and struck a match. He remembered now why he had brought that extra belt.

Or had Hardy lied? There was nothing here. His touch found only smooth worn leather inside the holster.

Then, holding the match closer, he saw it—an extra patch of thin leather sewed inside.

Reassured, he ripped at it with knife and fingers, tore it away, drew forth a folded paper. He tucked this into a pocket for future reference, and turned to join the others and lend Dwight a hand to get onto his horse.

Once more they headed out toward the road.

VII

AMAZING as it seemed, they had met no one, had sighted no one. Fearing ambush at every bend and shadowed stretch, every precaution taken—all had been useless. It was incredible.

"Jeff ain't the man to be scared off by man or devil," Barr observed. "But Bill may have told them about the face at the window—undoubtedly did. He took it for a ghost. Jeff would know better. With Hardy dead and me loose, he might figger it was safer to lay low, since I'd know all his plan to waylay us. He'd figure that I had only been shammin', of course. Well, looks like all clear for tonight, at least. Jane, you really goin' visitin'? Or do you want to go back home tomorrow after Dwight gets off?"

"I'm going to Alamitos," she responded.

"Then I'll travel, too," said Barr. "How about your horse?"

"The livery will take care of it till I come back."

"Ours too, then. I'll get 'em later—when I come back," and he flung her a quick grin. "For I'll be back, mind! I got reasons."

As the hotel had a stable in connection, they went straight there, passing a dancehall and two saloons which evidently had no closing hours. Uncomfortable in the knowledge that Jeff Campbell must be somewhere in the vicinity,

Barr left the others at the livery and strode into the hotel lobby. This was empty except for a sleepy clerk who shoved the register and a pen at him.

"Not so fast," Barr said amiably. "I was aiming to meet a feller here. Long, lean feller with red hair."

"Ain't seen him," was the response.

"In that case, I'll take a double and a single," rejoined Barr. "Lady in the single." Barr registered for all three. "Where's your sheriff's office here? Or would he be home this time of night?"

The clerk grinned. "He would be but he ain't. His wife's out of town and he's over to the Big Chance, sittin' in a poker game in the back room."

Jane appeared, with Chuck Dwight hobbling after, bringing their few belongings. Barr saw her to her room, said good night, then gave Chuck a hand up the stairs. Their room had a bath, he was glad to see. Chuck flopped on the bed and Barr drew off his boots.

"Leave room for me," he said. "I'll be back after a while and don't want you sprawled all over the bed. So long." He departed abruptly.

The Big Chance was close by. Barr walked in, his blue eyes sweeping the place rapidly, and a breath of relief escaped him. No sign of Jeff or Bill here. He did not know the other three men.

Striding on to the back room, his gaze searched the poker table, the men sitting at it, the men standing or sitting around. He noted the man who wore a sheriff's star. Touched him on the shoulder.

"Want to see you in private, Sheriff."

The other man looked up curiously, then nodded. He led Barr outside the back entry, then turned. "Well?"

Barr identified himself, handed over the folded paper he had carefully kept.

"Ever hear of the Socorro bank job, a year back? Two gents murdered. Here's the written orders to the gang that done it, by the feller behind the job. Name's Jeff Campbell. Know him?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Nope. But the teller of that bank down to Socorro, one of them that was killed, was my nephew. What's Campbell like?"

Barr gave a description. "He ain't alone; got four fellers with him. They come in on the stage from Hartville, but aren't at the hotel. May be anywhere. May be taking the morning train out."

"Ain't likely—I'll promise you that," the sheriff said grimly.

When he came back to the hotel, Barr entered the lobby and stopped, astonished, at sight of Jane. The girl exclaimed quickly:

"Oh! We forgot all about that letter. I was going to the post office."

"Let it go," said Barr. "Chuck will get through. You get to bed and sleep tight. Give me that letter; I'll keep it."

He mounted the stairs, weary but chuckling to himself as he pocketed the letter. Uncle Jeff, he reflected, not only had his guns spiked, but was going to be in some mighty hot water very soon.

He turned in, stiff and sore, but exultant.

WITH a deep sigh of relaxation, Sam Barr closed his eyes and was asleep instantly.

He roused with sleepy protests, struggling against the wakening, struggling with sudden frantic efforts. Unreality—a light flashing into his face, iron hands gripping him down, something strangling about his mouth and nostrils.

Then came reality. The broadening beam of a lamp flaring up, the features of Jeff Campbell rasping orders. Barr stared, incredulous, until he realized that it was true. Campbell; and the man Bill, bruised and savage, and two other men who had just trussed up Chuck Dwight, stifling his frantic oaths with towels knotted about his mouth.

An exclamation broke from Jeff Campbell. He went to the pile of clothes Sam Barr had left on a chair. On top of them lay the letter Barr had taken from Jane. The man caught it up, scrutinized it, broke into a laugh.

He tore the letter across and across, and pocketed the pieces. With a curt gesture of command, he turned to the two men holding Dwight. They lifted him and between them carried him out of the room.

"All right, Bill," said Jeff Campbell. "Nobody to interfere now. Go along and see that it's done proper—and the five thousand's in your pocket. You've got Hardy's job, and see that you don't bungle it like he did. A little ways up the track, and nobody will hear the shot."

"You bet," said Bill, and cast a malvolent look at Barr. "But I'd sooner have the fixin' of *this* gent."

Campbell laughed, and pulled out a chair. "Get along. I'll wait here."

Bill departed, closing the door carefully and tiptoeing down the hall after the other two.

"Sure is queer how things shape up, ain't it?" said Campbell in a casual tone. "That ornery galoot started out by rustling cattle for me, and now he's got Hardy's place—the place you might have had, Barr. Anyhow, I owe you somethin' for ridding me of Joe Hardy. He was getting sort of objectionable." He chuckled thinly.

Barr had been rolled in a blanket, about which a rope had been looped, effectually confining his movements. Strips of towel were tied about his mouth.

Sam Barr strove desperately to speak, to make his incoherent sounds mean something. He might still save Dwight, could he bargain. Life or death hung on a matter of minutes, almost seconds. His efforts were vain.

"I ain't aimin' to do you no hurt," said Campbell, relaxing comfortably and starting work on a cigarette. "No need of that, unless you force me to it, feller."

He held his cigarette over the lamp until it caught, then rose and stepped to the bedside. Reaching out, he twitched at the rope binding Barr's figure, which came loose, then returned to his chair and surveyed the amazed Barr with a grin.

"Sure, git free if yuh like feller. It doesn't matter now if I got to shoot you. In fact, I'd enjoy doin' it."

And as he spoke, Campbell jerked out his gun and laid it in his lap.

For Sam Barr was ridding himself of rope and blanket, sitting up in bed, getting his arms free, plucking at the gag about his face. Hatred swept into his brain—a surge of blind, hot hatred. His eyes went to the chair beside the bed, on which his clothes were piled. His gun-belt hung there—but the holster was empty. Campbell read the glance and chuckled.

"Nope; you can't go for any gun, feller."

Barr got himself free of the gag, worked his jaw.

"Ain't lookin'—for a gun," he said, his tongue dry. "I got—that letter of yours—from Hardy. Stop those fellers. I'll make a dicker with you—tell yuh where those orders fer the Socorro bank job are!"

Campbell came up out of his chair as though on springs.

"You! You got that writing!" he rasped. Gun in hand, Jeff Campbell darted forward to the chair, pawing the clothes there.

Barr gathered himself together. All in a split second of mad impulse. Then Barr's hand jerked one of the pillows into the air, straight at Campbell, and the other followed it. Then he followed the pillows.

INSTINCTIVELY, Campbell ducked. The second pillow spoiled his aim as his gun roared. And with that Barr was upon him bodily, grappling at him, clutching for throat and gunhand, overbalancing him with weight and impetus. Both of them went down and were rolling, thrashing about, on the floor.

Again the gun roared, close enough to sear Barr's hip with the burning powder. Barr's hand clamped on the gun wrist and bore it upward. Campbell was lashing about like a pinioned snake. Barr could only hang on desperately.

The gun struck against a chair and went clattering. With that, Campbell redoubled his efforts, a fury of oaths escaping him as they twisted and fought. Barr was done for, and knew it. The strength had gone out of his sore, hurt body. He clung desperately, frantically.

A cry escaped him. Campbell's head had jerked forward. His teeth caught at Barr's shoulder. Pain lifted Barr into a frenzy. For an instant he whipped the other man about like a doll, drove his head against the wall—then the strength went out of him. Campbell beat him back, escaped from that grappling hold, and with one savage burst of ferocity sent Barr headlong against the iron bed.

Barr struck it full, and collapsed helplessly.

Campbell let out a string of oaths. With one leap he had his gun, and jerked it up. Barr saw it covering him, saw the pale, terrible eyes of murder above it—

"Hold on, Campbell!" said the voice.

Jeff Campbell turned his head. The door had opened and in the opening stood the grizzled sheriff, other men behind him, a double-barreled shotgun leveled.

Campbell stood frozen. His arm fell. Another man came in past the sheriff and plucked out Campbell's gun. Then

another. Next moment Campbell was being forced into a corner and ironed.

"By gosh, feller!" The sheriff helped Barr to gain his feet. "I 'most got here too late."

"Quick, quick!" Barr caught frantically at him. "Dwight—my partner—they've taken him out to kill him. Up the railroad track. Move, man! Get after 'em!"

"No need, I reckon," and the sheriff chuckled. "We spotted these fellers before they come in the hotel. We grabbed the others down below. Your partner ain't hurt, neither, only he can't walk. That's how come we were so slow gittin' here."

The corridor outside was filled with shapes, with voices, with excitement. Through it came the figure of Jane Campbell, hastily dressed, excited and

anxious. She fought her way into the room and then paused, aghast.

"Texas man! You're not hurt?"

She stood staring. Then she caught at the sheriff.

"Where is he? Where's Sam Barr, hear me? Is he hurt? That man there—"

"My gosh!" exclaimed the sheriff, looking about. "Hey, Barr! Where'd you go to?"

Sam Barr's voice lifted plaintively. "Under the bed. Durn it, somebody throw me my pants!"

There was a yell of laughter. Guffaws rose loud and high. Even Jane Campbell broke into a tremulous laugh, as the room rocked with mirthful voices.

But Jeff Campbell, with bracelets on his wrists and the certainty of a long future waiting him, did not so much as smile.



"Brand that Calf Diamond Bar — or Draw!"

THAT was the demand made by Bull Tothero, the Diamond Bar foreman—but young ranch owner Lance Larrabee wasn't inclined to obey. "Just a minute, Tothero," he said calmly. "Last I knew, this calf was following after one of my handsome Box L cows."

The big foreman growled ominously. "You won't get far—trying to claim a steer that belongs to Miss Dace!"

"I don't care if it belongs to an angel," said Lance. "Miss Dace has plenty of cattle without taking mine."

Tothero's hand dropped to his gun. He fired once—but before he could shoot again, Larrabee had yanked him from his saddle, torn the gun out of his hand. And the two men mixed in a wild flurry of slugging, sledge-hammer blows. It was a desperate fight—and it was but the opening skirmish in a range dispute that will hold you breathless as you follow the fortunes of Lance Larrabee and "Ginger" Dace in a novel packed with color and action from start to finish!

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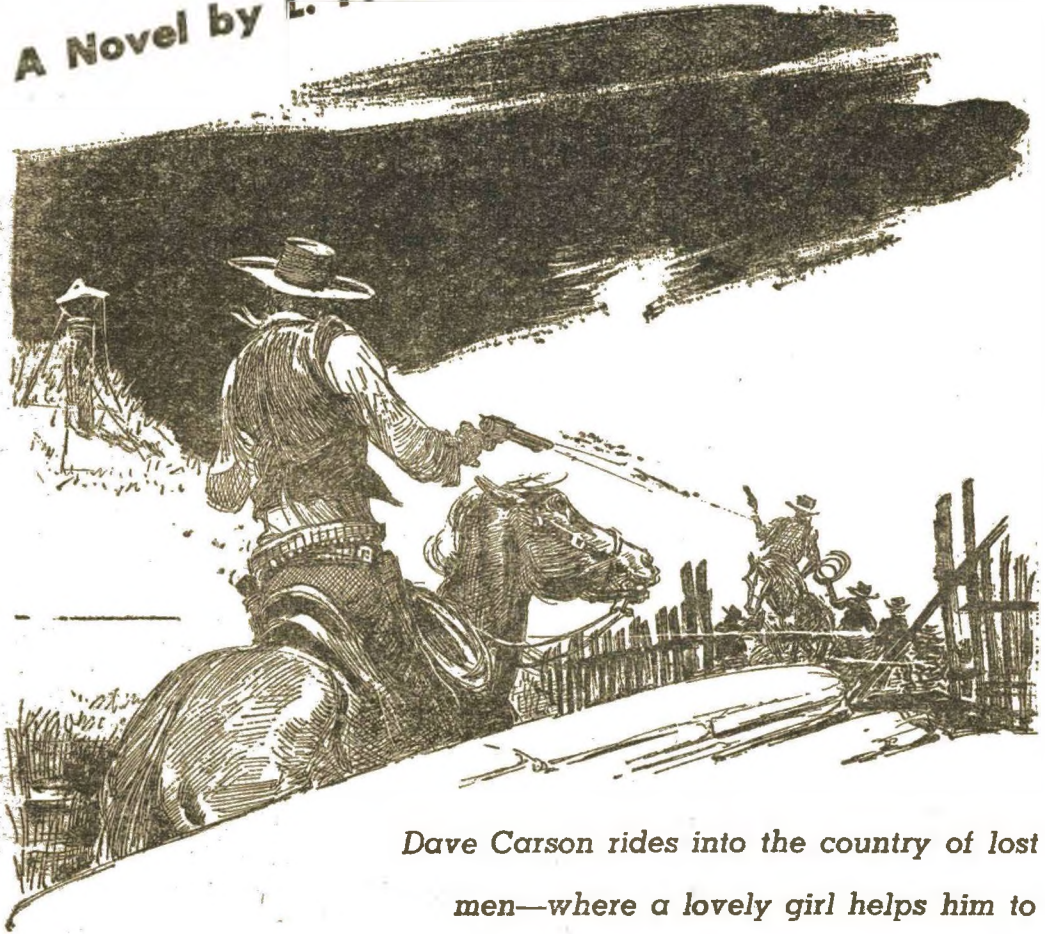
OUTLAW



Jack Galloway lingered there for a moment in order
to empty his six-gun at the approaching outlaws

HILLS

A Novel by L. P. HOLMES



Dave Carson rides into the country of lost men—where a lovely girl helps him to find himself amid flaming battle!

I

ON the rim of the bulging rock-face at the head of Apache Canyon Sheila Bruce sat cross-legged, powerful field-glasses glued to her eyes as she watched the termination of the drama far below.

The fugitive rode a dun pony with white stockings and Sheila could tell by

the ragged gait of the animal that it was not far from exhaustion. From time to time the rider of the dun would twist in his saddle and fling a shot from the Winchester he carried.

It was these shots which kept the pursuing group at a distance, some half mile to the rear. They also were shoot-

ing, but the range was long and most of the shots fell short, as Sheila could tell by the gouts of dust which leaped so mysteriously from the earth behind the fugitive.

"Another outlaw," sighed the girl. "Why do they always have to come here—to these hills!"

It was an old story to Sheila Bruce. Several times before she had witnessed this same thing. Men beyond the law, fleeing to the Shadow Hills, pursued by hard-riding posses who seemed to feel that these hills were beyond their province, who never came farther than the spot where hills and desert met.

Sheila saw that, barring some weird accident, this fugitive would win to sanctuary.

His lead was too great and though his mount was tiring fast, it had enough left to carry its rider clear.

A few moments later the chase below was over. The fugitive had won the race. Sheila watched the posse slow down, come to a halt. For a time they were still, in a group. Then they turned and filed dispiritedly away on the back trail. Again the law had failed, while the Shadow Hills had gleaned another outlaw citizen.

Sheila left the rock and traversed a little timber grown flat to where her pony stood. She swung into the saddle and set her mount to a jog along a trail carpeted deeply with pine needles. The light of the sinking sun built flames in her auburn hair, and the wind set the ends of her gay silk neckerchief to fluttering.

"At least," she murmured, "the wind is clean and the sunlight pure, and it isn't the fault of the old hills that men use their shadows to hide in."

In the center of a basin Sheila drew rein and brought out her field-glasses once more. From where she sat, far down the slope, another meadow was visible, an emerald patch fed by a never-failing spring.

As Sheila focused her glasses she picked up the figure of the dun pony with white stockings. It stood riderless, its feet spread, its head hung low, patiently at the very end of its strength. But it was the sight of the animal's rider, sprawled full length on the ground beside the dun which caused Sheila to catch her breath.

Was the man hurt, or merely resting?

SHE soon had her answer. She saw that sprawled figure move, sit up, come to its feet. Two steps it took only to fall full length once more. No doubt of it. The man was hurt, wounded perhaps by one of those chance shots fired by the posse.

Sheila put the glasses away. She swung her pinto sharply about and spurred down the slope toward that lower meadow. When she reached it, Sheila jumped to the ground and ran to the prone figure.

He lay on his face, his arms outspread. His hat was off and his dark hair was caked with blood. That portion of his shirt covering his right shoulder also carried a dark, ominous stain, the center of which showed wet and crimson.

Sheila turned him over and she caught her breath as his face came into view. It was grimy with sweat and dust and a stained pallor lay beneath the heavy tan of throat and jaw. But it was a young face, a strong face, the features clean-cut and firm. He groaned slightly.

Deftly Sheila set to work. With her pocket knife she cut away the shirt about the wounded shoulder, noting with relief that the bullet had gone completely through. She made two pads of clean, cool, wet moss and bound them in place with the rider's neckerchief.

Then, soaking her own silk throat scarf in the spring, she wiped his face clean and soaked the clotted hair apart. The head wound was not serious, merely a scalp wound incurred by a blow, probably from a gun barrel.

As she finished this job his eyes opened. They were gray eyes, gray as granite, forming a striking contrast to his dark hair. A slight wonderment was in them as they rested on the face above them, flushed and lovely from her exertions.

"I didn't figure that slug through my shoulder was enough to kill me," he drawled. "But it must have been. Else how would I be lookin' at such as you?"

"You're a long way from dying," retorted Sheila. "It doesn't matter a bit how or where I came from. The question is, will you be strong enough after a bit to ride? I can't do much for that shoulder with only cold water and wet moss."

"I'd say you've done pretty good." He smiled slightly. "It don't hurt near

as much as it did. With a long drink of water and a little rest, I'll be ready to ride."

She brought him water in the cupped crown of his own hat and he drank thirstily.

"Glory! That was good!" he sighed. "How's Boots, my horse? He isn't down, is he?"

"No. He would have been, though, in another mile. It was a close call for both of you. Whether you deserve this kind of luck, I don't know."

"I savvy." He nodded. "I'm offerin' no alibis, understand. But sometimes appearances are deceivin'. Names don't usually mean much after bein' fanned by a posse. But mine is Dave Carson."

"Sheila Bruce. But it doesn't matter."

Slowly he got to his feet and she saw his eyes narrow and his lips twist with pain. She caught the dun and led it to him.

"Take it slowly," she ordered. "And don't be afraid to put your weight on me."

Without her lithe young strength he could not have made it. But presently he was in the saddle, his lips a trifle tighter, his pallor a little more pronounced.

They left the meadow at a slow walk, with Sheila leading the way on her own mount. The dun, rested and breathed, carried its head high once more, and stepped along easily. The trail climbed steadily through the quick dusk of the timber.

An hour passed without a word. The trail had leveled out through a wide stretch of parklike country, where timber alternated with open meadows where cattle grazed and rested. The stars came out and the chill of the hills deepened.

They emerged finally on the edge of a wide shallow basin, across which winked the friendly beckoning sparkle of light. A dog barked and presently buildings hulked through the night. A gruff voice hailed them.

"That you, Sheila?"

"Yes, Dad," answered the girl. "Sorry I was late."

The gruff voice came again, mildly admonishing. "You shouldn't ride so far alone, daughter. Not in these hills."

"I didn't go any farther than usual. But I found a rider, wounded. That's what kept me. I brought him home with

me. He needs taking care of."

A muttered curse sounded and a man came forward swiftly.

"You would, you big-hearted kitten," he grumbled. "But I've warned you against anything like that."

"Don't let it worry you, mister," said Carson quietly. "Long as you feel that way, I'll say thanks to the lady and be on my way."

He started to rein off, but in a flash Sheila had cut her horse in ahead of him.

"Dad!" she cried. "Use your head. This man is in no shape to go off alone. You might give me credit for having some judgment. Here, help him down."

"Sure," said Bruce, his tone somewhat mollified. "You're right in that. Okay, stranger. Any man my girl vouches for is plumb welcome. Grab hold of me and slide."

SHEILA ran ahead and opened a door for them, a door which led into a comfortable, roomy log house. Bruce steered Carson to a big, deep chair and the wounded man sank into it thankfully. The light fell right and Bruce stared down into the face below him. He noted the grim set to the mouth and the beads of cold sweat which stood out on the forehead.

"There!" exploded Bruce contritely. "I must've hurt you like the devil."

"No, you didn't hurt me." Carson shook his head. "I'm just cold—and stiff. I reckon I'm farther gone than I thought." His voice was hoarse, his words clipped.

"Sheila," boomed Bruce, "get that spare bunk in my room ready. Washoe—hey, Washoe! Bring me some whisky and hot water."

A half hour later Dave Carson lay snug and warm in blankets. A stiff three fingers of whisky had roused him and his wounds were washed and dressed anew.

"I don't think he should have any food tonight," said Sheila judiciously. "By morning, if he has no fever, he shall have a little something. Just now he needs rest—sleep if possible."

Jim Bruce nodded. He was big, gaunt, bushy-headed, with a face which looked as if carved out of mahogany.

Washoe, the cook, a little, round-faced, bow-legged man frowned dubiously.

"I don't know about that, Sissy. A man needs strength to get over a bullet hole, and if you don't feed him, how in blazes is he going to get that strength? Now me, I recommend a big T-bone steak, cut thick and fried rare, a mess of spuds and some coffee. That'll make him sit up and howl."

"It would kill him, you mean," retorted Sheila, though she smiled. "I'm nurse in this house, and when I say so, food it will be. But not before. Now Mr. Carson, you go to sleep and forget everything. Go 'long with you, Dad and Washoe. I'll put out the light."

The men trooped out and Sheila bent over her patient, making sure that the blankets were tucked in.

"I'll go to sleep," murmured Carson softly. "And I'll forget everything—except the lady who brought me here."

Sheila turned and blew out the lamp. From the door she spoke, and her voice was cool.

"I said forget everything. I'd probably done as much for an Indian."

"I reckon," answered Carson swiftly. "Only it wasn't an Injun. It happened to be me."

The door closed. Dave Carson smiled a trifle grimly into the darkness, sighed and went to sleep.

II

WHEN Sheila Bruce arose the following morning and went to her patient's room, she found him still asleep. She noted with satisfaction that the pallor had left his features. His forehead was cool. She left quietly.

Jim Bruce came in and joined Sheila at breakfast. He was frowning and thoughtful.

"Been lookin' over Carson's hoss and ridin' rig," he explained. "The horse packs a Diamond C iron an' in the saddle bags I found this."

"This" proved to be a faded paper, which when Sheila opened it, resolved itself into a reward notice. It read:

REWARD! \$2,500 REWARD!

The above amount will be paid for information leading to the capture of "Sling" Carson, alias Jim Rusk, alias Ed Myers. Description as follows: Age 30. Height 6 feet. Hair dark. Eyes gray. Fine rider and dead shot.

This man is dangerous. Wanted for train and bank robbery, horse and cattle stealing. Notify—

Z. N. Disbrow, Sheriff
Cinnibar, Rincon County, Ariz.

Sheila's face was pale, her eyes shadowed as she finished reading. Jim spoke gently.

"Sorry, dear. I know you kind of had hopes for that Jasper in the other room, but it sure looks like he is just another one of that breed. The description fits him to a dot."

Sheila nodded. "And a hundred other men besides. Twenty years ago I imagine it would have fitted you pretty well. Oh, I'm not saying that what this notice says isn't true. No question but that he is the man. But it seems—too bad."

Her voice broke slightly.

The meal was finished in silence. Jim Bruce went out about his daily tasks. When he had fled to the Shadow Hills, back along the dim years, Bruce had been broke. But by hard work and sacrifice he had gained a start and built up his herd of cattle.

Now he was well fixed. He controlled extensive range and his cattle numbered close to five figures. He employed four riders besides the cook, Washoe.

Long since had Bruce been exonerated. The old charge against him had been quashed and he was free to come and go as he chose. But the Shadow Hills were his home now. If for no other reason he was rooted to the hills because of a grave not far from the house, where Sheila's mother rested.

Once or twice had Bruce been forced to show that what he had amassed, in the way of range and cattle, he was ready to fight for, and fight ruthlessly. Since then, the outlaws who roamed the Shadow Hills beyond the reach of the law left the Slash B pretty well alone. Now and then, one less informed than the rest would cause some trouble, but these were soon discouraged, usually in a permanent manner. Advancing years had not crippled Jim Bruce's fighting ability to any appreciable extent.

It was nearly midday when Washoe sought out Sheila to announce that Dave Carson had awakened.

"He cleaned up that broth in a hurry," said the old cook. "Now he wants to see you."

"Good," said Sheila, a little grimly.

"And I want to see him."

He was propped up with pillows, smoking, when she entered. He greeted her with a bright, quick smile, but Sheila's expression did not mellow any in reaction.

"Well?" she demanded stiffly. "What is it?"

His smile faded, his face turned grave.

"At no time yesterday or last night was I thinkin' clear enough to thank you in the right way for what you've done," he said quietly.

"I believe I said it didn't matter," Sheila cut in. "I said I would have done as much for an Indian. And if that had been the case, it would have been more worthy, it seems."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"This." She held out the reward notice.

He glanced at it and the bitter lines gathered about his mouth once more.

"Of course, I understand. Just the same, I want you to know that if ever I can do anything in return for your kindness, nothing can keep me from it."

"There is nothing you can do for me," said Sheila. "But there is much you can do for yourself. You can go straight from now on."

"Very well. You have my word for it."

"At least," said Sheila, "that is something."

And before he could speak again, she left him.

Dave Carson looked long at the closed door. Slowly he tore the reward notice to bits and dropped them beside his bunk.

"Sometimes," he muttered, "I wonder why I ever started to play the generous fool. Looks like my welcome in this house is about played out. Reckon I better be movin'."

His clothes were hanging from a wooden peg, driven into the log wall. Slowly he got out of the blankets and dressed. It was an awkward task with only one sound arm, but he made it. He was agreeably surprised to find that, though a trifle weak, his head was clear and his movements steady. He left the house by way of an open window and stalked down to the corrals.

Jim Bruce and his riders were out on the range and Carson was unobserved as he saddled the dun. But as he mount-

ed and reined clear of the corrals, he heard a cry of surprise and saw Sheila running toward him from the house.

As she came up, she tried to catch hold of the dun's rein, but Carson whirled the horse away from her. She stamped her foot and her eyes blazed.

"You idiot!" she cried. "Do you want to undo all my efforts? You'll start that shoulder to bleeding again and that will be the finish. Get down off that horse and go back to bed."

He shook his head.

"Ordinarily your wish would be law with me," he answered. "As it is, I'll be ridin'. An Injun might be willin' to stay put, regardless what you thought of him. Not so with me. Yesterday, when you first found me I told you that appearances are sometimes deceivin'. I ain't given to lyn'. I admit things look plenty off-color. Even a reward notice can be wrong—sometimes. Yeah, I'll be ridin'. Thanks a heap—for everythin'." He bowed and was gone.

Sheila stared after him, biting her lip.

THE town of Wolf Butte lay well back in the fastnesses of the Shadow Hills. Originally it had been merely a trading post where wandering trappers, prospectors and wild horse hunters had outfitted and obtained supplies.

But as the reputation of the Shadow Hills as a sanctuary from the law spread, doubtful characters came drifting in from all directions, to gather at Wolf Butte. Inevitably the place grew in size. Cabins were built. Saloons and gambling halls took root and grew. Its reputation grew also, and it wasn't a good reputation.

Here, the only law was that of the quickest draw. Killings were common. But always more hunted men came in to take the place of those who died.

Dave Carson rode into Wolf Butte at mid-afternoon. He had taken his time coming from the Slash B. There was no occasion for haste, while there was for care. He had heard of Wolf Butte, knew its reputation. It was a town where a man needed all possible strength and wits to survive, especially if he had a few dollars on his person.

Wolf Butte stood in the partial gloom of a heavy stand of timber, with a willow and witch hobble rimmed creek nearby.

At a low-roofed stable with a corral in the rear, Carson reined in. A frow-sy, whisky-bleared individual answered his hail.

"Got room for the hoss for a few days?" Carson asked.

"Depends," was the leering answer. "Let's see the color of your money."

Dave displayed a roll of currency, at which the man's eyes turned greedy and covetous.

"Okay," he grunted. "Dollar a day for shelter and feed. Grain, four-bits extra a feed. Costs money to freight grain in here."

"Sounds like it," observed Dave. "But stake him to two grain feeds—one today, one tomorrow mornin'. Here's five dollars in advance."

Dave walked slowly up the street, measuring the town and its inhabitants. Of the inhabitants he saw three, lounging before what was obviously a saloon. They fixed him with hard, suspicious eyes, but offered no comment as he threaded his way past them and entered the place.

The place was crowded, card games going, men lounging against the bar, whisky bottles at their elbows. Again Dave underwent the scrutiny of eyes, eyes that guessed and balanced and probed.

The bartender, a fat, greasy-faced individual, edged down toward Dave sliding bottle and glass along. And when Dave apparently paid him no attention, the bartender spoke.

"The rules of this house is for every stranger to set 'em up for all the boys," he said gruffly.

Dave eyed him coldly. "I make my own rules as I go along. That ain't one of them."

A stir ran through the place. Men twisted about in their chairs to get a look at this man who flouted Tub Olney's pet rule—a rule which meant a sizable kick to the day's take.

"I hope," blurted Olney, "that I won't have to tell you twice."

Dave's granite eyes hardened.

"You ought to throw a gun on a man and ask for his roll," he bit out. "It'd be more decent."

The stir became a hush. Men edged apart from Dave. Olney looked toward the other end of the room.

"Tony!" he called.

Came the sound of a curse in Span-

ish, as a squat, broad-faced, beady-eyed man arose from his seat at a card table.

"*Caramba!*" he snarled. "What ees thees? Another fool who needs to be convinced? That weel be two for thees day."

Sounded a coarse, brutal laugh. "You should worry, Tony. It's good practice an' another notch for yore gun."

LUCK at cards had been running against Tony Alvarez all day, and his mood was fiendish. His thick, brutal lips drew into a hateful pout and his eyes took on a reddish gleam, giving to his features a strangely feline cast.

Despite his squatty bulk, the Mexican moved easily, smoothly. He swaggered slightly as he cleared the jam of tables and chairs, and moved toward Dave. His thumbs were hooked in his crossed gun-belts, close to the butts of his heavy guns.

"If the stranger don't buckle, twenty to five that Tony makes it two for the day," rasped the same harsh voice.

"I'll take that, Sanders," drawled another.

"Give me the same odds, and I'll lay you a hundred," chimed in a third man. "It's a good bet if you lose."

An icy tingle ran along Dave's spine. It wasn't fear. It was a surge of the coldest, wildest fury he had ever known. These crass, lowering brutes were calmly betting against a man's chance at life or death. For he did not misread the signs.

Two alternatives lay before him. He could crawfish and buy the drinks as the fellow Olney ordered, or he could trade smoke with this hired killer. It wasn't in Dave's make-up to crawfish, so he studied the Mexican gunman with smooth, steady glance.

Ten feet from Dave the Mexican had stopped. "You carry your right shoulder stiffly," he purred. "Ees eet that you have an old wound there, perhaps?"

Dave shrugged. "Think a long time, hombre, before you open a game you can't finish."

The Mexican laughed hissingly. "Tony Alvarez has opened many a game—an' ees ready for another. Me, I am not beeg-hearted as Olney ees. I geeve an order only once. You weel buy the dreenks!"

"The last thing in the world I'll do," said Dave quietly. "is take orders from

a low-down half-breed."

Crash!

The bellowing challenge of a single shot sounded. Tony Alvarez's shoulders grew round, as his chest caved before the impact of the heavy slug. He coughed, gasped and wilted to the floor.

Dave whirled to face the ogle-eyed bartender, the gun in his left hand still curling smoke.

"Now I'm givin' you an order, you hog-faced four-flusher. You set 'em up—for everybody. This one is on the house. I tried to tell that make-believe gun-thrower of yours that I was left-handed!"

The room was still, deadly so. Then a gaunt, reckless-eyed rider jumped to his feet.

"And that is one drink we'll all sit in on!" he bellowed. "It'll be the first one in history. Move up, you jaspers. It's Tub Olney's treat. And we'll drink to the health of the man who cut Tony Alvarez's string."

The cry caught on and men surged about the bar. Olney, his face sulky, his eyes shot with fear, shoved out bottles and glasses with a prodigal hand. Partial silence fell as drinks were downed. At the other end of the bar a drunken man coughed.

"Alvarez just lost a big pot, shoving two pair agin threes," he blurted. "And them two pair were aces and eights. The dead man's hand!"

III

EARLY the following morning Jim Bruce rode for Wolf Butte. The rancher had discovered that at least sixty of his cattle were missing and he had decided it called for a showdown. He took his four punchers with him, and they pulled out while the stars were still bright and cold in the sky. Sheila had slept fitfully and the soft patter of hoofs as they rode away wakened her.

Just as she was about to sit down to breakfast, Nero, the shaggy old stock dog, set up a barking. She went to the front door and looked out. A rider was cantering up, coming in from the east. A tall, lean man, his wide sombrero pulled down over his eyes.

At sight of Sheila he reined in and swept off the sombrero. Sheila gasped. For a moment she thought she was

looking at Dave Carson. This man had the same crisp dark hair, the granite eyes. But the lines of his face were different. It was an older face, grimmer, harder.

"Mornin', lady," he said gruffly. "Any chance of gettin' somethin' to eat?"

"Of course," answered Sheila. "Get down and come in. This is Jim Bruce's Slash B. I'm Sheila Bruce."

He did not give his name in reply, but swung to the ground and stalked to the door, moving with the stiffness occasioned by long hours in the saddle. As he came he made an unconscious settling movement with the twin gunbelts which crossed his lean hips.

Sheila led the way in.

"You can wash in the kitchen," she told him. "Washoe, the cook, will show you where."

When he returned, he ate for some time in hungry absorption. Guardedly Sheila studied him. More and more she was struck with his resemblance to Dave Carson. It was in the tightness and harshness of his mouth and jaw that he differed most. He looked up suddenly.

"Wonder if you could tell me if a man drifted past here in the last couple of days?" he asked. "A man packin' a gunshot wound?"

In a flash, Sheila understood. This lean, grim, hawkish man was an officer of the law. And he was evidently after Dave Carson. Turmoil grew in Sheila Bruce's breast. An almost overpowering impulse tempted her to lie flatly, to deny having seen anyone.

It was Washoe who betrayed this generous impulse. Washoe, not entirely easy in his mind at having his beloved Sissy eating breakfast with this hard-faced stranger, had been hovering close to the door. Now he stuck his head into the room.

"Yeah," said the garrulous old fellow. "There was. Facts are, Sissy found him layin' back in the timber with a hole through his shoulder. She brought him home and took care of him. And the ongrateful coyote pulled a sneak on us. He skedaddled yesterday afternoon."

The stranger's eyes narrowed. "He wasn't hurt bad, then? Not serious, I mean?"

"It depends," answered Sheila slowly. "If he takes care of himself, he will be all right. I didn't want him to leave—but he went anyway."

"What lookin' sort was he?"

"He really looked an awful lot like you. Younger and not quite so—so hard-looking."

"And his name was Carson, Dave Carson?" put the stranger swiftly.

Antagonism rose in Sheila. The impulse to shield Dave Carson grew.

"Why does all this matter to you?" she asked crisply. "You are going to try to arrest him, I suppose."

The stranger stared, then laughed softly. "I thought you were a little reluctant at answerin'. Now I know why. You think I'm a lawman, eh? Well, put your fears at rest. No man was ever further away from bein' one. I'm Sling Carson. Dave is my kid brother."

"Your brother?" Sheila gasped. "You mean—you—then that reward notice doesn't apply to him?"

"None a-tall," was the quiet reply. "I'm the cause of that bein' printed. I'm Sling Carson. Dave? Shucks, that boy never pulled an off-color trick in his life."

Sheila Bruce's world was reeling. She was astounded at the warm, sweet thrill which poured through her. Dave Carson was honorable! He was not a man with the shadows of his misdeeds hanging over him.

Yet, there had been the posse—the pursuit—his wounds!

"I still don't understand," she stammered. "I saw the posse after him—I saw them shoot at him. He was fleeing from the law."

"Reckon I can explain that," said Sling Carson. "I heard what happened from a feller in Cinnibar. Dave rode into town evidently lookin' for me. He saw a reward notice tacked up on a buildin'. He read it, and what he saw must have made him mad. It was the one about me. He tore it off."

"Some snooty feller saw him do it and he marked the resemblance of Dave's appearance with the description on the notice. He figured Dave was me and raised an alarm. They tried to corner the kid in a saloon. He made a break and won clear, headin' for the Shadow Hills. Durin' the chase, one of the posse sifted that slug through his shoulder. And he got the crack on the head durin' his ruckus in the saloon before he broke free. When you faced him with that reward notice, didn't he say anything in defense of himself?"

THE girl nodded, an expression of regret on her face. "Yes, he did. He said that reward notices did not always tell the truth and that there had been cases before of mistaken identity. But he wouldn't explain any further than that."

"He wouldn't." Sling Carson smiled grimly. "He wasn't puttin' out any information that might cramp my actions. Dave's that sort. A darn sight more thoughtful of my peace of mind than I've been of his. Well, maybe it ain't too late for me to square things for him. I aim to try. Which way did he head when he left here?"

"Toward Wolf Butte. And it has worried me. Wolf Butte—is terrible."

"I've heard so." Sling Carson nodded. "But don't worry too much. Dave's a pretty good boy in lots of ways. He's able to take care of himself. You—kind of like the kid, don't you, miss?"

Sheila colored swiftly, but her eyes did not waver. She nodded.

"Yes, I do like him. And I'm awfully happy to know that he—that he—"

"I savvy," put in Sling Carson gently. "You can take my word for it, the boy's square. Now, I'm thankful for your kindness, miss. I'll be trackin' along and as soon as I locate Dave I'll be sendin' him home—with instructions to stop here on the way. Would—would you shake hands with such as me?"

"Of course," said Sheila swiftly, suiting the words to the act.

She went out on the porch and watched Sling Carson ride away, and knew a swift rush of sympathy for this man destined forever more to ride lonely trails with bitter thoughts to dog him.

IV

DAVE CARSON lingered in the Fly-Trap, as Tub Olney's saloon was known, only long enough to see the drink on the house consumed. Dave did not drink himself, and his eyes went often to the sprawled figure of Tony Alvarez, to which the other members of this lawless crew were callously indifferent. Taking human life, even under such justifiable circumstances, was not a pleasant thing.

While the crowd drank, Dave slipped through the door and stalked down the street. He saw the inevitable outcome of

this shooting affray. He had gained a reputation, whether he liked it or not. It had been plain that Alvarez was the town gunman, the bully and killer of the pack.

Now that Dave had downed him, Dave would stand in Alvarez's shoes, if he chose to stay in Wolf Butte. It was notoriety he would like to have avoided. But the thing was done.

It was the reckless-eyed puncher who had suggested that the drink on the house be a toast to the man who had, as he paraphrased it, "cut Tony Alvarez's string." He grinned crookedly at Dave.

"I'm peaceful," he announced. "I ain't got a thing but good-will for you, *amigo*. But back in the Fly-Tray, it seemed to me that you looked kind of gone, after the shootin' was over. I heard Alvarez crack that you had a bum shoulder and I thought maybe you weren't feelin' any too stout. Was you to keel over now, you'd never wake up. Olney would get some rat to slip a knife into you.

"So, figurin' you were a he-man an' deservin' of help, providin' you needed it, I thought I'd quit mindin' my own business an' sort of butt into yours. I got a cabin back a little in the timber, where you're welcome to hit the blankets, if you're feelin' that way."

Dave looked long into the reckless eyes, found no guile there. He nodded.

"Thanks—a heap. I could do with a little rest. My shoulder feels pretty good, but I ain't as strong as I might be. I'll take you up on that. I'm Dave Carson."

"Sure," said the other gravely. "I'm happy to know you. I'm Jack Galloway. You did this rotten town a good turn by rockin' off Alvarez. He was a snake if I ever saw one. Now he's gone, Olney is the man you'll have to watch. Olney's the brains of this burg and the local power."

"He'll do one of two things—either try and get you to take Alvarez's place, as his private executioner, or start groomin' some slick gun-hand to cut your string. So watch him."

While talking thus, Galloway had been leading the way along a twisting little trail back into the timber which rimmed the town. Now a crude little cabin showed, its peeled logs gray and ancient. Behind it was a tiny corral and stable. In the corral stood a splendid

sorrel gelding, fleet and staunch looking.

At the approach of its master, the sorrel lifted its head and whickered softly. Galloway lingered beside the fence a moment, rubbing the animal's sleek neck. Right there Dave Carson decided his new-found friend was to be trusted. This horse plainly adored its master, and horses, like dogs are excellent judges of character. Kindness and patience alone win a horse as this horse was plainly won.

"Where'd you leave your bronc?" asked Galloway. "Down at the stable?"

Dave nodded.

"I'll go down and get him a little later," said Galloway. "Plenty of room here for two broncs, and ole Sunset will enjoy the company. Besides, I don't trust that booze-lappin' Vickers any too far. I know'd him to take a pitchfork to a horse at one time."

The interior of the cabin was frugally furnished, but clean. Galloway pointed to the neatly blanketed bunk. "Stretch out an' take it easy. If you think that shoulder needs a little attention, I'll be glad to look at it. I'm sort of good at things like that."

"It might be a good idea," agreed Dave. "It don't feel bad at all, but there's always the chance of infection settin' in."

Galloway surveyed the wound carefully.

"Somebody did a whale of a good job or it," he drawled. "It looks fine. Heafin' up already. I'll slap a fresh bandage on it an' then you get some sleep. In less'n a week, you'll be fit as a fiddle."

Dave had no trouble sleeping. He had almost drowsed off by the time Galloway had finished with the bandage. When he awoke he was ravenously hungry. He felt alert and bright and strong. From outside the cabin came the sound of an axe falling rhythmically. The air, pouring in through the open window, was cool and fresh and sweet with the tang of balsam.

THE sound of the axe ceased and then Jack Galloway entered, carrying an arm load of wood. He grinned down at Dave.

"You sure are one thorough sort of jasper. When you shoot, you shoot straight—and when you sleep yuh do a job of it. You tore off a stretch of eighteen hours straight. She's a brand

new day, Dave, and lots of excitement brewin'. I reckon you're half starved though, so I'll save the news until you've thrown a mess of venison steaks into you."

Dave ate to repletion, built a one-handed cigarette and settled back on his stool with a sigh of comfort. "Let's have the news, Jack."

"First off," began Galloway. "Jim Bruce and his riders showed up in town this mornin', fightin' mad. Seems that somebody rustled a sizable bunch of his cattle. He don't know who did it, but he served notice on all an' sundry that it was goin' to be mighty unhealthy for somebody if it was kept up.

"I think Bruce more than half suspects that Olney knows somethin' about them cattle, and I wouldn't be surprised if he was half right. The gang in the Fly-Trap didn't like what Bruce told 'em a heap, an' it sort of looked for a time like there might be fireworks.

"But nothin' broke, and the Slash B crowd went on home. Yet I figure there'll be a showdown one of these days between Bruce and a lot of these jaspers in Wolf Butte.

"Them Slash B herds look mighty fat to some of these buzzards. If they ever get through gamblin' an' boozin' long enough to organize, Bruce will catch trouble. So much for that. The other excitement is—there's a jasper in town lookin' for you."

"Packin' a star, you mean?" Dave straightened.

"Not that I could see." Galloway shook his head. "Don't think he's a law-officer. If he is, he's the first one with nerve enough to hit Wolf Butte since I can remember."

"What lookin' sort is he?" asked Dave. "An' what name did he ask for?"

"I gathered he was lookin' for Dave Carson. And as for looks—he reminded me a heap of you. Had your color hair and eyes and he sort of carried himself like you. His face looked pretty hard, though. I'd say he was one tough hombre—a good man to let alone."

Dave got to his feet, his eyes gleaming. "Do you think you could get him up here, Jack? I got a hunch! It must be Sling."

"Who the devil is Sling?" blurted Galloway.

"My brother—Sling Carson."

Galloway stared. "Your brother, eh?

Well, sure, I'll go have a talk with him."

While Galloway was gone, Dave stepped out of the cabin to stretch his legs. He walked around to the corral and found that Galloway, true to his word had brought the dun up from the livery stable. It was in with the sorrel now and they stood amicably together, nibbling at each other's withers.

It was a grand world, up there on the top of the Shadow Hills, a grand world despite the presence of Wolf Butte and the renegades who swarmed there.

Some day a strong man would strike the Shadow Hills and clean them from end to end. And a paradise they would be after that.

Dave's thoughts were broken by the arrival of Galloway and the stranger. The moment Dave saw them, his eyes quickened. The stranger was Sling, right enough.

For a moment the still, cold mask of Sling Carson softened. His hand went out.

"Hello, kid," he said. "Long time no see. Heard you were lookin' for me. And I been lookin' for you, too."

Galloway went into the cabin, leaving them alone.

"How's the shoulder?" asked Sling.

"Fine," answered Dave. "Any chance of gettin' you to come home to the old Circle C, Sling?"

A weary, bitter light shone for a moment in Sling's eyes. "Wouldn't I like to, kid—yeah, wouldn't I like to. But I wouldn't have a chance, with those charges hangin' over my head."

"You've been a darned fool, Sling," said Dave. "How much truth is there to the charges?"

"They fit." Sling shrugged. "Yeah, I been a fool. But what's done is done. There ain't no trail back. You're the one to go back home and mind your business. If you go bargain' around, lettin' yourself be mistaken for me, you'll be gettin' killed. This country is no place for you."

"I can take care of myself," retorted Dave succinctly.

"Apparently," nodded Sling. "From what I hear how you took Tony Alvarez, you ain't plumb helpless. But one step along the outlaw trail just leads to another. And sooner or later things clamp down on you—an' there's the finish. Believe me, I know!"

IN the silence that fell, they built cigarettes. "Comin' in," went on Sling, "I had breakfast with a grand girl at the Slash B. An' I put her right as to who was Sling Carson and who wasn't. She was mighty relieved to know you were on the square, kid. An' that's why I'm wantin' you to stay that way, Davy."

"Gosh, what life offers to a young feller like you with a clean slate behind you. Yuh got to get outside the law to know the job of livin' within it. Again, I know. So I'm sendin' you home, just as fast as the trail will let you go. Forget about me. Live your own life and live it right."

Dave spoke with thoughtful softness. "In the old days we was always pretty close together, you and me, Sling. There's just us two left of the Carson family. I—I get lonesome for you, Sling. I'd like a heap to have you back with me. We could dig in and build the ole ranch up to what it used to be, before Dad died. Ain't there anyway we could fix things up?"

Sling shook his head. "None a-tall, kid," he answered, his voice slightly husky. "If I went back to Cinnibar and surrendered, they'd slap me behind bars for the next fifty years. An' even the kind of life I'm leadin' now, lonesome and hunted as it is, is a heap better than rottin' away in jail. Nope, I've played my hand and played it wrong."

A man came up the trail from town, a liquor besotted, shifty-eyed looking individual. He nodded to Dave.

"Tub Olney wants to see you," he blurted. "Said for me to tell you he had a good proposition to offer you."

With this brief statement, he turned and went back the way he had come.

"Olney, he's that hog-faced bartender, ain't he?" asked Sling softly. "What should he want to see you for?"

"Don't know," answered Dave. "Maybe he wants me to take Tony Alvarez's place. The Mexican seemed to be Olney's pet gun-fighter. Then again—"

Dave broke off, a gleam in his eyes, as a new thought struck him. "There's a chance—a chance, anyway. Hey, Jack! Come out here. I want to ask you somethin'."

Galloway emerged from the cabin and Dave told him of the message.

"What do you think?" he finished.

Galloway scratched his head. "Perhaps he wants you to take the place of

Alvarez. Or perhaps he's got some kind of a trap set for you. Then again, there's a possible chance that he's figurin' on goin' after the Slash B cattle in a big way and he wants you on his side, seein' that you've showed you can throw a fast, accurate gun."

"My guess exactly!" exclaimed Dave. "In which case I sure aim to see what he has to say. I owe Jim Bruce and his daughter quite a lot. If it wasn't for what they did for me, I might have been dead right now. They're mighty fine folks, decent and square shootin'. All they ask is to be left alone."

"If Olney is plottin' to rustle them off the earth and I can listen in on the scheme, I'll see that a trap is set that'll clean out Olney and his gang like a fire cleans out dead weeds. I'm headin' for the Fly-Trap."

Sling Carson would have argued against this if he had thought it would do any good. But he had noted the quick, warm gleam in Dave's eyes when he told of Sheila Bruce's relief on hearing that Dave was no outlaw, and he sensed the big reason behind Dave's desire to help thwart any future raids on the Slash B properties.

"If you're plumb set on goin' down there, Davy," he said, "I'm draggin' along. In case it is a frame-up, I want to be handy. It'll be the last thing that overgrewed polecat will ever try."

"Me too," chimed in Galloway. "Wait till I get my hat."

"Listen, Jack." Dave caught the impulsive cowboy by the arm, "I sure appreciate all you've done for me. But it looks like you've got to live in this town, an' I don't want you to get in bad. If Olney is plottin' against Jim Bruce, I'm for Bruce, all the way. But you can't take sides, the way you're fixed."

"Just the same, I'm takin' 'em," Galloway said with a grin. "Looky here, cowboy—I don't owe nobody in this cussed town a single thing. I got no use for Tub Olney and never had. I got things behind me that I wish I'd never done. I been wishin' for a chance to make good for them mistakes."

"If Olney wants you for what we figure he might, then my chance is here. I know what side you're gonna take and I'm ridin' the whole way with you, sink, swim or suck eggs. It will feel good to be doin' the right thing for decent folks once more."

"That jasper is all wool, an' plenty wide, Dave," said Sling softly as Galloway hurried into the cabin. "He'll do to ride the river with. Count me in on this thing, too. That Olney thinks he's so all-fired wise. Here's where we scramble his eggs."

V

MIDNIGHT. Three men rode quietly up to the Slash B headquarters. The night was moist and chill and the stars pricked out in unsullied brilliancy. Jim Bruce, sleeping soundly, was awakened by a tapping on the sill of his window.

For a moment he lay, very still, his eyes wide, his senses alert to pick up any threat. A voice called softly.

"Bruce—hey, Bruce! Come alive. This is Dave Carson speakin'."

Bruce came out of his blankets, one hand stealing to the holstered gun hanging beside his bed. Since that raid on his stock, Bruce was trusting no one, least of all a man who had ridden into the country under suspicious circumstances.

Sheila had told him of the visit of Sling Carson, with his declaration of a clean bill of health for his brother Dave. But as Bruce viewed this information, it was merely a self-admitted outlaw vouching for the character of another. Bruce would have to be shown. He held the gun naked in his hand, as he stepped to the window.

"What's on your mind?" he demanded gruffly. "Is your business so urgent that you have to wake a man up in the middle of the night to tell him? I'm warnin' you, I can see you pretty plain and the first crooked move, I drill you."

"Don't blame you a bit for feelin' suspicious," answered Dave quietly. "But I'm on the square, and the two men with me are on the square. We come out at this time of night, because it was the only time we could slip away without Tub Olney gettin' suspicious. What I got to tell you concerns the safety of your cattle."

"What do you mean?" barked Bruce. "Another raid comin' up?"

"Yeah, there is one. Not tonight—but inside the next week at the latest."

"How the devil do you know?" demanded Bruce.

"If you'll quit barkin' around like a sore-eared wolf and come on out, I'll tell

you," answered Dave sharply. "Shucks, man, I'm not tryin' to crook you."

"Okay," growled Bruce. "Be with you in a second."

He pulled on his clothes and went out, buckling on his gun-belt as he went. He found Dave grouped with Sling and Jack Galloway by their horses.

"Meet my brother Sling, Mr. Bruce," said Dave. "And also Jack Galloway."

Bruce accepted the introductions with nothing more than a curt nod.

"Speak your piece," he said briefly.

Dave did so. He sketched his meeting with Tony Alvarez and the outcome of it. He told of Olney sending for him and of the long talk he and Olney had had in the back room of the Fly-Trap.

He ended: "The cold facts are Olney is organizin' that gang in Wolf Butte for the purpose of rustlin' you blind. He asked me to sit in with him, and I agreed as a stall. Naturally, I don't intend to prey on your herds, and neither does Sling or Jack. But by actin' like we are playin' along with Olney, we'll get all his plans. Then, we can tip you off. If we play our hand right we can let Olney walk right into a trap and clean him and his crowd to a fare-ye-well. That's the all of it."

Bruce considered thoughtfully. If this young fellow was telling the truth, it meant that he could smash the outlaw power of Wolf Butte, once and for all. If he wasn't telling the truth, it meant that Bruce would be the one liable to be smashed.

Sling moved restlessly.

"Looky here, Bruce," he said harshly, "I don't blame you for bein' suspicious of Jack and me. But if you stand around suckin' your thumb because you don't trust Dave, you're just a plain fool. If anybody knows that kid, I do. He's givin' you the gospel truth. As far as Jack and me are concerned, we don't give a hang for you personally, though I would hate to see your daughter made a pauper. But we're ridin' the same trail as Dave is, and that puts us on your side. Make up your mind."

Jim Bruce made his decision. He had to trust someone. Either way he had a fight with Olney and the renegades on his hands. They had already started to work on his herds and a final showdown was inevitable. With these three men on his side, his advantage would be great. This advantage was worth the gamble.

"Very well," he said gruffly. "I'll string along with you fellows. I can only say this—if yuh double-cross me, yuh're double-crossin' my daughter and her future. I wouldn't forgive any man for doin' that. I'd dedicate the rest of my life to runnin' him down an' rockin' him off."

"That's man talk," said Sling. "Shake on it."

Bruce knew growing confidence as he felt the firm pressure of the handclasps. Something told him these men were right, despite the murky past of at least two of them.

"I can't say for sure when Olney will move," said Dave. "But I'll let you know in time. Now we better be janglin' back to town. Olney is a big, slugheaded rat, but in his way he's cunning."

Jim Bruce listened until the sounds of their departure faded out. Then he went back to bed.

"There's a heap of truth in that old sayin' about 'bread upon waters,'" he muttered. "Sheila scattered some when she lugged home Dave Carson and tended to his wound. I reckon those boys are square."

THE following morning, Jim Bruce said nothing to Sheila of the midnight visit. He was abroad early with his men. To them he told the story.

"As I see it, the tougher we make it for Olney to hit at us, the more he has to come out in the open where we can knock his ears down proper. So, instead of layin' back for Carson to tip us off, we're gettin' busy to tuck in the loose edges. I'm aimin' to centralize our herd more. With the stock spread out the way they are we can't watch 'em all. If we push 'em into a smaller area, they'll be easier to guard. So we start combin' the roughs and the timber and throwin' the stock into the clearin's."

Dock Lake shook his head thoughtfully. "Wish I could trust that Jasper Carson like you do, Jim. Me, I never saw a one of that crowd in Wolf Butte that was worth a hoot. Watch that they don't run a blazer on you."

Bruce shrugged. "There's times when you got to trust someone. This is it. You know and I know that in the long run Olney would win the edge on us. We're outnumbered bad. More or less all my life I've gambled. I'm goin' to do it now. I'm goin' to gamble that those

two Carson boys and that Jack Gallo-way are shootin' square with me. Let's get to ridin'. The sun ain't far away."

Sheila rose and breakfasted alone. Then, restless, she saddled a pony and started off on a ride. Again she was struck by the ironical situation, there on the crest of the Shadow Hills. Nowhere could there be a more perfect world. The sunlight was crisp, vital. The timber drowsed in the haze, cut here and there with emerald meadows that smiled their peace at the cerulean sky. Birds winged high and low and the small, furry folk scuttled about, busy at the business of living. And yet, not so many miles away the town of Wolf Butte crouched, full of depravity, of greed, of treachery and lawlessness.

What disturbed Sheila the most was the knowledge that Dave Carson was in the depraved town. Since he had left her care, still a little pale and weak from his wounds, she had heard nothing of him. True, Sling Carson had ridden through in search of his younger brother. Sheila wondered if he had found him. And if so, in what condition.

She had accepted without reservation of any kind the words of Sling Carson in relation to his brother Dave. Dave was clean and square and honorable, and Sheila had thrilled a dozen times to this knowledge. Yet, Wolf Butte was no place for a decent person. Perhaps Dave had gotten into trouble there. Perhaps even at that moment he was lying wounded—or dead.

A shiver went up Sheila's spine. Anxiety grew in her, a queer, aching anxiety deep in her breast that hurt like some vital pain. Dave Carson had ridden into her life from nowhere and had been there but a matter of hours. Yet, in that time he had gripped her imagination, her interest—almost, it seemed at times, just a wee bit of her heart.

She tried to shrug aside these thoughts, but with little success. Abruptly she swung her pony's head and lifted the pace to a fast lope. And she headed directly toward Wolf Butte.

Sheila did not ride directly into Wolf Butte. No matter what her mood and thoughts, she was too level-headed to do that. But with Dave Carson in the town, it drew her like a magnet draws steel. So, keeping a few hundred yards back in the timber, she slowly rode a circle about the place, reining in now

and then when she got a partial view of the buildings through openings through the trees.

This maneuvering availed her little. She saw the raw jumble of buildings, but they acted as a barrier to the street and what it held. She finally drew up, stiffening herself in the saddle, while a slow flush mounted in her face.

"You're acting a perfect idiot," she told herself fiercely. "Circling around that hell-hole of a town. And just because of a man you've known for less than a week. If Dad knew this he'd tell you plenty, Sheila Bruce, and you'd deserve every word of it. It is time you headed for home, and common sense!"

Yet, at the very moment she started to rein away, down through an aisle in the trees she glimpsed a tiny clearing in which stood a humble, gray-logged little cabin and a pole corral. Near that cabin, swinging an axe with slow, easy strokes stood a man, bareheaded. She recognized that dark head and those lean, broad shoulders. A thrill shot through her.

There was Dave Carson.

Quietly she rode down upon him and was within twenty yards of him before he became aware of her presence, so deep and soft were the muffling pine needles beneath the hoofs of her mount. He straightened and turned, and his eyes went wide.

"Good grief!" he exclaimed. "You! Sheila Bruce! What in the world brings you here? Has something gone wrong out at the ranch?"

She shook her head, smiling, a little breathless and confused, now that she actually faced him.

"Nothing is wrong," she answered. "But I've been worried about you. About your wound."

HE moved swiftly close to her, so close that he stood near her stirrup, looking up at her. She thought again how clean and firm his face looked, how boyish his tousled hair. His eyes were gleaming.

"Worried?" he exclaimed. "Over me? I never dreamed such a thing. But you shouldn't have come. If any of those wolves down here should see you! I'm scared to death. You got to get out of here—now!"

Sheila recovered her self-possession. "That's a fine way to treat a visitor,"

she joked. "Tell her to get out the minute she shows up."

"Yes—no—you don't understand what I'm drivin' at," he stuttered. "Wait! I got an idea. I'll throw my saddle on the dun and ride back with you."

Before she could stop him he had hurried into the cabin for his hat and saddle. Two minutes later he led the dun from the corral and swung astride.

"Come on," he urged. "I'll have the jitters until we put a couple of miles between us an' that town."

Dave set a pace that soon ate up those two miles. Then, with the comforting walls of the timber all about them, he reined to a slower pace.

"There!" he exclaimed. "This is a heap better. I can talk now without bein' jumpy. But you listen to me, young lady. Don't you ever try that stunt again. You keep away from Wolf Butte—just as far as you can. Understand? I don't know what's wrong with your pa's judgment, to let you ride loose thisaway. He ought to know what Wolf Butte is."

"Don't blame Dad," answered Sheila. "He knows nothing about it. But tell me, your shoulder seems to be doing well."

Dave flexed the wounded member. "Shucks, it's all right, thanks to you. Another week, and I'll be right as rain."

Sheila dodged away from that. "Your brother—did he find you?" she asked.

Dave's face sobered. "Yeah. The ole son-of-a-gun, I sure was glad to see him. He told me about you feedin' him. That was decent of you. You sure stack up high with the Carson brothers, kind lady."

Sheila colored.

They rode along, stirrup to stirrup, and strange serenity descended upon them. Each was terrifically conscious of the other and that a strange and all-powerful bond was drawing them together. They talked of many things, mere verbal things in words that fell a little stiff and stilted. But the glowing flame of attraction grew brighter with each passing moment.

In the back room of the saloon in Wolf Butte, Tub Olney listened scowlingly to the excited words of a fawning, booze-besotted hanger-on.

"I tell you, Tub, I saw 'em plain—plain as I see you right now," insisted the fellow. "Like you told me last night,

I was hid back in the timber, keepin' an eye on the Carsons and Jack Galloway. First I saw Galloway and the one called Sling go down the trail to town."

"That much is right," growled Olney. "Those two are out front now, buckin' the faro table. Go on."

"Well, maybe a half hour after they left the cabin, that Bruce gal come ridin' up. Young Carson was outside splittin' firewood. He darn near jumped out of his skin when he saw her. I couldn't hear what they said, but he saddles up and they ride off together. I tell you, Tub, them jaspers are double-crossin' you. They're playin' in with Jim Bruce."

Tub Olney stared long at the speaker and past him. Olney's little eyes contracted until they were mere slits in his pouchy face. Slowly he nodded.

"Yeah. I reckon they are, Slip. I think I know where they went last night when the three of them rode off together. They went to see Jim Bruce—to tip him off that I'm goin' to clean up on his cattle. Seein' young Carson an' that Bruce filly so friendly just about cinches that. Well, I been suspicious of those two Carsons from the first. Galloway, I thought for a time he'd make me a good man. But it looks like he's gone soft. You know what the answer will be, don't you, Slip?"

"Yeah, Tub, I know." Slip Fallon nodded. "This is as good a time as any to take care of them two out front. You go out and tip off Long Bob. When he calls 'em, I'll go to work on 'em from the door here with your Winchester."

Olney smiled. "You got good ideas, Slip, but you don't think far enough ahead. I don't want just two of 'em. I want 'em all. And if we knock off them two out front now, we may lose a chance at the third one. No, we want 'em all together to make the clean-up. Tonight, Slip, I'll send word I want to see 'em, and I'll have the stage set right. Now, because you've done as you were told, and done it right, I'll show you I know how to play square. Go out and tell Baja I said to give you a quart. Bring it in here. I'll take care of it until after the show tonight. Then it's all yores."

Slip Fallon licked his lips. "You're white, Tub. We'll get those double-crossin' polecats and we'll get 'em plenty."

VI

IT WAS dusk before Dave Carson returned to Jack Galloway's cabin. He found Sling and Galloway waiting anxiously.

"Where have you been?" asked Sling gruffly. "You had Jack and me scared to death. Did Bruce send someone to get you?"

"Not exactly." Dave colored slightly. "But Miss Bruce dropped in to see how my shoulder was gettin' along, an' I rode most of the way back with her."

"I don't blame you, kid." Sling smiled. "She's a swell girl. But she shouldn't come ridin' so close to Wolf Butte alone."

"That's what I told her," nodded Dave. "I made her promise not to do it again."

Dave went out to wash for supper, which Galloway was preparing. Sling turned to him, his face grave and moody.

"Sure, Jack," he said. "Men like you and me are fools. Look what we've forfeited. Dave can ride with a fine, sweet girl with a clean conscience. You and I can't. We haven't got the right to expect any decent woman even to look at us. Our trails lead in the shadows, not in the sunshine of a good woman's smile. Yeah, we've been fools."

Galloway nodded. "It's up to you and me, Sling, to see that Dave has a chance to find happiness with Sheila Bruce. Somethin' tells me they ain't a long way from bein' in love. Dave is a fine boy. I aim to give all I got to see that he gets a break."

Sling put his hand on Galloway's shoulder. "Later, when this mess is straightened out, if you and me are both fit and able, I got a proposition to make, Jack," he said earnestly. "It's been in the back of my head for a long time, but I needed a pardner to make it go. We'll talk it over some day. It's a good setup—and a square one."

The three of them had just finished supper when Slip Fallon knocked at the door of the cabin.

"Olney wants to see you fellers tonight," explained Fallon when Galloway opened the portal. "He's got somethin' heavy on his mind. Was all excited about it."

"Okay," Sling answered. "We'll be there."

Galloway watched Fallon disappear down the shadowy trail to town, then frowned thoughtfully as he came back to his stool.

"Me, I don't trust that drunken bum of a Fallon," he drawled. "That jasper would cut a man's throat for a drink of whisky. You know, Sling, when you and me went downtown this afternoon I saw Fallon hangin' back in the timber. He made out like he was pickin' up dead branches for firewood, but the thought just come to me that he might have been spyin' on the cabin.

"If he was, then he sure must have seen Dave ride off with Sheila Bruce. Fallon is a pet snake of Olney's. If he saw Dave and the gal ride off, you can be sure he told Olney about it. And if Olney sent him out in the first place to spy on us, it means that Olney don't trust us near as much as he makes out. Me, when we go down tonight, I'm goin' to shore have my six-gun in easy reach and ready to go."

Sling nodded thoughtfully. "There's plenty in what yuh say, Jack. I see no reason for this excitement and hurry-up that Olney claims. Things can't have changed much out at the Slash B since yesterday. There's somethin' behind this move of Olney's. Dave, I think it'd be a good idea for you to stay here. Jack and I can handle this."

"What do you take me for?" Dave exclaimed, flushing. "I'm goin' along with you."

Sling frowned. "Maybe I'm wrong, but Jack and me figger there's pretty strong feelin' between you an' Sheila Bruce. If that's so, you got a heap to live for, kid. You can't afford to take any extra chances. With Jack and me it's different. We don't count a lot one way or the other. How about it, Jack?"

"That's gospel." Galloway nodded. "You stay here, Dave. Sling and I can find out what Olney wants."

Dave stood up and reached for his hat. "What a fine, yellow pup you take me for," he growled. "I'm goin' along. That's settled. Sheila Bruce would despise me if I backed down on a play like this. Shut up! Both of you. You big-hearted, square-shootin' Piutes."

A half hour later they stopped before Tub Olney's saloon.

"Keep close together," murmured Sling. "Don't let anything get us separated. And don't all look the same way.

Maybe there ain't a thing to fear. But more and more I got a hunch that we're headin' for a showdown, right now. On your toes—and watch everybody."

THEY went in, seemingly careless, but their eyes were brilliant and alert, missing no detail. Olney was not in sight. Baja, Olney's spare bartender, a pock-marked, sullen-looking Mexican, was behind the bar. The place held its usual crowd, grouped about the gambling tables. The air reeked with the mingled odors of tobacco smoke and raw, hot whisky.

Baja nodded toward the rear. "Een there," he said. "Olney ees wait for you."

Casually but watchfully, they crossed the room to the closed door opposite. Sling did not knock. Instead he flung the door wide with startling abruptness. Olney, seated at the table, was so surprised he spilled half the contents of a whisky glass he had been in the act of lifting to his lips. Three others beside Olney were present, Slip Fallon, a tall, hatchet-faced man known as Long Bob, and a squat, gorilla-like desperado called Rio.

Olney cursed harshly as the spilled whisky drenched his none too clean shirt front. Jack Galloway laughed. "What's wrong, Tub?" he asked. "You act nervous."

"That's no way to come into a room," growled Olney. "Men movin' that sudden sometimes get shot. But grab a seat, you jaspers. I got somethin' to tell you."

He indicated three chairs standing empty. One was in a direct line with the small window that opened off the room. The other two were full in the light of the kerosene lamp. Fallon, Long Bob and Rio sat in the partial gloom of the far end of the room.

Sling smiled grimly as he moved the chair facing the black opaqueness of the window.

"It's against my religion to sit in line with a door—or a window," he drawled.

Dave and Jack Galloway took his cue and moved the other two chairs away from the light.

"Bright lights always did hurt mine and Jack's eyes," said Dave. "What you got on your mind, Olney?"

Olney seemed to fumble with his

thoughts. His eyes were narrowed to mere sparks. Fallon, Long Bob and Rio shifted nervously. They acted upset, as though something they had planned had gone awry.

Sling caught the eye of Dave and Galloway and nodded. He leaned forward in his chair, his hands resting on his thighs, close to the twin guns hung there.

"This," he drawled coldly, "looks a heap like a set-up, Olney. How about it?"

Olney stared at him, searching for a new train of thought that would not come. A voice broke from the dusky corner of the room, Rio's voice—thick and hoarse and brutal.

"Aw rats, Tub! Quit bluffin'. They're wise. Give it to 'em!"

Instantly the room was a roaring inferno. At Rio's final words, Sling Carson's guns were out and flaming. Jack Galloway followed suit. Answering flames came from the corner. The walls of the room rocked with the bellow of heavy guns.

Dave Carson, dragging at his gun, felt a slug strike the leg of his chair, splintering it and dropping one corner so suddenly that Dave sprawled on his hands and knees. As he did so a sawed-off shotgun split wide the outside night, the window glass was blasted to fragments, and a double charge of buckshot tore into the wall on a line where his head had been a moment before.

Slip Fallon collapsed like an empty sack. The squat killer, Rio, came out of the corner at a queer, staggering run. As he crossed between Dave and Olney, he lurched and went down with a crash. Dave, looking upward saw Olney pulling down on him for a second shot. The first slug had been taken by the dying Rio.

Dave threw himself sideways, feeling the hot kiss of a bullet as it flecked the collar of his shirt. He drove a shot at Olney—who went over backward so suddenly Dave could hardly believe his eyes.

Dave turned and took stock. Of the original four occupants of the room, Long Bob alone was still on his feet, shoulders braced against the wall. Long Bob was fighting for strength to lift the gun dangling in his right hand. But the strength did not come, and he collapsed, falling sideways.

Sling's hand gripped Dave by the

shoulder, pulling him to his feet.

"Kid!" he panted. "Where'd they hit you? I saw you fall!"

"I'm all right, old settler," Dave told him. "A slug tipped my chair over. How are you and Jack?"

"A hundred percent sound here," came Galloway's voice. "Gosh! What a buzzsaw you are, Sling. Those jaspers didn't know what they were bustin' into. Did they nick you?"

"One of 'em skinned my knuckles with a slug, that's all. Come on! We got to get out of here before that crowd in the other room finds out the why and wherefore and gets organized. Follow me, but don't throw any more lead unless you have to."

Sling went out of the door and moved swiftly along in front of the bar. The room was in an uproar, card tables being overturned, chips and cards and money scattered on the floor. A number of men were making for the outside, in belief that a raid from some unknown source was on.

Baja, the Mexican bartender, stared at the three partners as though he could not believe his eyes. Galloway, meeting the look, growled swiftly.

"Yeah, we're plenty alive. Plenty alive and ready to cut your string if you make a crooked move. Freeze, and stay that way!"

BAJA "froze," his hands splayed on top of the bar. The three fought their way through the jam at the door, Sling leading the way.

Just as they burst forth into the night, a hoarse yell of rage broke behind them. Someone, more courageous than the rest, had explored that back room.

"Get 'em!" he bawled. "Get Galloway and them two with him. They've downed Olney and Bob an' Rio an' Slip. Golly! It's a slaughter-house. Get 'em!"

Sling, Dave and Galloway broke into a run, heading for Galloway's cabin.

"Hurry up!" panted Sling. "That whole crowd will be after us. We got to hit leather and ride. We can't stand 'em off long—there's too many of 'em."

They pounded along through the blackness. Behind them that first yell of rage had become a chorus, swelling to a mad, sullen roar. Guns barked flatly and lead spat into the trees that lined the trail.

At the cabin, Dave was the first to get his horse under saddle. From its boot he pulled his Winchester and levered a cartridge into it.

"If there's anythin' special you want to get from the cabin, Jack, fly to it," he barked. "I'll hold 'em back for a minute."

The Winchester began to crash and the howling tumult down the trail broke and halted. Dave emptied the gun before he spun back to his horse. Sling and Galloway were in their saddles now, and Dave mounted with a leap. Galloway lingered for a moment to empty his six-gun at the approaching outlaws. Then spurs sank home and they raced off into the blackness of the timber.

The sound of those escaping hoofs brought another howl of rage from the mob and another forward rush. Guns blared in blind shooting toward the three racing riders and just as they reached safety, a stray slug spat wickedly into flesh.

Jack Galloway gasped and reeled in his saddle. He hunched forward freezing to his saddle horn. A stifled groan broke from his lips.

Dave, coming along in the rear, heard that groan.

"Sling—Jack!" he cried. "Who's hit—who's hit?"

"All right here," answered Sling, his voice anxious. "Jack—Jack, ole feller—where'd they get yuh?"

Jack Galloway did not answer. He was virtually unconscious, but still in his saddle by virtue of iron will.

Dave found his way beside the wounded man and locked a supporting arm about him. The horses began to slow down as Sling came reining back.

"Keep goin', Sling," said Dave hoarsely. "I got him. We can't stop yet. When we get across this first ridge, we'll take a look at him."

Through the utter blackness beneath the timber they groped their way. The rumble of hate behind them gradually dwindled with the distance. They topped the ridge and dropped down the other side. They pulled up, their horses panting from the effort expended.

"Jack's not—dead?" asked Sling, a queer, husky catch in his voice.

"No," answered Dave. "But he's out—limp as a rag. Catch hold and let him down easy!"

Between them they lowered Gallo-

way to the soft mat of pine needles underfoot. There, while Sling lighted match after match, Dave examined the wound that had cut the reckless, staunch, likable cowboy down. The bullet had struck him high in the body, just to the right of the spine, and gone completely through. It looked bad.

With neckerchief, handkerchief and strips torn from his own shirt, Dave bandaged tight compresses over both the entrance and exit of the bullet. Then he glanced up at Sling, whose face was lined and bitter in the red glow of a final match.

"It don't look like he's got a chance," said Dave softly. "But we'll make a fight with him. He's got to have better care than we can give him here. We're headin' straight for the Slash B. We can't tie him on his horse. The joltin' would kill him in less than a mile. We got to carry him in our arms. We'll take turns. Ready? Help me up with him."

BACK in the rear room of the Fly-Trap saloon, Tub Olney was seated dizzily in a chair. A clumsy bandage was about his head, and in his right hand he held a quart bottle of whisky, from which at times he gulped greedily.

Baja, the Mexican bartender, stepped back and eyed the crude bandage he had made with admiring eyes.

"*Caramba!*" he chattered. "That was close, Tub. One inch lower and your brains—pouf!"

"I know, I know," grated Olney. "That feller Carson—Dave Carson—he nearly got me. I'd have got him first though if Rio hadn't stumbled into my lead. I had that double-crossin' rat dead to rights. My luck's gone bad all around. But I'm not through. I'm goin' to show 'em who's boss of the Shadow Hills. Help me out into the barroom. I want to talk to the boys."

Stumbling and weaving Olney managed to make it to the other room with Baja's help. Here he slumped in a chair before a card table that had been righted, and stared around the room with bloodshot, murderous eyes.

The crowd had returned from its short pursuit of Sling and Dave and Jack Galloway. They did not know that Galloway was wounded near death. They only knew that the three fugitives had raced off into the shelter of the

timber on fresh, speedy horses and that an attempt to trail them was almost impossible before daylight.

Some had surged into the back room to stare morbidly at the dead figures of Slip Fallon, Long Bob and Rio. They congratulated Olney profanely on his narrow escape. Then they had repaired to the main room to drink and talk excitedly.

Olney glared around.

"Shut up!" he bawled. "I got a proposition to make! I'm through fiddlin' around with Jim Bruce. There's better'n thirty of us here. If we work together we can bust the Slash B wide open. Bruce must have close to ten thousand head of stock packin' his brand. We can realize, at the very least, fifteen dollars a head, straight through. That means a hundred an' fifty thousand dollars. If you jaspers want to sit into this with me, we'll split that money even up, share and share alike. It'll run close to five thousand apiece. Are you game?"

The vociferous howl of agreement nearly blew Olney off his chair. He smiled cruelly.

"Then we do it," he shouted. "Come daylight we raid the Slash B. We hit 'em right at headquarters. We can overpower 'em. We got the man-power. Then we hold a round-up and move the stock out to market.

"Galloway and them two Carsons have probably gone to the Slash B. But we still got 'em outnumbered better than three to one. And I want them three jaspers. I want 'em dead. I pay a thousand dollars to the man who shows me their dead bodies. Now move up and have a couple of drinks on the house. At daylight we ride!"

VII

THE eastern sky was a bowl of rioting pink and gold when Dave and Sling rode up to the Slash B. Their faces were gaunt and lined with weariness. In Sling's arms sagged the still, limp body of Jack Galloway. Dave's bad shoulder had given out on him hours before and on Sling had rested most of the burden of carrying their wounded comrade.

Galloway looked like a dead man. Had he been constituted of less steely fiber he would have been dead. Yet, despite

the sunken pallor of his face and the chilling limpness of his limbs, a faint spark of life still beat in Jack Galloway.

"Root somebody out, kid," croaked Sling. "I can't hold him much longer. I'm plumb paralyzed."

Dave swung stiffly from his saddle and went to the kitchen door, for smoke was drifting lazily from the stovepipe. He opened the door and stepped in. Old Washoe, the cook, was bending over his stove and, as he turned and saw Dave, his jaw dropped.

"Don't ask questions," snapped Dave. "Explain later. Come outside—quick! Got a wounded man there. Friend of mine—and of Jim Bruce."

For once in his life Washoe obeyed without palaver. There was that in Dave Carson's eyes and manner that stilled him. He hurried out with Dave and took the figure of Jack Galloway in his arms. He carried the wounded man in and put him on the same bunk Dave had occupied.

"Where's Bruce?" asked Dave.

"Him and the boys already hit the trail for the breaks, poppin' cattle," answered Washoe.

At that moment Sheila Bruce came into the room. She had just gotten up and her cheeks were pink and dewy with sleep. She caught her breath.

"Sorry to disturb you, Sheila," said Dave quietly. "But this man, Jack Galloway, is real—and worthwhile. Friend of mine and Sling. He got shot because he was standin' up for your dad and for you. He's near gone. But you'll do what you can?"

"Of course, Dave," said Sheila calmly. "You did right, bringing him here. Washoe, hot water and my medicine kit!"

For half an hour Sheila worked silently, with Dave and Sling aiding where they could. Sheila finally stood up, looked at Dave and shrugged.

"He should have been dead, hours ago," she murmured. "But his spirit is indomitable. He still lives. I'll help him in his battle all I can. You boys go rest and eat. You look worn out. Washoe, take care of them."

Washoe led Dave and Sling into the kitchen, where he unearthed a whisky flask.

"Pour a snort of that into you," he told them. "I'll rustle grub pronto." Hot food and a half hour of rest and

relaxation, brought Dave and Sling back quickly. Dave told Washoe what had happened in Wolf Butte.

"You say you salivated Olney?" blurted Washoe. "By gollies, that's good news."

"It'll be small satisfaction if Jack dies," said Sling grimly. "Jack is worth more than the whole crowd at Wolf Butte. He's all man, that feller."

Dave and Sling went out and took care of the horses. Sling passed a moment petting Jack Galloway's fine sorrel gelding.

"We'll do the best for your boss, old feller," he said softly.

The horse nickered and bent its head, rubbing against Sling's shoulder. As it did so a wisp of the flowing mane was severed cleanly, not a foot from Sling's face. A bullet chugged into the logs of the feed shed and, back at the edge of the clearing in the east, a rifle snarled vindictively.

IN one whirling leap, Sling was behind the scanty shelter of the corral fence, both guns drawn, eyes glued on the fringe of timber some two hundred yards away. He saw the flicker of movement as mounted men skirted the clearing as though to surround it.

"Wolf Butte men," he snapped to Dave. "The whole poison mess of them. We're in for it. Golly! I wish Bruce and his men were here. We got a fight ahead of us, kid. Grab our Winchesters and bring Jack's too. We'll need it. Come on! We got to make a run for it."

They raced for the main ranchhouse. A blood-thirsty howl arose from the attacking force, and leaden hornets buzzed and snapped all about. Washoe came lunging from the kitchen door, his eyes wild, his gray hair standing up like the roach of an angry wolf. In his hands he held a heavy, long barreled Sharp's buffalo rifle.

He took in the situation at a glance. The Sharp's swung up, steadied, then spat a thunderous challenge. Over by the timber, one of the renegades who had run out from the trees a ways for clearer shooting at Sling and Dave, was clubbed down by the tremendous buffalo slug.

Washoe yipped his shrill war-cry. "Come and get it," he whooped.

He sent another giant slug crashing into the timber, then turned

and ducked back into the house as Sling and Dave raced in to momentary safety.

Washoe's face bore a snarling grin. "What does that mangy crowd want?" he asked.

Dave shrugged. "Sling an' me, I reckon. Again, it looks like a real raid on the Slash B. There's a powerful lot of 'em out there."

While Sling prowled to the front of the house, Dave went into the room where Galloway lay. Sheila met him, her eyes wide with questioning.

"The Wolf Butte crowd," explained Dave softly. "There's better than two dozen of 'em. A crowd like that means they are figuring on wreckin' this ranch."

"There will be no talk of you and Sling going out to face them alone," declared Sheila sturdily. "The logs in this house are thick. We'll make a battle of it. If Dad hears the shooting, he and the men will come."

From the front of the house, Sling's Winchester rapped its challenge. Dave found him crouched beside a window.

"They're surroundin' the place," rasped Sling. "We're goin' to have our hands full, kid. I'll stay here. Tell Washoe to watch the back. And you keep circulatin' from side to side. Keep out of line with the windows. They can't get a slug through these walls."

Sling thrust his rifle barrel through the window, caught a snap sight and triggered the shot. At the edge of the timber a man went down, writhing.

"That makes three—with the one Washoe got," said Sling grimly, stepping back as a hail of lead pounded about the window. "They'll find out they haven't got a cinch ahead of 'em."

Dave slipped from window to window studying the maneuvering of the outlaw force. On every side he saw men. The place was surrounded.

The attacking fire settled down to a steady roll. Window glass shattered, bullets smashing into the inner walls of the rooms. Dave tried a couple of shots in return, but without success, as the attackers were keeping close to cover.

In the kitchen he found Washoe cursing raucously.

"I thought you said you rocked off Tub Olney last night," growled the cook. "Well, I just saw the polecat. He's got a big bandage on his haid. He's down

yonder back of the bunkhouse, with five or six others. They're goin' to make it tough from there."

"Olney did go down quick," nodded Dave. "Almost too quick. I must have just creased him. Well, hold this end. Sling's out front, and I'm watchin' the sides."

A period of comparative quiet ensued. "Keep alive," called Sling from the front. "They're gettin' set for a rush."

Washoe gnawed off a huge chew of tobacco and spat into a sawdust-filled box. His face was stern.

Dave, looking over Washoe's shoulder, saw some six or seven men leap from behind the bunkhouse and come racing forward. Washoe's Sharp's belowed and one of the men collapsed. Before the cook could reload, Dave had levered out three shots himself. Two of them were good. The charge broke, and the survivors scurried back to shelter.

Up front Sling's rifle was firing steadily. Dave raced to the east side and caught four men out in the open. He got one and the others sought safety in a dry, weed-shrouded ditch which ran from a corner of the corrals back into the timber.

Moving back to the west side of the house, Dave was surprised to hear a rifle cracking steadily there. It was Sheila. She had just stepped back from a window and was shoving fresh loads into her rifle. Her chin was set and there was a look of determination in her eyes. She silenced Dave's objection.

"This is my fight too, Dave," she told him. "This is my home."

"But I can't have you takin' such chances," said Dave huskily. "You can't guess what it would do to me—if you got hit."

Sheila's eyes softened. "I suppose you think it would be easy on me, if you were shot down," she retorted.

Dave stared at her, then kissed her. "That goes both ways, *querida*. But now I'll take a lot of killin'."

BYOND the corrals, the barns and feed sheds was the only place that initial charge gained ground. Olney, quick to realize the advantage of this cover, had concentrated most of his men there. And now, from this protection, they poured a ceaseless fire into the rear of the ranchhouse.

Sling left his post in front and, with

Dave, joined Washoe, who was cursing steadily. Everything in line with the door and windows of the kitchen was rapidly becoming a wreck. Dishes were smashed, frying pans and pots punctured. A shelf of spices and flavoring extracts was a ruin. Broken crockery littered the floor. A condensed can of milk, hit squarely, had spattered walls and ceiling in a clammy smear.

"Golly!" bawled Washoe, crouched behind the stove. "Look at what they're doin' to my kitchen. They're ruinin' it, that's what! I got a dang good notion to burst right out at 'em."

"You stay put," barked Sling grimly. "Let 'em shoot as long as they don't hit nothin' better than a mess of dishes and pots."

Leaving Washoe to rave and curse, Dave and Sling went back to their regular posts. Things were quiet there, but when Dave pushed the crown of his hat into sight at a window, it was immediately torn from the barrel of his rifle and sent whirling across the room.

"Goin' to be tough," he muttered. "They're through takin' chances. The next rush will be from the kitchen end, and it's likely to be a mean one."

He went in where Jack Galloway lay, to find Sheila bending over the wounded man. Her eyes were shining as she looked up at Dave.

"I can't believe it, Davy, but his pulse is actually stronger. This man is iron."

Sling came prowling in, heard of Galloway's improved condition, and smiled.

"He'll live, if any man in his shape can do it. No quitter in Jack."

Dave told Sling of Washoe's statement that he had seen Tub Olney directing the attackers. Sling nodded.

"Shouldn't wonder but he's right. There's nobody else in Wolf Butte who could organize that crowd. You probably just stunned the polecat, Dave. Well, he ain't got us yet. But I'd shore like to see Jim Bruce an' his men show up."

At this moment there came a yell of warning from Washoe, followed by the blaring thunder of the big Sharps gun. Twice more it roared, the blast of it fairly shaking the stout walls of the house. Washoe yelled again, but this time his cry carried pain and despair.

Sling dropped his rifle and whipped out both guns.

"The finish, kid," he rasped. "One

way or the other—the finish. Let me go first.”

Before Dave could answer. Sling lunged past him, leaping into the kitchen. He began to shoot, the measured double roll of his weapons pounding out a march of death. To Dave, as he followed at Sling's heels, the room seemed full of men.

They were pouring in from the rear door, lips peeled back, eyes aglare with the crazy, killing heat of a mob. Without consciously realizing it, Dave found his hand guns rearing and jolting in recoil. Writhing on the floor by the stove was Washoe, his right leg queerly doubled under him. In the surge and roar of the fight he was trying to reload the Sharp's and get it to his shoulder.

Sling Carson was a fury. Out of the shadowy years of his past life he drew upon all the unerring mastery of a gunman's art. Step by step he moved toward that force of raiders fighting for entrance through the rear door, and the flailing lead from his guns seemed like an awful, invisible lightning that caught the raiders full in the face and drove them back and down.

An outlaw who had magically escaped Sling's onslaught, sidled along the left wall, his gun poised for a shot. Dave beat him to it by a fraction of a second. The fellow tottered and lunged forward on his face.

The room was an inferno. The air turned hot, acrid, and powder fumes strangled the lungs. Queer, invisible hands plucked at Dave's clothes. A red-hot brand appeared along the angle of Sling's taut jaw, followed immediately by a seeping fan of crimson.

But the raiders broke. The very fury of Dave's and Sling's onslaught made them irresistible. The doorway was piled high with dead and dying men, and those who turned and fled had to leap to clear the shambles.

Sling's guns clicked empty. Outside the door a harsh, raucous voice was screaming curses. Tub Olney heaved his heavy bulk into sight, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. At sight of Dave and Sling, he threw it up. Dave pulled down on him. The gun snapped uselessly on a dead cartridge.

Simultaneously Dave did two things. He hurled the useless gun at Olney and flung himself down and across, cutting Sling's feet cleanly from under him.

Both of them crashed to the floor. The room shuddered before the combined roar of two heavy reports.

Washoe sent a shrill paean of triumph cutting the air. "I got him—I got him square! Olney's down—this time to stay!"

DAVE struggled to his feet and knew unutterable relief as Sling followed suit. The room was queerly silent. But outside there was a new note. Guns were still rumbling and spanging, but no lead struck the house. Sling was the first to grasp the import.

"It's Bruce!" he cried. "The Slash B boys are here at last. Now we'll give those rats plenty. Washoe, give me that Sharp's—some shells: Quick!"

Washoe, sitting up now, his face lined with pain, but full of triumph, handed over the great buffalo gun and a double handful of long, yellow cartridges.

Sling went out the rear door, and soon the bellow of the Sharps was added to the thinner notes of the other guns.

Dave was white and sick when he followed Sling through that grisly doorway. Just beyond it was sprawled the uncouth shape of Tub Olney, his malignant power in the Shadow Hills forever through.

The raiders, what there was left of them, were in full retreat. Their leader had been killed, a dozen or more of their companions in evil blasted into eternity by Dave and Sling Carson. Now swift, grim, cold retribution descended upon them in the persons of Jim Bruce and his riders. They broke and ran, each man for himself.

Dave saw Bruce and the Slash B boys thunder past, driving home the weight of victory. Sling loped toward the corals.

"Stay put, kid," he called over his shoulder. "I'm grabbin' a bronc to help out Bruce and the boys. You watch the house. Some whelp may be hidin' out somewhere."

Dave located a discarded Winchester, saw that it was loaded, and circled the house and out-buildings. The place was still, empty. He shook himself trying to be rid of the nightmare atmosphere of the past hour. Strangely enough, it seemed to him, the sun was still shining, the timber green and whispering before the push of a clean, pleasant breeze.

He went back to the kitchen, steeled

himself at what he saw, then went in. He found Washoe propped against the stove, sucking greedily on a whisky flask. Washoe tossed the empty bottle aside and grinned at Dave. "Got a shot-up leg," he mumbled. "Wasn't that fight a lulu? I'll tell a man!"

Saying which, the doughty old cook fainted.

A MONTH had gone by. Two horses stood saddled before the Slash B corrals. Behind them stood two more horses, pack animals, heavily loaded. On his spirited sorrel sat Jack Galloway. He was thin and wan, but in his eyes gleamed the spark of returning strength and health. At the head of the other saddle horse stood Sling Carson.

Sling's face was as grave and stern as ever, but in it showed a new and spiritual strength. About Sling and Galloway were grouped Dave and Sheila, Jim Bruce and his men, and, supporting himself on a pair of homemade crutches, old Washoe.

"It's better this way," Sling was saying. "Now that the Shadow Hills are clean and that Wolf Butte is only a bad memory, decent folks are goin' to come in and settle here. With them will come the law, with the long memory that reaches back to records Jack and I want to forget. We got a good idea, one that'll pay worthwhile dividends.

"Cattle have got to be raised an' people fed. South of the Border, in old Mexico, I got a good friend—a real, high-class Spanish gentleman. He's always wanted me to come down there and go in pardners with him—bring down some up-to-date American methods on cattle raisin' and marketin'. Jack and I are headin' for there. It's hard to say good-by—but that's how life is."

He shook hands with Bruce, with Washoe and the rest of the Slash B men. He turned to Dave and said. "Well, kid, after a rotten start the big brother has got his feet on a straight trail at last. And it'll stay straight to the end. That's a promise boy."

Dave swallowed thickly and he gripped Sling's hand with all his strength. He managed a smile.

"The big brother is still the best man of his weight in the world," he said.

Sling turned, looked at Sheila, bent his head and kissed her on the cheek.

"Adios, Sheila," he murmured for her ear alone. "You're drawin' a man."

Her smile was quick and misty.

"I know it," she answered. "And don't forget—you and Jack. Maybe you won't come back to visit us, but after you get settled, write and tell us where your ranch is. And perhaps, some day, you'll have a lot of visitors from the Shadow Hills."

Jack Galloway grinned. "That's another promise. We'll turn all Mexico out to welcome you, eh, Sling?"

"Keno!" echoed Sling. He went into his saddle quickly and lifted the reins. His flashing smile went over everyone. "Till we meet again, adios!"

He and Galloway rode off, the pack animals jogging behind. They did not look back.

Side by side Dave and Sheila stood, while the others melted away and left them alone. Jim Bruce's eyes were gentle as he looked back on his slim, vibrant daughter and the lean, virile man of her choice.

Long after Sling and Jack had disappeared into the timber, Dave and Sheila still stood. Her head was on his shoulder now, his stalwart arm her shelter.

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SIX-GUN "COLLECTOR"

Carson and Mysterious Dave
plunged into the smoke filled
room behind leveled guns



*The exciting true story
of Dave Mathers, dogged
deputy of Dodge who was
daring, deadly and dour!*

by **HAMILTON CRAIGIE**

HE was short and broad, with a wide spread of shoulder, and an eye that was "pizen mean."

As he stood at the bar of the Lady Gay saloon, men sheered off from him so that, in no time at all he stood alone.

The whispers might have reached him, but he paid them no heed:

"Shore, he's pizen. That there is Mysterious Dave!"

And it was true enough. Of all of Dodge's routin-tootin bellions who

feared neither Man, God, nor the Devil, Mysterious Dave Mathers stood alone. Just as he stood alone at the bar there. A man, passing behind him, saw his face in the bar mirror, and backed off. Because the face that looked back at him was like the face of a side-winder, a rattlesnake, a vinegaroon. Such was Mysterious Dave Mathers, a six-gun "collector," not of pistols, but of men.

And yet, as he stood there, the whisky glass like a thimble in his huge, hairy hand, Dave Mathers represented the Law. Deputy marshal under one Tom Carson, already he had made an enviable—or an unenviable name. There was no doubt about it that he was a "bad-man" in the worst sense of the word, evil, unfeeling, treacherous, revengeful, but it was not remarkable that he should have been appointed a peace officer for all that. Nor was he the only man of his type to hold such office because, for one thing, that was one way of drawing the teeth of a bad man—make him a lawman, so that his guns would be on the side of the Law.

Mathers Stands Alone

It was early evening, and the Lady Gay was full. But, as has been said, it was noticeable that the man standing at the bar there stood alone. But only for a scant five minutes. From up the street there sounded a rattle of gunfire, and short, sudden yells. And then, the batwing doors slammed violently against the wall. Into the saloon strode a tall man, on his vest his badge of office, Tom Carson, marshal of Dodge. Unerringly he made for the lone figure.

"Dave!" he called out. "Come on. I need you. Shake a leg!"

Mathers, downing his drink at a gulp, turned to face his chief without change of expression, as Carson said: "It's the Henrys. Sure. Acting up again, in the Palace Dance-Hall. Already they've shot two men."

The Henry gang was notorious. Dave Mathers nodded, without excitement. He turned and walked out of the saloon with Carson, and up the street toward the dance-hall, from which came a further burst of gunfire, and wild yells.

Carson in the lead, the two men stood for a moment at the dance-hall door, and then went in.

Inside all hell had broken loose, with

several men down and dying, and over against the wall a group of cowboys, six in number, the Henrys, their guns out and blazing, with the sound of the bullets like the buzzing of bees. They saw the two men in the doorway, shifted their aim to send their bullets at the peace officers, in a steady stream.

But Carson—and certainly his deputy, Mathers—had not been idle. The marshal's two guns were in his hands, with Mathers beside him, as the two men walked into that stream of bullets. The nearest of the desperadoes, Ling Logan, slid down against the wall as Carson tottered, but kept his feet. Another of the Henrys, pistols in hands, sagged forward, his forehead striking the dance-floor with a thud. Slugs, in a leaden rain, were sprayed at and around the officers, but with Mathers on his feet and walking steadily forward, with no change of expression on his chill, ruthless countenance, his mouth a grim line.

Carson, both his arms broken by bullets, stood swaying, and then lurched out. He was a dead man almost with the motion, his body riddled, his eyes rolling in his head. Behind him, Mathers, however, was on his feet. The guns in his hands seemed moving in a blistering wheel of flame, with the odds now four to one, and with the desperadoes at last retreating, and still Mathers came on.

Right, left, his guns spoke, fired with a cold precision, because, whatever his evil qualities, the man was absolutely without fear. Without nerves. Without anything.

Perhaps this very chilled-steel nerve daunted the desperadoes. Because, in spite of their bullets, this man would not go down. They broke now, but before they could reach the rear entrance, two bullets from Mathers' guns found a brace of billets, with the odds now shortened to no more than two of them against the lone deputy. Cursing, these two dropped their pistols, throwing up their hands.

Two Survivors Are Shackled

There followed a tingling silence, like the silence of death, as in fact it was. There came a hoarse whisper from one of the two remaining bandits: "He ain't human!" And it may have been so. Cowed, their eyes wild as if they had seen something that they could not be-

lieve, the two live desperadoes stood speechless while Mathers handcuffed them, prodding them ahead of him toward the front door.

Four dead Henrys lay behind him, with the smoke from the combat lying over the dance-hall like a pall. Outside, men gave way before him, tough men, who looked at the deputy with something approaching awe. "It's Sudden Death Dave, sure enough!" a man muttered, and it was no more than the truth.

No marshal, no peace officer could have topped Mathers' achievement, and a partial list of his contemporaries includes such names as those of Wyatt Earp, Uncle Billy Tilghman, Ben Daniels, and Luke Short. Another, perhaps not quite as well known, was T. C. Nixon, who had become a deputy Dodge marshal, when Mysterious Dave had turned in his star. The two men met then in a saloon in the town, with their roles this time reversed.

This time it was Mathers, the ex-deputy, who, drunk and on the prod, stood, as was usual, alone at the long bar, his moody gaze fixed on the glass in his hand, his pale eyes indrawn, thinking what thoughts no man may know, the dark thoughts of the killer, with his hand against every man's. He had been heroic in that desperate gun-battle in the dance-hall, but now he turned at sound of a cool, carrying voice:

"Why don't you go home, Dave?" it greeted him. It was Nixon, on his vest his badge of office, his thumbs hooked into his gun-belt, but making no move toward his guns.

For the tenth of a second Mathers made no answer—in words. Then, lightning-swift, and with absolutely no warning, his starboard gun was out and roaring. Nixon, shot through the heart, fell forward, face down. Mathers, not looking at the dead man, turned, walked out.

No man there made any move to stop him, nor is there record of any sort of reprisal or of retribution, from the Law. Because it was only a little later that Mathers became the central figure in an almost unbelievable drama—and it was in a church.

The man who—according to one authority, Bob Wright—killed seven men by actual count in a single night, topping even his toll of the Henrys, at long last attended church. This was after he had turned in his deputy's star. Accord-

ing to this same authority, Mysterious Dave had, actually, killed more victims than any other gunman in the West. The nickname, Mysterious, however, could have been given him by reason of what follows: the episode in which he surprised everybody—perhaps even including himself.

The Sawdust Trail

In a small church in the town an evangelist was holding forth. An eloquent man, he had made many converts, and now his voice rose in the respectful silence with an added appeal:

"Gents," he pleaded, "we've had a powerful number of those who've come forward to walk the sawdust trail. But there's one man who, so far, has refused to walk that trail, one man who's been stubborn, and you know who he is. Dave Mathers." He turned to where Mathers sat, his cold gaze on the preacher. The evangelist lifted his voice. "Dave," he implored, "you've come here before this, but nothing I've said has moved you. I ask you: come forward—before it's too late!"

The silence that followed was profound. The preacher, who had not expected Mysterious Dave to heed him, began again to speak. And then, all at once—and there is testimony as to this, too—there came the sound of a sob. It was Mathers. Bowing his head, and burying his face in his hands, his sobs filled the small church. The rest of the congregation did not know what to think. They stirred restlessly, as the sobs continued, and then there came the preacher's voice:

"Lord, if I can convert this one sinner, I'm willin' to die, Lord, so help me! Let him be converted—and then take my body, Lord, and my soul!"

Alongside the pulpit, another worshipper spoke up. He was one of the deacons. Others of the deacons joined him in frenzied prayer. For a moment, in the turmoil, their voices reached to the roof: "Lord, take me, too, if this sinner will confess. I ask it with all my heart, Lord. Let us all ascend straight to heaven, along with this sinner here, if it be acceptable, if it be acceptable to thee, O Lord!"

Then—pandemonium broke loose. Mathers, rising in his place, began shouting:

"I'm with you, friends! I'm saved. I'm saved, preacher! But while we're all here together, and all of us saved, we'll all start straight for heaven, I say. First, Brother Johnson, the preacher; he goes first. Then them there deacons. Me—last!"

The congregation sat, frozen. Brave as many of them were, their knees turned to water as they saw Mysterious Dave whip out a long, heavy gun. The gun crashed—and we have to remember that Mathers was a certain, dead shot—but with time for the preacher, in a long dive, to crash through the nearest window, taking it with him—not on his way to heaven, but downward, to the outside earth.

Safety First

The deacons, some of them, dived down beneath the benches; others milled together in a furious effort to reach the door. Mysterious Dave, sheathing his gun, grinned a twisted grin, rising and going out. And—as one sardonic chronicler has witnessed: "After that they never did worry any more about Dave's soul."

There is no doubt that Mysterious Dave was every bit as black as he is painted. In the matter of the shooting of Nixon he did it in cold blood, whether or not he was full of bad whisky. But he could be magnificently brave, as witness

his facing of the Henry gang, and the killing of the seven men, at which he had no assistance whatever, a record, as to actual killings at one time, exceeded only by Wild Bill Hickok—if the incident can be believed. Hickok is supposed to have accounted for eight men who braced him when Hickok's guns were in their scabbards.

That Mathers had a sense of humor is seen in his behavior at the revival meeting in the church, and yet, who knows, he might, at the time, have been sincere. He was by no means the only Western badman full of apparent contradictions, mean, "ornery," tough, and yet with what seems to have been a sense of humor, and, of course, brave.

Unlike a contemporary, Billy Brooks, for example, at no time did Mysterious Dave show anything resembling the white feather. He leaves us the picture of a man not so much brutal as cold, merciless, and possessed of an ice-cold nerve. In a day and a time when offhand bravery and skill with a six-gun were common, he stood out. This alone would be enough to confer on him a kind of immortality wherever and whenever stories are told or written of badmen of any sort.

In the words of the editor of the *Kingsley Graphic*, he was one of the most prominent citizens of Dodge City, helping to make it the "beautiful bibulous Babylon of the Frontier."

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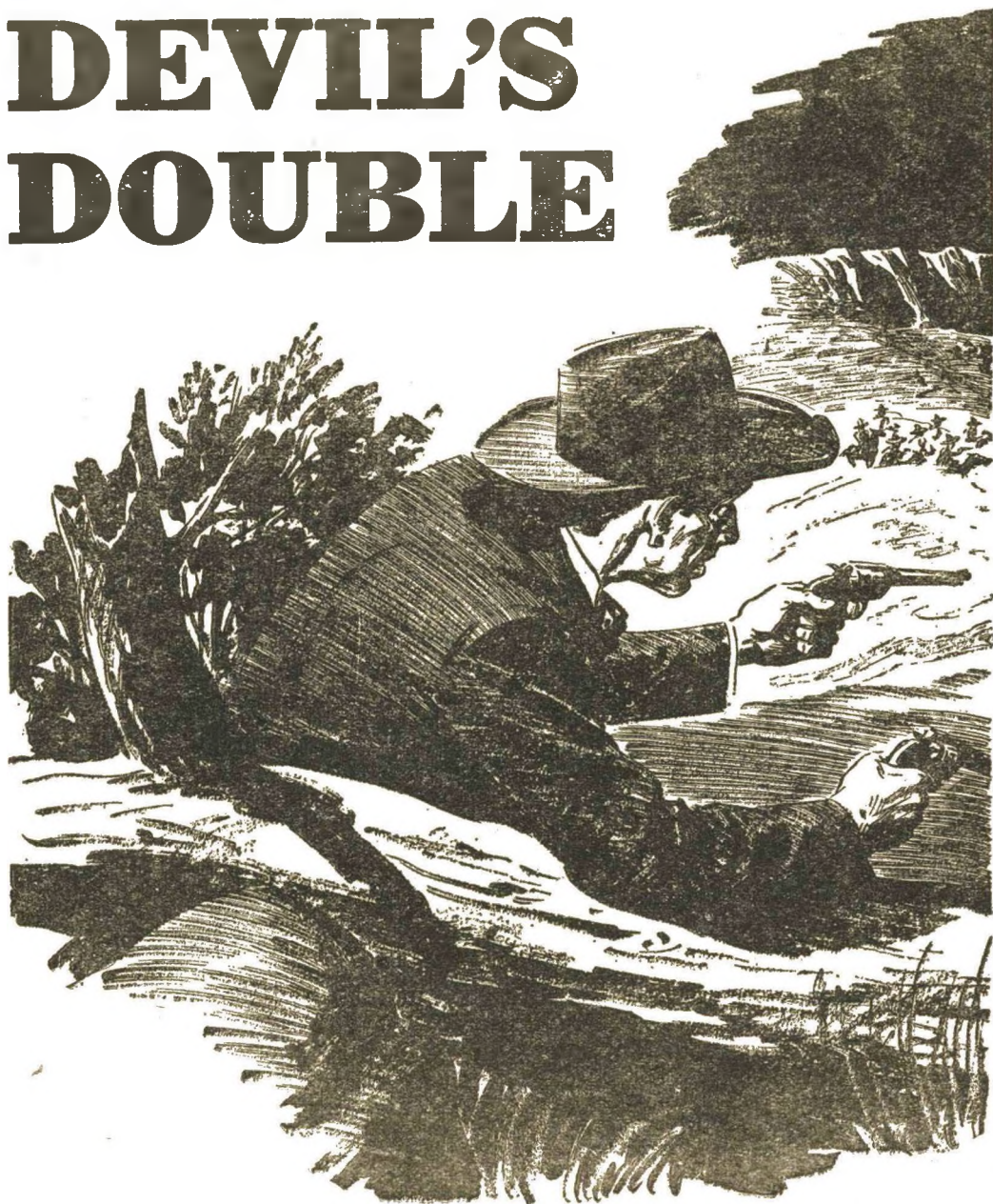
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When Drake Kennedy steps into the role of his notorious outlaw cousin and joins Mabry's wild bunch, his real motive is clouded by gunsmoke!

HERBERT A. WOODBURY



As Drake fired, Mabry gave a spasmodic jerk and dropped flat

HANDS on hips, shoulders squared, eyes intent, Drake Kennedy stood in the Trey Full Saloon in Los Alamos, regarding the poker game at the center table. Five men sat about the board. Two didn't count. They had thrown down their hands after the deal; they

weren't in on the fast and furious raising taking place, now, before the draw. The other three interested Drake.

Two—the men on each end—were professional gamblers, obviously. The worried-looking youth sitting between the two gamblers was a young Spanish-

American. He concentrated on the game. Drake chose the hyphenated word deliberately. Spanish-American—not Mexican. The boy's manner and his general look of breeding proclaimed that he was the scion of one of those wealthy, influential Spanish families which had lived on this side of the border for generations.

Drake's bronzed features tightened in seriousness as he continued to watch. The old army game. The boy, sitting between the two gamblers, didn't have a chance. Just now, he was being caught in a battle of cross-raising between the other two. The gambler on the one end had opened with a bet; the boy called; the gambler on the other side had raised. Now, the first gambler raised his partner's raise, and it cost the boy two blue chips merely to play along.

Drake watched the process repeated a second time; a third; a fourth; a fifth. And his frown deepened. He didn't know the boy; he had never seen him before. But once, long ago, he had lived here in this neighborhood and had numbered as his friends, other young Spanish-Americans.

The tactics of the two gamblers stuck in his craw. It was mighty sharp poker to trap a man thus in the middle, to keep raising in such a way that he wasn't able to force a call; to freeze him out.

Drake waited until the boy, with cold perspiration standing out on his forehead, said, "I'm out of chips. Will you let me drag some and owe the pot?"

"Nope, sonny." Both gamblers shook their heads. "If you're out of cash, you got to drop out."

Then Drake stepped forward, and swiftly tossed a roll of orange-backed bills onto the table. "The kid ain't out of cash yet," he said. "He's borrowin' what he needs from me."

The boy looked up at Drake and said, "Gee, mister!"

"Forget it, kid," Drake snapped. "Go ahead and take what you need. They won't freeze you out, now. You've enough there to outlast both of 'em."

There was a moment of crisp, brittle silence. One of the gamblers rose, his face purple. "Listen, hombre," he challenged, "you ain't got no right to horn in!"

Drake's long, gracefully tapered hands slid down toward the ivory butts of the twin, matched Colts swinging

from his hips in criss-crossed holsters.

"No?" he intoned softly.

THERE was a second of silence, broken, this time by the second gambler.

"Aw, why not let him lend the kid money, Pete?" he said. "It just goes to make the pot that much sweeter, don't it?"

Pete, the first gambler, sat down. There were two more raises round the board; then a general call. And then the dealer, turning to the boy, said "Cards?"

"I'll play these," the boy said.

"Three," said the far gambler.

And in that instant, Drake Kennedy sprang. His hand caught the dealer's wrist; twisted it.

"No objection in the world," he said softly, "to your givin' your partner three cards. Only they come off the top of the deck, not the bottom."

The man attempted to leap back, but Drake clung to him; held onto his wrist, exposed three aces just slipping off the bottom of the pack.

Pete, meantime, had leaped to his feet in a flash, and his hand had dropped to the holster on his right hip. His gun came up; cleared. And there was a report!

Only—it didn't come from Pete's gun. Nor did it come from either of the twin Colts which had been dangling there from Drake's criss-crossed holsters!

Drake had been unable to make a draw from either holster. His right hand, which should have made the criss-cross draw from the left holster had been occupied; clamped onto the dealer's wrist. His right holster, containing—butt forward—the gun which he might have drawn with his free left hand, had been pinned against the table.

Still it was Drake who fired! Mysteriously, miraculously, out of nowhere as it were, a tiny, double-barrelled Derringer had appeared in the palm of his left hand. And it was the Derringer whose blast reverberated through the barroom. Pete swung completely around, folded in the middle like a closing jack-knife, dropped!

All in the same, blended movement, Drake swung back upon the dealer, whom he hadn't yet let go. He lifted the Derringer this time like a club, brought it cracking down upon the dealer's skull. He let go of the man's wrist as he did

so, and the man slumped groggily into his chair.

Drake turned calmly to the boy. "Supposin' you help yourself, now, to what you've lost to the pair of 'em," he suggested.

The boy sprang eagerly to obey. Drake waited until he had retrieved his losses, counted them, and cashed them. Then, turning his back on the table, pocketing the Derringer, he started forward to the bar.

There was an instant scream from behind him. "*Madre de Dios, señor!* Look out!"

It was an unnecessary scream. Drake, with his eyes on the bar's mirror up ahead of him, had seen the pistol-whipped dealer go for his gun the instant he turned his back. He whirled, using his right hand, this time, making a lightning fast cross draw from his hip. He fired as his gun cleared.

The blast of a forty-five shook the stillness of a suddenly hushed room. Joe, the dealer, clutched at his breast; dropped as his crooked partner, Pete, had dropped.

There was hubbub, pandemonium, at once. The timid crowded for the doors and windows; some sought refuge under tables. Then, abruptly, into the midst of the confusion, from the swinging doors giving on the alley stepped a tall, lean, sallow-faced gentleman in a stiff-brimmed, very military Stetson. He wore a star upon his calfskin vest. His two holsters, one upon each hip, were empty. In each of his hands was a gun. The man with the star came to a full halt.

His voice boomed across the room.

"Drop your gun, stranger! And don't move!"

Drake could have blasted the length of the room at the man with the star, of course. His Colt was there in his hand, aimed. But he had been born and brought up with a respect for the law. The law was on the side of the just, wasn't it? What had he to fear? He let his gun slip through his fingers to the sawdust floor. The man with the star bounded forward.

"You're under arrest!" he cried.

"But it's all right, Sheriff Bartlette," the young Spaniard interposed. "He caught Pete and Joe trying to cheat me. And—and Joe tried to throw down on him from behind."

The sheriff gave the young Spaniard not the slightest heed. Two eyes as cold and gray and fathomless as the eyes of a fish took Drake in from head to foot.

"Killer, huh?" the sheriff sneered. "Bad man? Heard Los Alamos was a tough town and come in here lookin' for trouble. Well, hombre, you've found it all right. Let's get a-goin'!"

The boy tried to protest again.

"But, Sheriff, I only—" Drake began to say.

"Only killed two men, huh?" the sheriff scoffed. "I know. Probably ain't up to your usual record. But it's the last two men you'll kill here, stranger. Or anywhere else."

Drake felt himself freeze. "But ain't you goin' to listen to what the kid says?" His blue eyes swept the room. "There must be other witnesses. Ain't somebody goin' to stick up for me?"

NOBODY was going to stick up for him. Or so it seemed for a long moment which spun itself out endlessly. Drake's eyes sought the two men who sat at the poker table with the boy and the two gamblers. Each man in turn averted his glance as Drake mutely appealed to him.

Drake wondered for a second how swiftly he could drop his left hand, draw the gun which lay there at his right hip. Then abruptly a man in the coat and vest of a black business suit, in cream colored trousers tucked into the tops of high, butterfly inlaid boots, strode forward. He was a man of fifty with eyes as cold, somehow, and as cruel as the sheriff's. A man who instantly repelled Drake.

"I reckon the pair of 'em had it comin' to 'em at that, Bartlette," Drake heard him say.

The sheriff whirled, sheer astonishment written on his face. "Y-you're vouchin' for the stranger, Mabry?" he stammered.

"I'm vouchin' for him," said Mabry.

There was a moment's crisp silence; a moment's significant by-play. Drake saw the sheriff's mouth open, close, drop open again. He saw the sheriff control himself with visible effort. Then the sheriff's guns went slowly and—Drake knew—reluctantly, regretfully back into their holsters.

"Okay, Mabry," said the sheriff, "if you want to vouch for him, why—why—"

But I'd have thought, under the circumstances—" The voice trailed off uncertainly.

Drake turned to Mabry. And again the man somehow repelled him. He managed, nevertheless, a very genuine, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Mabry said. He turned and walked off.

Drake didn't follow him. He stooped, picked up the Colt he had dropped. As he slid the weapon into its empty holster, he saw the sheriff turn back to him.

"You're lucky," Bartlette said. "Mabry owns the town. And if he wants to excuse your killin' two of his gamblers, why, that's his affair. But I wouldn't try to crowd that luck of yours too much if I was you, stranger. I been admirin' that black horse of yours, outside. Looks like he's quite a stepper. I'll give you till noon to try his ridin' qualities."

Bartlette turned without waiting for an answer; disappeared. Drake's blue eyes followed him calmly, quietly. Then he, too, turned. He searched the room with his glance for the young Spaniard. But the boy was gone. Had he abandoned him? It didn't matter.

Drake walked to the bar and ordered a double whisky.

II

DRAKE quietly stood there at the bar, his drink untasted, ten minutes later, when Mabry stepped up to him. There was a smile on Mabry's lips; friendship, in a way. And yet not quite friendship either for it was tinged with a sort of cunning, craft.

"Well?" Mabry asked.

Drake looked the man full in the eyes. "Well—what?"

The smile warmed faintly along Mabry's lips. "Well, I heard Bartlette orderin' you out of town."

It was a speech which said nothing in particular in itself. It was an opening, as it were, for something yet to come. Drake waited.

"I watched that draw of yours, stranger," Mabry added quietly. "It was mighty fast. Faster, I'd say, than Bartlette's."

Drake felt a freezing along the back of his neck as Mabry's eyes bored into him. They were the eyes of a rattlesnake.

"And why," Drake asked, feeling un-

comfortable under the gaze of those rattlesnake eyes, "should you be telling me that? Accordin' to Bartlette, you own the town. If that's true, Bartlette must work for you. And if Bartlette works for you, it don't make sense for you to tell me that."

"But it does make sense, Kennedy."

"You know me?" Drake gasped.

Mabry nodded. "Recognized you the minute you started up to the bar after killin' Joe. You'd been pointed out to me once in Rim Rock." The man laughed dryly. "And for the minute I couldn't decide what to do—whether to let Bartlette take you out and hang you, whether to let him make himself famous as the man who finally caught you.

"And then it come to me on the spur of the moment that maybe you'd be worth more to me alive than dead. Fact of the matter is, Kennedy, I've needed a new partner here for a long time. Bartlette ain't been satisfied with his wages. He's been pullin' off a few jobs on the side; not reportin' 'em, not turnin' the money in to me.

"Been considerin' havin' him dry-gulched," Mabry went on, matter-of-factly. "Sort of hesitated, though, at the same time, because I was danged if I knew who I could get as fast on the trigger to replace him. But that's all solved now, if you'd care to string along with me."

"You mean," Drake cried, "you expect me to work for you?"

"Hope," said Mabry, "not necessarily expect. I know you've always played a lone hand, Kennedy. I know you've never teamed up with anybody before. But consider the lay you'd have here. You wouldn't be dodgin' sheriffs, any longer. You'd be the sheriff.

"You stay in town past Bartlette's deadline—see? He starts gunnin' for you. You kill him. There's an inquest. We don't tell a soul you're Kennedy. We pass you off as Smith or Jones or Brown—somethin' like that. You're a decent cowhand that Bartlette crowded unjustly into a fight. Everybody sees that, and consequently you're acquitted.

"Then what? The town needs a new sheriff. I own the town. I suggest that Smith or Jones or Brown gets the job. The county pays you a hundred a month. And I pay you—well, I'm payin' Bart three hundred. A man like you'd be worth more. Say five."

"And you expect me—" Drake spaced his words—"to kill a man for five hundred dollars a month?"

"Make it five hundred and a bonus then," said Mabry. "We've got a sweet proposition, Kennedy. Not only your line, but we've gone in for cattle rustlin' quite recent. Discovered a secret canyon leadin' out of these hills into country where it's never occurred to folks to look for their stock."

Drake backed unsteadily away. "No; thanks, Mabry," he cried. "N-no. Thanks."

His hands dropped to the handles of the Colts; he continued to back, all the way, to the door. It was an unnecessary precaution, apparently. If Mabry had talked freely, if he had hinted glibly of being the guiding evil genius behind a syndicate of crime, with headquarters here in the Trey Full at Los Alamos, he gave no sign of regretting his confidences.

"Okay," he called after Drake cheerily. "Go on playin' it alone, if you like. But in the meantime, do me a favor. If you ain't goin' to do what I asked you to do as a business proposition, please don't do it out of sheer cussedness. Because if I ain't goin' to have you to fill a—well, a certain job, I'm goin' to need the hombre that's fillin' that job at present. Savvy? Just as one pard to another?"

Drake Kennedy reached the sidewalk under the wooden awning of the Trey Full. He flung himself up into the saddle of his black, spurred and was off up Main Street. Pain, hurt, a bewildered disappointment, clouded his face. His blue eyes, their horror gone from them, now, were sad.

So this was Los Alamos! A town of crooked gamblers, thug sheriffs, crime overlords who hired killers. Drake's glance shot for a moment to the grassless plaza on his left. And his mind slipped back into the past. He had been fourteen when he had first seen Los Alamos. At that time the town had seemed to him the most beautiful in the world.

They had lingered in Los Alamos a year, he and his father. Then they'd pushed on. But never, either in his travels with his father or in his travels, afterward, alone, had Drake found a town—or any place—which had so captured his fancy.

THE Los Alamos of his youth had been a village of pink and blue 'dobe buildings set about a green, grassy plaza with palms and giant flowering oleanders and roses. It had been a town of peace and quiet and contentment. Of color. Of laughter. Of music. No tin-panny blasts from dance halls—just the soft, lilting strains of the guitar, strumming Spanish waltzes.

The town had been American, to be sure. This district had belonged to the Union for years and years. But the country round about here, twelve years ago, had been owned mostly by the descendants of the first Spanish families who had settled here as early as the time when the Pilgrims had been settling at Plymouth. Los Alamos had been a bit of old Spain.

It was all changed now. Sadness, sheer melancholy, overwhelmed Drake as he loped steadily away from the ugliness, the sordidness, the wickedness behind him. Let Sheriff Bartlette think that he had run him out of town! Let Mabry think that he was going because he wanted to play a lone hand—whatever he meant by that!

Neither reason took him away. He was fleeing because behind him a dream, an illusion, lay shattered. He had longed for twelve years to return to Los Alamos. He'd saved his wages, come back to his childhood paradise to settle down, and he'd found corruption!

Suddenly a bullet nipped Drake's sleeve; a bullet sang past his cheek; a bullet whined over his head! And Drake Kennedy ceased thinking of shattered dreams.

The blasts had come from behind him. A gun in each hand, his reins dropped over the pommel of his loping black, Drake twisted himself round in his saddle, and beheld a spectacle which unnerved him. He'd expected to see Bartlette, perhaps, speeding him on his way out of town with lead. Or some ugly crony of Pete's or Joe's. Or even Mabry. Mabry who might have regretted his confidences. Mabry who might have pursued him.

But instead, on the loading platform in front of a store, Drake beheld a white-haired old woman. She held a revolver in her hand. Even as Drake glimpsed it, it belched flame a fourth time, and a bullet tore through the top of his Stetson!

Drake did the only thing which, under the amazing circumstances, it seemed to him he could do. Two Colts went back into their holsters. He whirled forward again, leaned low along the neck of his pony, and spurred for dear life.

She probably was some drunken old crone, some liquor-crazed witch. But he couldn't fire, even so.

A fifth bullet screamed over Drake's head. A sixth thudded into the dust behind him. Then he was out of range before the woman could reload. He checked the pace of his pony finally, a mile or so outside town. The old woman, whoever she was and for whatever reason she had fired, had let her performance go at that, apparently. There'd been no attempt, as far as Drake could see, looking back along the trail, at pursuit.

He jogged on. The town had been ugly. The countryside, green and gold beneath a turquoise sky, was beautiful. It hadn't changed. On the slopes the ocatillo shook out long, scarlet-fingered blossoms. There were tiny, waxed buds on the saguaro. The paloverdes were a mass of yellow.

Drake sighed, and his interrupted sadness flowed gradually back over him. If only the town weren't there. Or if only the town could be erased, blotted out.

It had been on a day in May like this when he'd first glimpsed this district. And he'd felt wonderful.

What man living hasn't felt it, some time? You glimpse a place for the first time, and you think, "This isn't new. It's old. I've seen it before. It's home. Destiny waits for me here."

The same sensation swept back over Drake afresh, now.

If only the town could be erased, blotted out! he thought again.

An hour passed; he plodded on. And then abruptly, for the second time since he'd left the Trey Full, Drake came out of his day-dreams with a crash!

No bullet roared, this time. He simply glimpsed for a second a shadow overhead. Then before the meaning of that shadow had registered in his mind, a rope tossed from a mesquite clump which he had just passed settled down over his shoulders.

Its coils pinioned his arms, helpless, to his sides. Drake felt himself jerked from the saddle. He landed in the trail behind

him with a thud. And before he could move, he was buried beneath a human avalanche.

A fist smashed him in the face. A gun butt descended crushingly on his skull. Red spots whirled up before his eyes. Before he even knew what had happened, it was lights out. . . .

HIS arms bound tightly to his sides, his Colts no longer at his hip, his feet tied as securely as his arms, Drake emerged from his unconsciousness as the brandy trickled down his throat, and looked up groggily, dazedly into the stern face of a white-haired old man, a Spaniard. Beside the old man stood a woman with white hair; also a Spaniard.

"But it will do no good to take him into Los Alamos and turn him over to Bartlette," the woman, gesticulating wildly, was crying in excited Spanish. "Poof! Bartlette, Mabry, that crew—why, they'd welcome him with open arms! Make him one of them! Please, Sebastian, let me kill him, now, as I tried to kill him while he rode out of town."

Drake's blue eyes opened wide. This was the woman who had fired at him from the porch of the store? She'd circled out around him; contrived this ambush? But she was no drunken crone; no liquor-crazed witch! Her face showed as plainly the stamp of breeding and refinement as had the face of the young Spaniard whom Drake had saved from the gamblers back at the Trey Full.

She, like the boy, must be one of the neighborhood's old aristocracy. One of those who, in times gone by, had been Drake's friends. One of those whom, even as he'd cursed the new Los Alamos, he'd still instinctively looked upon as his friends. Yet she wanted to kill him? There were a half dozen others beside the old man and the old woman.

"She's right Sebastian," one of these spoke up. "If we took him back to Los Alamos and turned him over to the sheriff, they'd only be too glad to set him free. What a chance for them! To get Lightning Kennedy to team up with them."

"Lightnin' Kennedy?" Drake cried.

"Lightning or the Devil—whichever of your two handles we use," one of the younger men said in English, "don't

make no difference, partner. You're Kennedy, and that's all that matters. You don't deny that, do you?"

Drake said, "I'm Kennedy."

"Then take that!"

A fist thudded into Drake's unprotected face, started to thud again. But the old man flung himself upon the youth.

"No, Juan! No!" he cried. He hurled the young man back. The young man's voice mounted hysterically.

"But he killed my brother! Before my eyes! Before my mother's eyes!"

It had been a day of surprises. This was the weirdest, the strangest of all.

"I killed your brother—before your mother's eyes?" Drake stammered.

"When you held up the stage, six months ago, near Rim Rock. You shot the driver from ambush. My brother leaped out the door, gun in hand. You shot him down like a dog!"

The voice went on and on while Drake's mind whirled, jumped, spun. Six months ago near Rim Rock. Rim Rock! Why, that was what Mabry had said, too. "Saw you once—in Rim Rock!"

Other bits of Mabry's conversation floated back, "Not only your line, but cattle rustlin' too . . . Wouldn't tell a soul you was Kennedy . . . No longer need to be dodgin' the sheriffs." Mabry must have taken him for an outlaw, too!

Must have? But of course he had! That was why he'd felt so safe, making his own confession of crime. He'd imagined himself talking to a killer, to a highway robber. Drake's mind continued to spin, to jump. And the killer looked like himself? The killer—most impossible of all—was named Kennedy?

Then it clicked, somehow; it all made sense. Memories floated back out of the forgotten past. He remembered all of a sudden why they had come to Los Alamos in the first place, he and his father, so many years ago. His father's cousin, Dan Kennedy, had been supposed to have a ranch near there. Only he didn't have a ranch near there.

The sound of words impinged upon Drake's thoughts. The Spaniards were arguing again about the advisability of turning him over to the law in Los Alamos. The old man, Don Sebastian, spoke:

"Perhaps you're right, all of you," he said. "But if we keep him, we can't kill him like a dog. We'll have to—to give him a fair hearing."

"We could take him to Don Esteban's," someone cried, "and try him. You know—as we've been trying some of our civil suits there lately since we've failed to trust the courts in Los Alamos. We'll have Esteban sit as judge. Juan and his mother can be witnesses; we'll pick a jury.

"Why not? If it isn't legal in the strict letter of the law, it's just, isn't it? It wouldn't be murder on our part in a case like that, would it?"

Drake swallowed at the word, murder. For briefly he visioned the scene: a miners' court, as it were—swift justice. The limb of a tree as a gallows, a rope round his neck, a blindfold on his eyes, a horse whipped out from under him.

"But you're makin' a mistake, folks," he cried. "You must be thinkin' of an hombre named Bill Kennedy, son of a Dan Kennedy. They lived here a long time ago. Dad and me came lookin' for 'em. Couldn't find 'em.

"They'd moved. Somethin' about this Bill's killin' a boy that used to play with him. Got acquitted because he was so young at the time. But him and his father left the country. He's probably gone from bad to worse as he grew up. It's him you're lookin' for. I—I'm Drake Kennedy."

"And you look enough like this Bill to be his twin?"

DRAKE nodded. "I do. I'd forgotten all that. But now it comes back. I remember bein' told when we first come out here that I looked like this second cousin Bill."

"You have a convenient memory," Don Sebastian said. He turned to the others. "Better not untie his feet even to get him into the saddle. Throw him across the saddle like a sack of meal."

"But there's folks here in this neighborhood that can vouch for me," Drake's voice mounted. "Folks who knew me when I was here before. Folks who—who knew Bill too. Who knew there were two of us. The de Garcias, for instance. Dad and I worked for Don Fernando de Garcia!"

"You have," said Don Sebastian, "in addition to your convenient memory, a most convenient knowledge of the neighborhood—since you pick a family which hasn't lived here for five years."

"I knew the Mendozas, too, and the Alvarez family!"

"Who also sold their holdings and moved out of here when Mabry first came into the neighborhood," said Don Sebastian.

Two stalwart young Spaniards had Drake between them by that time. They carried him roughly to his own horse, slung him across the saddle as Don Sebastian had commanded. They tied his hands to the stirrup leathers on one side; his feet to the stirrup leathers on the other. There was a general mounting. Someone took the reins of Drake's pony. And they were off.

As they jogged across country, Drake couldn't help thinking how ironic it was. Because he had hated Mabry, hated the new Los Alamos, he had fled—to be killed by those whom, all his life, he had considered his friends!

III

A HALF HOUR passed. Two outfits met head on along the road—the one led by Don Sebastian; the other, riding toward Los Alamos, led by Pablo Gomez, the youth to whose rescue Drake had come in the Trey Full. The two outfits halted to hail each other. And all in a flash, Drake had a staunch defender.

"But is his story so strange?" Pablo demanded. "If he is the wicked one, why did he want to lend me money? What did he care whether Pete and Joe froze me out or not?"

"He simply wanted to start a row," said Juan. "They say he's like that. He comes into a town, deliberately does something to make a brawl, and then sees how many men he can kill."

"But would he have started a brawl that way?" Pablo demanded. "Why, *por Dios!* I—I right now was on my way with my *vaqueros* here to save him from being hanged in Los Alamos by Sheriff Bartlette. When I left him the sheriff had arrested him for the deaths of Pete and Joe. I fled home to get help for him."

Pablo's voice trailed off. He must have read in the stern eyes of Juan, of Don Sebastian, of the others, the impossibility of argument. For they hadn't seen Drake Kennedy perform in the Trey Full. But Pablo had seen him.

Killer? He'd killed Pete and Joe to be sure. But not as the fiendish Lightning Kennedy might have killed them, in cold blood, without giving them a chance.

He'd drawn on neither man until the man had drawn on him.

Pablo wheeled his pony aside as if to let Don Sebastian's cavalcade pass on. A gap of a dozen feet widened between the two outfits. Then, a gun abruptly appeared in his hand, Pablo cried, "Halt!" Guns gleamed in the hands of the *vaqueros*, the *caballeros* with him. And Don Sebastian's outfit came to a sudden, amazed stop.

Pablo spurred forward, jerked the reins of Drake's pony from Juan. Then in a flash Pablo wheeled, covered, protected by the guns of his men. He led Drake's pony behind his line of *vaqueros*. He vaulted down out of his saddle, cut Drake free of his bonds, allowed him to mount astride. Then Pablo spurred; his men spurred; Drake spurred, and they were off!

They'd covered a hundred yards, two hundred yards, when the fusillade commenced behind them. A rain of lead fell just short and continued—at two hundred yards—to fall just short.

Pursuit pounding behind them, Pablo led the way across the soft green featheriness of the desert. A *vaquero's* horse plunged its hoof into a gopher hole, went down, somersaulted, and the *vaquero* went flying.

Drake, looking back, saw the man pick himself up dazedly, saw Don Sebastian's party roar past him. They came to the lip of an arroyo; their ponies sat on their haunches to slide the steep bank. Saddle leather creaking, cinches straining, they shot up the other side.

Then gradually, slowly, they gained on the others until Drake saw the pursuers abandon the chase.

A long, low, sprawling, red-tile-roofed 'dobe house surrounded by a high 'dobe wall loomed up ahead of them at last. A high, iron-studded wooden gate stood open, and they loped into the yard of a hacienda. Peppers, graceful and feathery as weeping willows, gnarled ancient olive trees stood about the yard. A red rambler rose bush climbed a lattice beside the porch. The last men through the wooden gate closed it, shot a bar through a slot.

"We're home," Pablo remarked.

Drake made no answer. His blue eyes had darted ahead to the dark-haired, dark-eyed young girl in the tight-bodied, flowing skirted dress who had risen from a chair on the veranda; was com-

ing forward. A high, tortoise-shell comb set with rhinestones gleamed upright in her hair.

And Drake, not knowing why, swallowed; felt the roof of his mouth go dry. She was lovely!

"My sister, Lucia," Pablo said. Then while Lucia regarded Drake and while Drake regarded Lucia, Pablo poured forth his story. "I did right, didn't I, Lucia?"

Two brown eyes seemed to penetrate deep into Drake's very soul. He saw the girl weigh him; size him up.

"You did right, Pablo," she said.

They sat down to a dinner served on silver plate, to wine in crystal goblets, that night. Drake told Pablo and his sister a little more of his story. How, when he had left Los Alamos with his father, the two of them had gone on over the Sierras into California.

He told of working his way, after his father's death, as far up the coast as Oregon, as far inland from there as Wyoming; then, of his sentimental pilgrimage back here to Los Alamos.

"And I thought it had all changed," he said. "I hated it. But this hasn't changed. This is just as it used to be."

"Things have changed, though," the girl told him. And she sketched a short history of the neighborhood.

THE Texas trail herds had come in; some owned by honest, industrious ranchers who had settled down peacefully with the Spaniards. But there'd been a host of riffraff, too. The riffraff had taken possession of the town. A great many of the old families had sold their holdings and moved over the line into old Mexico.

"And those of us who've stayed are beginning to wonder whether we wouldn't have been wiser to have moved out, too. For the last six months we've all been losing cattle. We're slowly going bankrupt. We suspect Mabry, but we haven't been able to catch him at it or to trail the herds."

"But if you're sure it's Mabry, why don't you all band together, go in town, and shoot up the place?" Drake asked.

The girl shook her head. "We'd have the troops in here from Fort McDowell. And unless we could prove we'd been justified, we'd suffer for it."

Her sentence trailed as a servant, pale and breathless, rushed into the room.

"Don Sebastian's at the outer gate," he cried, "with an army of thirty men. He says he'll give you fifteen minutes to surrender the prisoner you took from him, this afternoon."

Pablo rose. "And if I refuse?"

"He said you were his kinsman; his friend. He said that he had borne you only love and that he'd hate to harm a hair of your head. But he said that if you refused, he'd be compelled to order his men to attack."

Drake saw the shadow which flitted across the girl's face. Fear? No, not that. Something else; pain, anguish. And Drake knew instantly of what she was thinking. Don Sebastian had said that he was Pablo's friend. She and Pablo were, conversely, friends of Don Sebastian. And now there was to be war, bloodshed among brothers? And he the cause of it?

Drake pushed his chair back; got to his feet. "He's given you fifteen minutes," he said. "That's long enough for me to saddle my black; long enough for you to give me a couple of guns to replace my Colts. You invite 'em in when the time's up. By that time I'll be gone."

"But they've entirely surrounded the wall," cried the servant.

"Easy," said Drake, "even so. We'll pull the oldest trick in the whole bag."

And they did. Fifteen minutes lagged by. Then Pablo ordered the great high front gate swung open; invited Don Sebastian and his men into the walled garden. They came in, guns drawn, on the alert.

Then, as the last man entered the enclosure, Drake, seated on his black, hidden up until then by the great gate which had swung inward, spurred out from his hiding place between the gate and the wall. He reined around the gate, out through the arch.

But he didn't depart quite unseen. It wasn't as simple as all that. There was a sudden cry, behind him, from those whom he'd tricked. There was a burst of revolver fire as the rear hoofs of his pony disappeared. And Don Sebastian's men wheeled, dashed en masse for the arch.

It was that dash, en masse, every man trying to go through the gate at once, which gave Drake his precious thirty seconds. Don Sebastian's men jammed; were caught in the archway. By the time they had untangled themselves, Drake

had reached the outside far corner of the walled enclosure, had turned that corner.

If his trick of a moment ago had been the oldest in the whole bag, his next, perhaps, was no newer. Outside the walls, at a distance of a hundred yards or so, stood a stockade corral, walls five feet high of mesquite saplings tight-laced with rawhide. Pointing his black straight for the stockade, unseen for the moment by those behind him, who, just coming out the gate, hadn't decided as yet what direction he had taken, Drake spurred, quirted.

And held his breath! Five feet was high. Too high? Not too high! The black cleared the stockade, dropped inside. Drake staked everything for the moment upon hiding rather than fleeing. Hiding was better, he told himself, if he got away with it. Hide and let the others set out. And then set out himself alone unpursued.

Fortune favored him. Luck smiled on him. Don Sebastian's men reached the corner of the wall, loped past the nearby stockade without a glance inside. And simultaneously, from a little way off, there was a roar of hoofbeats.

Some wild mustang, startled by the shooting, was setting out to flee. But to the ears of Don Sebastian and his men, the mustang's hoofbeats were the hoofbeats of Drake's black. They dashed in pursuit.

Drake waited there for silence; then walked to the corral gate, opened it, led his pony outside into the night. For a long, long moment he stood there without mounting. He was safe; he was free. He had only now, to swing astride his pony and ride out of the neighborhood.

He could skirt Los Alamos upon the arc of a wide circle, pick up the trail which had led him here into the district, be on his way back by morning. A country where, on one hand, there were no Mabrys. Where, on the other hand, no one had ever heard of Lightning Kennedy; where no one was apt to hang him, under the impression that he was hanging Lightning.

And yet—Drake had been eager to flee this district earlier in the day. He wasn't so eager, now.

PERHAPS, it wasn't entirely the wish to see more of Lucia, Pablo's sister, which made Drake suddenly reluctant

to be gone. Perhaps he felt as he did because of many things. There had been the beauty of the afternoon landscape. There had been the loveliness of the old hacienda here. Things out of the past which hadn't changed.

Over Drake there suddenly flooded the feeling that a dream and an illusion weren't necessarily shattered, after all. The country was changed, but it wasn't changed irremediably. In Drake was reborn the urge which had brought him here, to invest his money here, to settle here, to make this country his home.

He continued to stand there in silence and deep thought. A million problems faced him, of course, if he did decide to stay here. Then abruptly, his lips broke in a smile, and, as if by inspiration, he thought he saw a way through his problems.

He mounted his black. Instead of setting out in such a way as to skirt Los Alamos, he rode straight to the town's outskirts.

Kneeing his pony through the quiet Los Alamos street, Drake drew up at the hitchrail in front of the Trey Full saloon at ten-thirty that night. He swung lithely down out of his saddle, his blood tingling in expectancy, his nerves keyed to brittle excitement. He tied his pony, crossed the plank sidewalk under the shadow of the wooden awning, pushed through the swinging doors into the lantern-lit interior of the Trey Full.

Sheriff Bartlette, who had been standing at the bar, saw him across the length of the room. The man put down his drink; his hands dropped slowly until they rested mere inches above the butts of his guns.

"What are you doin' here, stranger?" he demanded, his voice resounding through a sudden, hushed stillness. "I thought I'd drove you out of town."

Drake nodded. "I was afraid you might think that, Bartlette," he said. "I left town because of a rather pressin' errand that had to be attended to, and I was afraid you'd jump to the conclusion you'd scared me away. So I figured I'd come back, the errand bein' attended to by now, and show you that you hadn't run me out."

Bartlette's hands slid the fraction of an inch nearer still to the walnut butts of his guns. Drake's hands, on the contrary, lifted themselves, folded themselves across his chest. Up and down the

length of the room, men moved as far as they could to each side, to leave open a wide, unobstructed path.

There was a moment of brittle hush which spun itself out—and out—and out. Then tension snapped in a blaze of movement. Bartlette's two hands dropped. Simultaneously, in rhythm so graceful that it seemed not in the least rushed or hurried, Drake's right hand went across his body to his left holster.

His fingers closed round—not the butt of one of the twin, matched Colts whose feel, whose balance, whose precision Drake knew to the minutest iota—but around one of the guns Pablo had given him. A weapon which never before he'd had in his hand.

Even so, Drake fired first. There were two second shots. Bartlette's fingers completed in death the task they had commenced in life.

Two dead fingers tightened in reflex upon two hair triggers. Two explosions shook the room. But one bullet thudded harmlessly into the floor; the other crashed into the ceiling. Bartlette slid sideways into the copper gutter beside the brass rail.

Silence, hushed and crisp, descended again as the reverberations of the guns died away. Across the room, Drake saw Mabry, his face a question mark, his eyes a challenge.

He'd said, this morning, "If you ain't goin' to do what I've asked you to do as a business proposition, don't do it out of sheer cussedness."

Drake reversed the gun in his hand, took it by its barrel, and stepped forward. He handed it to Mabry, gave the man a wink, a sign, as he did so.

"Sorry to've killed your sheriff," he said. "But it was him or me, I reckon. He crowded me, didn't he? Forced me into it?"

Mabry caught the sign, the wink. "I reckon you're right," he said in a voice which carried to every corner of the hushed room waiting to take its cue from him. "He crowded you into it. He had it comin' to him.

"Shall we hold the inquest here and now, boys? Acquit Mr. —" He, in his turn, gave Drake a wink, now. "You said your name was Brown, didn't you? Acquit Mr. Brown of havin' had any premeditated homicidal intent?"

It was what might have been called a directed verdict.

"We might as well agree with Mabry," said a tall, lean, beanpole of a man, who announced he was the coroner. "No use holdin' Mr. Brown for trial. Only be a useless expense to the county. No jury'd convict him."

Mabry handed Drake back his gun. And then Mabry called for drinks for the crowd. Drake played it up. He produced his roll, ordered a second free round. And by the end of a half hour it was agreed from one end of the Trey Full to the other that Mr. Brown was a swell hombre.

At length Mabry drew Drake aside to a corner table. "So you changed your mind," he said.

DRAKE nodded. "Had a little run-in with some of the Mexicans around the neighborhood after I left here this afternoon that convinced me you was right. I'd get farther teamin' up with somebody than in playin' a lone hand any longer."

Mabry ordered a bottle brought to the table. They drank to their mutual success to crime. The following morning Mabry pinned the dead Bartlette's star on Drake.

"And my duties," Drake asked, "are what?"

"Well," said Mabry, "four days from now there's a gold shipment comin' through here from the mines up La Boca way. It'd be a nice friendly gesture, it strikes me, if, when they come through, you and a bunch of deputies I'll hand-pick for you should offer to convoy 'em as far as the county line. To—to protect 'em from Lightnin' Kennedy, we'll say."

Mabry laughed deeply. "Ha—ha, that's a good one. To protect 'em from Lightnin' Kennedy, and it's Lightnin' himself that's doin' the protectin'. Swell job of protectin' you'll be likely to do, Lightnin'. As soon as you git 'em into the hills, you kill 'em, slaughter their animals, throw the bodies into a lime pit, burn their gear. If there's ever a squawk, you tell folks that they was safe and sound when you bid 'em *adios* at the county line. If they've disappeared, somethin' must have happened to 'em over in the next bailiwick."

Drake tried to laugh as uproariously as Mabry. But it was laughter hollow and forced. "Four days from now," he said. He knit his brow. Four days was a long time to wait. His tenure of office

here—his chance to play his game—depended entirely, so it seemed to him, upon the length of time during which he could pass himself off as Brown.

Once let Don Sebastian and any of his friends discover, for instance, that Brown, the new Los Alamos sheriff, and Kennedy, the escaped prisoner, were one and the same man, and—well, Drake had a vision of many things, all unpleasant.

The Spaniards hadn't dared invade Los Alamos to attack Mabry, so Lucia had said, because they'd feared, lacking tangible proof of Mabry's wickedness, the investigation which would follow.

But they wouldn't hesitate a second, it struck Drake, to invade Los Alamos in search of Lightnin' Kennedy. Lightnin' was a known bad man. There was proof, there. They'd come shooting. And Mabry, lest he be considered an accomplice—Mabry, protesting, to save his skin, that he'd honestly believed his new sheriff to be named Brown—would turn him over.

It was an excellent scheme, an excellent plan which lay in the back of Drake's mind. But its execution had to come before Don Sebastian identified Brown as Kennedy. Likewise before Mabry suspected that Kennedy wasn't Lightnin' Kennedy.

"Then there's nothin' scheduled until then?" Drake asked.

"Nothin' we'd thought of."

"You couldn't think up somethin' could you?" Drake suggested. "Somethin' for tonight, maybe? Sort of a—a—well, an introduction for me. You mentioned cattle rustlin' for instance. Somethin' about a secret canyon. Why not take me out on a cattle raid; let me see how you pull your secret canyon business? I saw a herd, yesterday, jest beggin' to be stole," he added. "Out at a place near the town."

He described roughly Pablo's rancho.

Drake struck an unusually receptive chord, apparently.

"The Gomez place, huh?" Mabry said. "They've got an unguarded herd? Well, that's what I call good news. They've got nice beef; bring a high price, but they usually keep it guarded pretty well. We'll raid them, then, tonight, if you like."

"Fine," Drake said.

So it was agreed and planned. And Mabry, in a sudden burst of good humor,

even suggested that he, himself, would ride along with the raiding party. It wasn't usually his habit, he explained, personally to accompany his cattle rustlers.

But since this was to be "Lightnin'" Kennedy's initiation into the art of cattle rustling, Mabry would accompany him as a competent guide and lecturer. Nothing could have pleased Drake more. There remained only one thing more to be done. And that, thought Drake, ought to be easy.

IV

DRAKE left the Trey Full near noon. He had kept himself there all morning not exactly in concealment, but removed from the eyes of passersby, on the street. He stepped out into the sunlight, strolled slowly up the block on foot. He was, ostensibly, making the rounds, looking the town over, protecting his bailiwick.

But he let his steps take him nearer and nearer to the town's outskirts where, the night before, after his killing of Bartlette and before his retiring to bed, he'd left his black in a boarding corral. He was approaching the Beehive when a youth emerged from the store, halted suddenly, turned, smiled, and came forward, hand outstretched.

"Why, my friend!" It was Pablo.

And then, before Drake could speak or take advantage of this chance meeting here to save himself a long ride out into the countryside, Pablo's smile faded. Drake felt his friend's two eyes riveted upon the sheriff's badge.

Sudden, livid horror mantled Pablo's face. He turned abruptly, rushed for the hitchrail, picked up the dragging reins of a buckskin, mounted, without touching the stirrups, and was off.

An instant later, a bullet from Pablo's gun spat back toward the plank sidewalk. An instant after that, the tall beanpole, who, last night, had acted as coroner, darted out of the cantina beside the Beehive and demanded, "What's happenin'?"

"Some dirty Mex, took a shot at me," Drake cried, "and by heaven I'm goin' to get him!"

He rushed for the Beehive's hitchrail, appropriated the nearest pony. He mounted, spurred. It would be easy, he thought, to ride after Pablo, to shout to him somewhere along the trail to

force him to stop for an explanation.

But it wasn't to be so easy. For Mabry's henchman, the coroner, rushed to the tie-rail also. He also appropriated a pony.

"I'll ride along with you to watch the fun," the man cried. So saying, the man unholstered his gun, commenced firing after the fleeing Pablo.

No bullets reached their mark, fortunately. Pablo's start had been a flying one; he was out of range. Drake, seeing this, unholstered one of his guns, and—lest the coroner think it strange that he didn't do so—commenced firing also, taking deliberate care to shoot wide.

Side by side, Drake and his unwanted companion roared out of Los Alamos. Up ahead, Pablo gained on them slowly as Drake held his pony in, refused to give the horse his head. Drake's tactics passed unnoticed only for a few moments.

"Why, you're holdin' your hoss back, partner, as if you didn't want to close in where you could kill him," the man at his side cried suddenly. "Why, by Godfrey! That was the kid you was talkin' to before you got into your shootin' scrape with Pete an' Joe, yesterday. I thought at the time you was just usin' him as an excuse for pickin' a fight."

As he'd spoken, the man had jerked his hand round. The gun which had been firing up ahead, now pointed at Drake.

"But I wonder! He couldn't be your friend, could he? You—you couldn't be plannin' this raid on his place tonight, as a ruse to trap us?"

The revolver barrel pointed at Drake from the distance of only a foot. Drake acted instantly. As he brought the right hand which held his own gun round he simultaneously with his left hand neck-reined his pony sharply into his companion's mount.

The shock of collision came precisely as the other man pulled his trigger. Drake felt the bullet intended for his heart simply graze his shoulder. His own trigger finger tightened. Los Alamos' coroner plunged from his saddle.

Drake caught the reins of the terrified, riderless bay; brought it and his own mount to a halt. He swung down, tethered both ponies to a *paloverde* tree, walked back to Mabry's lifeless henchman.

Picking up the body, he dragged it off the trail down under the lip of an ar-

royo. There he covered it with brush. Then he took the man's mount, led it off into the featheriness of the desert. He tied it in the shade of a thick mesquite clump.

The shooting, the hiding of the evidence, took about ten minutes. Long enough to make any hope of overtaking Pablo impossible. Tight-lipped, a little bit worried, a little bit grim, Drake walked back to his own pony, swung astride.

Pablo had headed whither? Home? Or simply for the nearest rancho? Home, it developed.

As Drake loped into the cottonwood lane leading into the Gomez hacienda, he was met head-on by Pablo riding out, in advance of the same group of *vaqueros* who, yesterday, had saved him from Don Sebastian. They were men in another mood, today.

A REVOLVER cracked as the group caught sight of Drake. Drake trusted to their honor, their sense of fair play. He halted at the bark of the bullet, flung his hands above his head. And the firing, as he had imagined it would, ceased. They couldn't—any more than Don Sebastian could, yesterday—shoot him down like a dog.

The outfit roared forward; Drake was surrounded.

"But you had nerve, Lightning Kennedy, to pursue me here to the very gates of my rancho," Pablo cried.

"But I'm not Lightnin'," Drake protested.

"So you told me yesterday," Pablo said. "And yesterday, I believed you. You think I believe you, now? With that sheriff's star on your vest? There's only one man who could have pinned it there—Mabry. And if you've thrown in with Mabry, then you must be Lightning."

Drake nodded. "It'd look that way. That's the way Mabry looks at it, as a matter of fact. He thinks I'm Lightnin'. I've told him I'm Lightnin'. But only because it's a trick."

Rapidly Drake outlined his plan.

"You said you'd never been able to pin this cattle rustlin' on Mabry. I've arranged it so that tonight you can catch him and his gang red-handed. I'm bringin' 'em out here to steal a herd from you. They think the herd's unprotected. But I rode out here, you see, to tip you off.

"You're to spend the rest of the day goin' 'round the neighborhood collectin' an army. You'll hide 'em, under cover of darkness, out around your herd in such a way that when Mabry's gang rides in here, starts drivin' the herd off, they'll find they've ridden into a trap."

Drake had expected Pablo's face to light up instantly. It didn't.

"And why should you do that?" Pablo asked.

"Why—why—" Drake stammered, "because I figured it out this way. If I could pull this thing off—deliver Mabry to you with the goods on him, then you'd all know I wasn't Lightnin'. You believed me, yesterday. But Don Sebastian and the others didn't. And I thought that if I did this, why then Don Sebastian would believe me." He added, "You see, I don't want to be driven out of the locality. I like it here. But I can't stay here unless I prove to everybody that I'm who I say I am—Drake Kennedy, not Lightnin'."

"An ingenious story," Pablo said. "I see you in town wearing the sheriff's badge. I know, at once—since you've thrown in with Mabry—that you must be wicked, after all. That you must be Lightning. What do you do? You first pursue me out of town, firing at me all the way, trying your best to kill me before I can spread the alarm. Then you come here! Bah!"

"But I only fired at you," Drake cried, "because there was somebody with me." He told the story. And there was a long, long silence.

"It could be proved, that story, I suppose," Pablo said finally. "I could ride back, look for the man's body. If I find it, all well and good. I'll return and offer my humblest apologies. Otherwise I'll be compelled to believe that you rode out here to lead me and my people—not Mabry—into a trap. We were to gather this army you spoke of tonight; have them waiting here. And while they waited here, you and your gang would be raiding some of the other ranches we had left unprotected in order to concentrate all available manpower here.

"Is that fair, Senor Kennedy? Are you willing to be detained here at the hacienda as my prisoner, while I ride back along the trail and look for your dead man?"

Drake nodded. "But make it speedy! Because I mustn't stay away from town

too long. If I'm gone up till the very minute we're to start our raid, Mabry might get a hunch that I'd been out here tippin' you off."

"I'll make it," said Pablo, "just as fast as I can." He turned to his men. "When you've disarmed him, you can lock him in the supply closet on the second floor."

With that, Pablo was off.

Three hours later, Drake still sat in the barred-windowed supply closet. Pablo who, at a lope, should have made the round trip in a little over an hour at the most, hadn't returned.

Drake rose for the thousandth time, walked to the window, pressed his face against the bars, and looked out above the tops of the hacienda's 'dobe walls to the far horizon. The road twisted across the desert empty. Then as Drake turned away, a movement inside the 'dobe walls caught his eye. There in the garden sat Lucia. A moment's breathlessness swept over him. He felt his pulse pound as it had pounded at first sight of her, yesterday.

"Lucia?" Drake called to her.

She looked up, and Drake winced. Her eyes were hostile, accusing.

"You've sent my brother into a trap!" she cried. "You told him to go look for a body at a certain place. And what did he find? Men in ambush who've killed him!"

DRAKE felt himself sway dizzily. "Pablo's dead?" he stammered. The girl had risen. Her white face looked up at Drake.

"He must be," she said. "He hasn't come back."

"But why would I have done that?" he demanded. "What good would it have done me to have sent Pablo to his death? I'm here, your prisoner. His death wouldn't liberate me, would it?"

He took a deep breath.

"No, Lucia, no! What's happened is this: Pablo's had an accident either coming or going. His horse fell with him—something like that. You've got to believe me. Got to! And you've got to let me out of here!"

"Set you—free?" she stammered.

"Because I love you," Drake cried.

"At first sight, last night, *querida!* I planned this whole thing for you. You said you were going bankrupt; that you'd have to move. And I thought it

was still not too late, *querida*. Let me out of here now, and I'll go back to town and we'll bring Mabry out here into your hands tonight.

"Do as I begged Pablo to do in the first place. Send messengers around the countryside. Gather an army. I'll do my part. On my soul, on my honor! We can't wait for Pablo to get back and vouch for me, now. You—you'll have to take me on faith."

He let his voice trail off. There was a silence as the girl, there in the garden, regarded him fixedly. Their eyes met as they'd met last night; she seemed to probe him to the very soul.

"You swear that—that you didn't send Pablo into a trap?" she asked, her voice suddenly husky.

"Why should I?" he asked her again. "Didn't I tell you, last night, that you were my friends? That for twelve years, ever since I first lived here, I've loved your people?"

There was a second silence. The girl vanished out of the garden into the house. In a moment a key clicked in the locked storeroom door. And Drake looked into a face pale and set and intense.

"I'm going to take the chance," Lucia said, "of believing you. I'm going to have an army here, waiting to capture Mabry and his crew, tonight. But if you've lied to me, *senor*, my life-blood be on your head. For I'd kill myself in shame!"

Drake caught her in his arms. "I haven't lied to you!"

The tears started in her eyes. She went limp there in his arms as he kissed her.

"I—I know you haven't lied to me," she said. "It is as you've said. Pablo's horse stumbled. He's on foot, and that's what's taking him so long. But he's found—I'm sure he's found—what you sent him to find. Now come! Come quickly!"

She led him downstairs into the garden, outside the walls to the corrals. She stood there at his side while he saddled a fresh horse. She waved to him as he spurred and set out.

"*Vaya con Dios!*" she whispered. "God look after you!"

And Drake rode toward Los Alamos, his heart overflowing. She had trusted him blindly, even in the face of her brother's failure to return. Responsibil-

ity heavier than ever lay upon him now!

Very near to six o'clock, Drake at last reentered the *Trey Full*. He strode to the bar, ordered a beer. And it was there, while he sipped his beer, that Mabry stepped up to him, his face a thundercloud, his rattlesnake eyes fierce as they glared their accusation.

"So you're back at last, huh?" Mabry challenged.

This wasn't the jovial Mabry with whom he'd talked, this morning. Drake stepped back a pace, hooked his thumbs in his sagging gun-belts. Something had happened?

"Yeah, back at last," he said quietly, casually. "Had a disappointin' afternoon. Young Spanish kid took a shot at me as I was walkin' past the Beehive."

"We know all about that," Mabry said. "You and Bill Stiles, the coroner, chased him out of town. But what we don't know—what we want to know—is where you was, Kennedy, when pore Bill Stiles was kilt."

QUICKLY Drake unhooked his thumbs from his gun-belts; held the palms of his hands poised over the handles of his guns.

"Bill Stiles was killed?" he cried. He pretended to be surprised.

"By the kid you was chasin'. Young Pablo Gomez."

Relief, dizzying and overwhelming, flooded through Drake. It had been bad, their knowing that Bill had left town with him, their apparent discovery of Bill's body. But if they'd blamed the killing on Pablo, that was easy.

"So the kid killed him!" he cried. "Poor Bill! What a price to pay for being right!" He went on, glib explanation leaping to his tongue. "You see what happened was this. We'd lost sight of the kid by the time we'd come to the first fork in the trail. And you know what tricks your ears'll play on you, sometimes.

"I swore I could hear him lopin' ahead of us down the left-hand fork. Bill swore he heard him off to the right. The trail was so hard we couldn't look for hoof-prints. So Bill went his way, and I went mine."

"I see," Mabry said. "And you didn't hear the two of 'em shootin' it out when Bill evidently caught up with him?"

"I didn't. I'm sorry, too. I'd sure have to come to pore Bill's rescue if I'd heard

the shootin'. But I must have been miles away by that time."

Drake shook his head. "Does it matter, though?" he added callously after a second. "Ain't Lightnin' Kennedy worth at least two-three Bills to you?"

"Maybe it don't matter. Seein' as we caught the murderer."

It was a speech which came to Drake as a terrific jolt.

"You what?" he gasped.

"What I said," Mabry told him. "A bunch of the boys was out riding. They come down into a little arroyo. And there was Pablo Gomez bendin' over Bill's body. He'd dragged it off the road, evidently. Was apparently tryin' to cover it up with brush so's it wouldn't be found."

Fear, stark and abysmal, eddied through Drake. He caught the edge of the bar to steady himself to keep from trembling.

"And what happened?" he gulped. "The boys killed Pablo?"

"Should have," said Mabry, "but they didn't. They figgered it'd be more fun to bring him back here and hang him. So that's what we're goin' to do before we start out on our cattle raid, tonight."

Drake gasped. "Do it tonight? Before the cattle raid?"

"Why not?" Mabry asked him.

There was no answer to that one, of course. Drake was supposed to be Lightnin' Kennedy, a cruel, bloodthirsty outlaw. What logical reason would he have for asking that the hanging be postponed? None.

Then an idea came to him.

"I just wondered if we'd have time, that's all," he said. "But if you think we do have time, I'm in favor of it." He lingered there at the bar, sipping the rest of his beer, making small talk. "What did the kid say when you caught him? Anything?"

"Why, he said he didn't do it—naturally."

"And accused somebody else?"

"Who else would he accuse?"

Relief flooded over Drake a second time in as many minutes. Good boy, Pablo! The discovery of Bill Stiles's body had convinced Pablo, then, that Drake Kennedy wasn't Lightning Kennedy. And he'd kept his mouth shut; not dragged Drake into it.

Drake finished his beer. Then he wandered to the swinging doors of the Trey

Full, stepped out onto the street, mounted the pony he had ridden in from the Gomez rancho, and jogged the short block from the Trey Full to the sheriff's office and jail.

A deputy rose as Drake entered the front office.

He handed the man a half dollar, and told him, "Go across the street and get me a ham sandwich."

The man took the coin, left the building. Drake opened the door from the front office to the barred jailrooms behind. The lone deputy had been the only man on duty, apparently. There was no jailer back here.

Drake hastened down the corridor past three empty cells. He came to a halt before the fourth and last. He fitted the key he had taken from the front desk into the lock, opened the door and stepped into the cell.

Pablo, who had been lying there on a cot, didn't rise. Drake shook him by the shoulder.

"Pablo," he cried, "wake up. It's me. There's a hoss at the front hitchin' rail, ready and waitin' for you. The deputy's buying me a sandwich. When he comes back, I'll be lyin' here on the floor. I'll tell him I came in here to take a poke at you, and you knocked me out!"

But it wasn't to be as simple as all that. Pablo made no answer, and Drake shook him again.

"Kid, what's the matter with you?" Drake called.

THEN Drake saw what was the matter with him. The boy's face was a mass of bruises. There was a huge, ugly gash in his head. He was alive, but he was unconscious, and likely, by his appearance to stay so for some time.

There was, in other words, not the slightest chance of getting him up onto a horse, of speeding him on his way out of town on a dash for freedom! Not the slightest chance of trying to frame what might have looked like a jail-break.

Drake trembled. What should he do? Should he pick the boy up in his arms? Carry him out to the hitchrail; fling him across a horse and mount behind him? Should the two of them flee?

He shook his head. That scarcely was a solution. They'd make no speed that way; they'd be overtaken. Besides, to attempt that meant that Drake must show himself publicly as Pablo's friend.

It meant the scrapping of his whole carefully built-up plan for tonight. It meant that there'd be no cattle raid. It meant that Mabry would see the trap into which he'd almost fallen and refuse to enter it. It meant months and months more before Mabry and his desperadoes could be captured with the goods on them.

What then? If the idea of trying to carry Pablo out of here was impractical, and undesirable even if successfully accomplished, what else was there? Leave him here? Let him be hanged? Deliver Mabry into the trap afterward? There was certainly no victory in that!

Drake stepped out of the cell. A locked and bolted rear door opened from the corridor onto the alley. He unlocked the door with his keys, shot back its bolt, stepped outside. And he had his solution. Provided the alley remained empty and nobody saw him!

He rushed back into the cell, scooped Pablo up into his arms, carried him into the alley, laid his body down in the 'dobe dust beside the jail's rear wall. He rearranged the litter of broken boxes and caved in barrels to hide the body.

Then he stepped back into the jail's corridor—and was confronted, the length of the hallway, by the deputy whom he had sent across the street for the sandwich! Too late, now, to pretend to have been knocked unconscious. The deputy had seen the open cell door.

"Why, you double-crossin', dirty skunk, you!" the man shouted. He yanked out a six-shooter.

Drake's right hand flashed to his hip. His fingers closed round the butt of his gun. The gun leaped up. Flame jetted from the muzzle. Lead crashed the length of the corridor. The deputy pitched to his knees, fell forward.

All in the same instant, Drake flung his smoking gun from him, out through the open door into the alley. Simultaneously he reached for his other gun, fired wildly, crazily at the back wall of the building across the alley. Then he lay down and commenced to groan.

"What happened," he explained when the crowd poured in the front door of the jail, jammed down the corridor, and found him there, "was this: I went into the kid's cell to beat him up before you hanged him. Figgered nobody'd mind my taking a few pokes at him for pore old Bill's sake.

"But he landed one lucky haymaker on me. I went down, and he grabbed one of my guns. He stopped out into the hall and met my deputy just startin' down the corridor from the front office to see what the ruckus was. The kid drilled him the length of the hall, unlocked the alley door with my keys and ran out.

"I managed to raise up and take two shots at him just as he climbed into the saddle of a pony. But I was so groggy the best I could do was wing him in the hand. He dropped the gun he stole from me. It's out there in the alley now, I reckon. But he got away."

It was an explanation which apparently went over with the crowd. There was a feverish rush to mount horses, to be off, to scour the neighborhood.

Drake stood there after they had left him, just a little bit weary. What a day! It had all seemed so simple, this morning—to lure Mabry into taking his gang out on a raid, to tip off those who were to be raided, to spring the trap. Yet simple was the last word on earth to describe the day's hectic events.

He grinned after a moment. His weariness fled. Hectic though the day had been, he had come through it with flying colors, nevertheless. He'd met and solved each difficulty. What happened from now on would be easy by comparison. He glanced at his fat silver watch. Seven-thirty. One hour remained before the start of the raid.

He left the sheriff's office and started back to the Trey Full to rejoin Mabry.

V

MABRY was in the Trey Full three-quarters of an hour later. Drake had found him angry over Pablo's "escape" but unsuspecting. He had gradually managed to soothe the man. They had had a drink together and were lingering there at the bar over a second. It lacked but fifteen minutes of the hour set when they would ride forth on their cattle raid.

Then the swinging doors of the Trey Full were suddenly thrust open and a dark-haired, blue-eyed young man of about Drake's age and build and height entered the room.

"I'm a rip-snortin' coyote, and this is my night to howl," he shouted.

Drake stood there, and for the mo-

ment he felt his blood chill and curdle. For the man who'd just made his boisterous entrance was—his own exact double!

There were slight differences, to be sure. The newcomer's eyes were grimmer. His face was harder, older, lined with marks of dissipation. But in spite of the differences, he and Drake might have been twins.

Drake felt the universe rock and sway. The ground seemed to open at his feet. Here was Lightnin'! The real Lightnin'! And here, unless he thought and acted swiftly, was the end of his masquerade, the crash of his hopes and plans!

Drake stepped boldly forward. "By Godfrey," he cried, "if it ain't my sissy cousin, Drake."

He lifted his fists from his boot tops, sent it crashing in an arc to Lightnin's chin, and the man staggered back.

And then? Drake had it all planned. Lightnin' was supposed to go for his guns. He'd go for his. They'd shoot it out. Then—well, he'd taken the aggressive, and he'd called the other man, Drake, and the other man hadn't had the chance to call himself anything. . . .

It was to be like that; Lightnin' was to die without opening his mouth. Drake was to explain to Mabry that he'd shot a cousin who'd been trailing him or against whom he'd held a personal grudge.

But it didn't happen quite like that. For Drake had forgotten one thing. He knew of Lightnin's existence. But Lightnin' up until this moment, had never known of his. The effect upon the man was an astonishment so utter and so complete, that instead of going for his guns, he simply stood there as he recovered from Drake's blow, and blinked.

That moment of Lightnin's blinking, that moment while Drake waited and kept on waiting for him to draw was long enough for Mabry to come to life.

"Just a minute!" a voice behind Drake barked. "Both of you!"

Drake turned to look into the leveled muzzles of two guns which covered him and covered Lightnin'. He might have attempted to brazen it out; to keep calling Lightnin', Drake. But the chances are that he wouldn't have gotten away with it. Now with Lightnin' alive to protest that he wasn't Drake. So Drake did the only thing possible.

Realizing himself trapped the instant Mabry began demanding explanations, Drake didn't wait for explanations. He leaped sideways out of the aisle, ducked beneath a poker table. Mabry's guns thundered an instant late. Two bullets thudded into the top of the poker table just as Drake upset it to form a shield.

Then his own guns flashed out. He fired round the side of the overturned table at Mabry; missed! A chair hurled from behind him, struck him across the back. He whipped round, blazed at a man with a second uplifting chair, hit him in the shoulder, knocked him spinning.

Instantly the interior of the Trey Full was in tumult. The place was packed solidly with Mabry's henchmen, who had been going to set out on the cattle raid. Now every man in the place attempted to close in on Drake. The table protected him only from one side. They rushed at him now, en masse from the other.

A bullet grazed his cheek; a bullet seared his arm. He blasted back, leaped to his feet out into the aisle again, tried to zigzag toward the door. A shot knocked the heel off his cowboot, sent him reeling.

He staggered into the arms of a man who tried to hold him. He hurled the man away from him, sent two others crashing as the man collided with them. He sent a table spinning into the path of two others. He reached the swinging doors, and as he did so, there was a crash of dynamite in his head, the shock of an earthquake underfoot.

He felt himself plunge through space. He'd been hit; hit hard, at last! The red spots whirled up before his eyes. They were upon him in an avalanche now! Drake caught a last minute glimpse of Lightnin'.

"Don't know what it's all about, but do you mind my takin' a crack at him, too?" he heard the man say.

Then the heavy barrel of Lightnin's revolver cracked across his skull.

IT was hours later, when Drake came to. He lay there half a dozen feet from where he'd fallen. They'd simply pulled him out of the doorway, tossed him for dead into one corner.

A little way off from him, two men, the only occupants of the Trey Full, were talking.

Drake caught the mumbled words, "About time for 'em to be back from their cattle raid."

"Yep," said the other man, "about time."

Drake's head spun. But hadn't they realized after the real Lightning had been identified, that the bogus Lightning intended to lead them into a trap? Had they gone on blindly, blithely, with the scheduled raid, anyway? No, they hadn't, it seemed.

"Godfrey, they had a perfect setup for tonight, didn't they?" the first voice said. "All the Mexicans in the countryside waitin' for 'em at the Gomez rancho, and them wise to it. Must have been easy to go through them other, unprotected ranches."

Drake lay there, his head feeling as if it had been cleaved with a meataxe. But it was a pain, an agony deeper than anything physical which swept over him now. They'd raided the other ranches! They hadn't walked into the trap!

He had a momentary vision of a dark-haired and dark-eyed young girl. A girl saying, "But if you've lied to me, senior, my life-blood be on your head. For I'd kill myself in shame." Sheer horror transfixed Drake.

Now, as soon as she discovered that she had waited in vain to spring her trap, as soon as it developed that the other ranches had been raided, she'd believe that he had deceived her! She'd think that he'd been Lightning all along!

There was nothing else she could think in the face of the inexplicable miscarriage of their plans. She'd believe that she'd given her love, her kisses, her trust to an outlaw. And she'd do what she'd threatened to do!

Drake forced himself to stir. That awful thought gave him life. The strength flooded back into him. He forced himself to his feet by sheer will-power.

The two men who had been sitting at the table turned and gaped. Drake's hands dropped to his guns. But his holsters were empty! He remembered now; he'd been shooting as he'd fallen. The guns had been in his hands, had dropped out of them as he'd fallen. They had slid across the floor. He made a dive for the doorway.

A belated bullet, fired by a man who for a long moment had been too startled to shoot at what he had thought was a corpse coming back to life, smashed one

of the swinging doors behind him. A second shot zipped over his head as he reached the hitching rail, pulled himself weakly up into the saddle of a pony.

He spurred, and was off. Too late, now, he knew from the conversation he'd just overheard, to prevent the raid on the unprotected ranches. But not too late, he hoped to reach Lucia.

He winced. And again his pain wasn't physical. How different a role this, from the one in which he'd expected to ride out to the Gomez hacienda, tonight.

HE'D planned to arrive as a hero; a savior. Now the best he could do was to arrive with explanations and apologies. But a life depended upon those explanations and apologies. He must bring Lucia her first news of the cattle raids.

For if that news reached her before he arrived; if she jumped at the then inevitable false conclusion— He let the thought trail off, unwilling to face it.

Drake brought up his pony with a crash in the alleyway where he'd left Pablo. For that plan had now miscarried too. He'd planned that Pablo was to regain consciousness tomorrow in a town purged of its denizens of evil. A town where he would be safe.

As it was, Pablo, when he came to in the morning, would find himself little better off there in the alley than if he'd never been let out of his cell. The town would pounce upon him, rearrest him, hang him.

Drake vaulted to the ground, looked under the barrels and the boxes. Pablo wasn't there! But the gun which Drake, previously in the evening, had tossed out into the alley was there. He scooped it up, remounted, and was on his way again.

The outskirts of Los Alamos fell away behind him. The night wind whipped at his fevered forehead. The miles blurred past. Pablo had recovered consciousness and escaped? Or Pablo had eventually been discovered by Mabry's crew, either while he lay there or while he'd been trying to escape? Which?

Drake realized that he'd know the answer to that when he knew the answer to the other question: had Lucia yet heard of the cattle raid? Had she taken her life in shame, believing that through her folly she had betrayed her people? Or was she still alive?

EXACTLY how long a time passed, how many miles he covered before he heard shots, Drake didn't know. But hear shots he did, at last, faint and far-off, somewhere ahead of him. They came in a low roll, like the rumble of distant thunder. Then they came louder, and still louder! Volley after volley; fusillade after fusillade!

At a fast run, Drake crested the rise ahead of him and looked down into a valley. There, flame-etched against the blackness of the night, were two lines of fire! The Spaniards and their honest American rancher neighbors in pitched battle against Mabry's cohorts?

There came two sudden reports not from the floor of the valley, a mile ahead of and below Drake, but from the center of the highway scarcely a hundred yards ahead of him! He realized now, abruptly, that no horse had been loping toward him.

As two bullets missed him by the fraction of an inch; as his eyes, momentarily blinded by the two spurts of flame, readjusted themselves to the darkness, Drake beheld the shadowy figure of a man on foot, just darting into the brush.

The night and the dark and the distance were such that it was impossible to make out his assailant's features. But the man's silhouette and outline were distinctive. He wore the coat of a business suit; light-colored trousers were tucked into the tops of fancy boots. Mabry!

Drake blasted back as the man, his first shots missing, leaped for shelter.

What was Mabry doing here, alone and on foot? Was his outfit up ahead there, getting the worst of it? Had he abandoned his men, set out to flee, lost his horse?

Probably he'd fired at Drake, not having any idea who he was, but simply with the idea of killing him and stealing his pony. That seemed the logical solution.

There was a scream from Mabry. The man fell at the impact of Drake's bullet, but fell only wounded. Two orange cones of flame pierced the night where he'd fallen.

Drake's pony crashed. He hurled himself free, somersaulted as he landed, came up firing back. Mabry's body gave a spasmodic jerk, straightened out, relaxed. His guns slipped from his fingers.

Drake leaped to catch the reins of his

pony. The horse had evidently only been nicked. Recovering now from his spill, he made a wild, terrified plunge to be off. The reins in Drake's hand grew taut; he was jerked off his feet.

For a moment he feared he would be trampled beneath the beast's hoofs. Then he managed, in his moment of precarious balance, to reach up with his right hand while he still clung to the reins with his left; to seize the bit, the bridle. He yanked the panicky pony to a halt, mounted and was on his way again.

He thundered down the slope into the valley toward the two battling outfits. Did this fighting mean that the outfit waiting at the Gomez rancho had decided, after hours of inaction, that it had been double-crossed? Had they set out to ride home, to disband—and run into Mabry's crew?

Suppose that was the solution? Then what? What had Lucia done when the army she'd gathered together had ridden, disgusted, out of the hacienda?

Had she fallen in with the general consensus of opinion that they'd been double-crossed? Or was she waiting back there at the hacienda for evidence more tangible? Drake redoubled his speed.

The battle, he saw, as he came nearer to it, was a running fight, now—a rout. The outfit nearer to him was galloping toward him in full flight.

Behind that outfit, raking it with lead, came the second outfit in roaring, vindictive pursuit.

Drake yanked his pony to the right, raced pell-mell off at an angle. For to continue in his straight course meant to be run down, first by the pursued, then by the pursuers. He reached a spot far enough on the flank to let the remnants of Mabry's beaten forces lope past him.

He raked them with his own gun from the side as they flashed by. Then he spurred in to join the Spaniards.

"Drake!" a voice out of the group hailed him.

Drake brought up his pony as the youth who'd called drew up his.

"Pablo!" he cried.

The rest of the Spaniards roared on in their pursuit.

"Quick, Pablo, tell me!" Drake urged.

"How'd all this happen?"

"But you know how it happened," Pablo said.

"I—I know?" Drake stammered.

Pablo's voice was puzzled. "Why, certainly, don't you? Didn't I explain it all when you rode in from behind us, a half hour ago, your hands uplifted?"

WORDS failed Drake; he sat his saddle, dazed, his mind spinning. He'd ridden in to them a half hour ago, his hands uplifted?

"Didn't I tell you," he heard Pablo continue, "how I recovered consciousness there in the alleyway where you, I take it, had put me? How I heard the men, who'd come into the sheriff's office to get extra ammunition for the cattle raid, talking?"

"I heard them say that they'd killed Drake Kennedy. That they'd figured it out also that Drake must have intended to lead them into a trap; that they were going to turn the tables by raiding the unprotected ranches.

"After that, it was simple. I seized a pony, raced out of town ahead of them. I told the news to the army at my rancho. We left my rancho, set out, caught the enemy red-handed, trying to steal a herd from Don Sebastian's rancho, and we've been battling them ever since."

"But this business of my bein' here a half hour ago," Drake stammered.

"You've forgotten?" Pablo asked. "Forgotten how you rode in, explained to us that you hadn't been killed; that you'd simply been wounded? And don't you remember how you said that you were weak; that you wanted to retire to my hacienda and wait there for the end of the battle? And don't you remember how you asked the way; how you said you weren't quite sure of it in the darkness?"

All Drake managed was a husky, throaty little cry of agony.

"But that man wasn't me, Pablo!" he groaned. "That man was Lightnin'!"

"Lightning?" asked Pablo.

"Lightnin'," Drake said.

He seized the reins of Pablo's pony, jerked the animal about, faced him toward the Gomez rancho.

"Quick!" he cried.

He spurred sharply, and Pablo's pony, taking his cue from Drake's, leaped forward also.

"What must have happened," Drake cried, as they loped pell-mell, hell-bent, "is this: Lightnin' evidently rode out on

the cattle raid with 'em. When the fight started going against 'em, Mabry turned tail and headed for town. I met him back along the road a ways, and killed him. Lightnin', on the other hand, instead of stringin' along with Mabry, circles out round the back of his outfit and rides in toward yours."

"But why?" Pablo cried.

"To pass himself off as me, your friend." Drake lifted his voice again above the roar of the hoofbeats. "You say he asked you the way to the hacienda. That means that when he saw Mabry's raid failing, he decided not only to escape while the escaping was good, but to make a call at your rancho while he was escaping. To stage a little private raid, all his own, there! Not your cattle, but the silver plate, the heirlooms at the hacienda, perhaps. You see?"

"And Lucia," Pablo cried, "is there alone!"

"Exactly," Drake nodded grimly.

They roared on—and on. Neither man spoke again. Neither man, visioning what might be taking place back at the hacienda, wished to speak.

The red-tile-roofed 'dobe house loomed up ahead of them through the night, at last. They loped through the gate into a silent yard. And then, as they flung themselves from their ponies, the yard's silence was blasted by a revolver report!

There, in the archway of the front door of the house, Drake saw—Lucia!

Lucia firing at him and at Pablo? It looked that way for a second. Flame seemed to leap from the girl's hand. But simultaneously she screamed, too, in terror.

Then Drake understood. Lightning had heard them come loping in. Lightning, who must have had the girl already covered with his guns, had prodded her ahead of him to the doorway. Now, hiding behind her body, using her as a shield, Lightning was firing from under her arm!

Drake rushed forward, zigzagging, his useless gun in his hand. Lead smashed about him! Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pablo drop at his side. Killed? Wounded? Merely stumbled? He couldn't stop to find out.

Drake came to within a dozen feet of the pair there in the doorway. Lightning, up until now, had been firing without exposing his face; simply waving his arm back and forth, spraying lead

wildly, trusting to luck some bullet of the frenzied fusillade must sooner or later find its mark.

Now, Lightning moved his head far enough to one side of the girl to take cool, deliberate aim. It was, Drake realized, now or never!

Pablo lay there behind him, *hors de combat*. Drake was near enough to Lucia, now, to see that hers arms were bound behind her; that what had been a gag had half-slipped out of her mouth.

That meant but one thing. Lightnin' had not only had the girl covered with his guns when he and Pablo had arrived, but Lightning had been preparing to take the girl with him.

IF Drake stopped Lightning's bullet now, there was nothing in the world to prevent the success of his plan. It might be hours before the return of the rancho's *vaqueros*, who were out there riding on the heels of Mabry's disordered gang.

Drake breathed a prayer. He called upon his nerves in spite of their tumult, their frenzy, to be calm. He took longer aim than he usually required.

He waited until a target a half-inch in

diameter—Lightning's shooting eye—lined up along his sights. To fire too wide in the one direction meant to miss Lightning and be killed. To fire too wide in the other direction meant not only to be killed by Lightnin's bullet, but that his own bullet would kill Lucia!

Drake fired.

There were two reports, so blended that they sounded as one! Lead smashed Drake in the shoulder, hurled him over backward with its terrific impact. Failure loomed stark and terrible before him as darkness closed in on him. . . .

Drake opened his eyes at the soft touch of Lucia's fingers on his forehead. She had his head pillowed on the softness of her breast. A little way off stood Pablo, one wounded arm dangling. A little way farther still, there in the doorway where he'd fallen lay Lightning, a black bullet hole where his trigger eye had been.

Emotion too deep for words swept over Drake. He felt as he'd felt on that day years and years ago when as a small boy he'd glimpsed Los Alamos for the first time!

"This is home. Destiny waits for me here."



Fighting for justice and happiness, Dal Barton crosses the Rio Grande on the trail of a Mexican bandit, and battles against heavy odds when rustlers and range hogs combine to block his path in—

THE TRAIL TO HELL

An Epic of the Border

By **LARRY HARRIS**

ONE OF NEXT ISSUE'S FIVE TOP-FLIGHT WESTERN NOVELS!

One Man Train Robber



The possemen fired at the rider and hit him

*The true
story of
Black Jack
Christian—
and of Tom
Ketchum, who
tried to
fill his shoes!*

by

FRANKLIN

REYNOLDS

BILL CHRISTIAN, the original *Black Jack*, was a man! He was as a cowboy, a top-hand in the handling of cattle. Down in the *brasada* there was not a better man with a rope. He was good natured and well liked by all those wild, spirited *vaqueros* among whom he worked down in the Animas Valley of New Mexico and the San Simon, Sulphur Springs and San Pedro Valleys in Arizona.

He was popular with the ranchers be-

cause he did not have the average cowboy's dislike for odd jobs around the place that could not be done on a horse. When it came to cutting that scrub oak called *black jack* and used in building corrals down in the Chiricahuas no man could top him. Hence he was known as *Black Jack Christian*.

Tall, dark and handsome, he was courteous and kind. When he started riding the rim rocks on the outlaw trail, some were surprised. He made a prac-

tise of never stealing from a man who could not afford the loss occasioned by the theft. The Pancho Villa, or Robin Hood, of his day and place he took from the rich and gave to the poor. He never carried away more than he could use for himself or charity, never wasted what he took and never wantonly took a life. Even his victims had some regard and no little respect for him. He was never vicious, never mean—but he was an outlaw!

Posse Hunts Outlaw

Some men were afraid of him. These were men with personal reasons for their fear. One of them carried word to the sheriff that Christian was hiding in a cave on Cole Creek in Graham county, Arizona.

"Go out and get him and bring him in," the sheriff directed Ben Clark, a deputy.

This happened in the Fall of 1897. All night Clark and his posse waited near the entrance to the cave. Soon after daylight they concluded they had been misinformed and made their shivering way towards the Williams' Ranch House and hot coffee.

Without knowing they had been waiting for him Black Jack Christian left the cave soon after they departed. He too was headed for the Williams' festive board and a hot breakfast. He knew a short cut and took it. Emerging on the main trail a short distance ahead he was sighted by the possemen and they opened fire. Without learning the effect of their firing, without breakfast and hot coffee, they quickly mounted and rode into town. Hardly had they reported their actions to the sheriff before one of Williams' herders galloped down the middle of the dusty street.

"Williams says," the rider recited, "that he wishes you'd come out there an' get the man you killed this morning."

Without knowing it they had killed Black Jack Christian.

The next year a man was arrested in Bisbee, Arizona, who, in appearance was much like Black Jack Christian, and who was thought by the arresting constable to be Black Jack Christian. The constable insisted that Christian had not been killed but had bribed certain officers to report him dead in order that

the search for him would fade out. This man was imprisoned and held for several days until he did definitely establish the fact that Christian was dead and that he was Tom Ketchum of San Angelo, Texas, a cowboy just riding through.

Released, Tom Ketchum did not continue to ride but undertook to drink the Bisbee saloons dry. At the proper stage of his inebriation he whipped out his six-shooter, put three holes in a back bar mirror and swore by an oath as long as the bar itself and as profane as profanity could be in Bisbee that he would become an outlaw, that he would be known as "Black Jack" and that even the Rangers in Texas would tremble at the mere mention of his name! He was all set to be the ring-tailed whizzer with red-stripped wheels!

Two Dangerous Twins

Tom Ketchum had a twin brother, Sam. Twins in appearance, they were twins in souls and appearance. The Ketchum boys were a salty pair. They frequented saloons and gambling dens, refused to take to the ideas of school and church, and as one old-timer expressed it, "they just run plumb wild!"

Both grew into large, black-bearded, swarthy men—two of the meanest wolf-like outlaws who ever dried a pair of boots at a fire. Both were killers.

Just exactly when they started riding the outlaw trail no man can accurately say—unless it was the day they were born! Between the years 1880 and 1890 they were doing some rustling. This was their profession in the Black Range and Mogollon Mountains of New Mexico. Then they were heard from in the San Simon Valley in Cochise county, Arizona. In Tombstone they became intimate with Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, the Clantons, the McLowerys and Curly Bill Brocius. There too they learned many tricks of the gunman's trade.

The first gang of Black Jack Ketchum was made up of such notorious characters as Bill Carver who was later to ride with Butch Cassidy's Hole-In-The-Wall Gang of Robber's Roost; Jack Spindel; Cole Estes, alias, Cole Young and one Jess Williams.

At noon, August 6, 1896, this band rode into Nogales with the idea of robbing the International Bank. John Bes-

sart, the President, was alone on duty. When they came in the door he drew his six-shooters and opened up. Tom Ketchum returned the fire and wounded Bessart once, but not seriously. The banker routed the bandits.

"There is great excitement in town," the Nogales correspondent of *The Tucson Citizen*, wired his paper, "and if the robbers are caught they probably will be lynched!"

It was learned that the Ketchum gang on the way to Nogales had robbed the store and post office at Separ. A posse followed their trail for several miles along the International Line, found themselves in Mexico, followed through the northern part of that country for four days, lost the trail and returned to Nogales.

On August 27th, a cowboy reported to Deputy United States Marshal Jim Hall of New Mexico that he had sighted the gang in Skeleton Canyon over in Arizona. Marshal Hall gathered a posse, annexed a troop of cavalry from Fort Bayard and moved on the suspected hiding place.

Lawmen Fight Ketchum Band

Two days later Burt Alvord, a deputy sheriff of Cochise county, reported to the sheriff, Charles Fly, that he had located the Ketchum outlaws in the neighborhood of Mud Springs. Sheriff Fly organized a posse and moved toward that point.

The sheriff was luckier than the federal officers. He located the outlaws, engaged them in a gunfight and split the band into two parts. One of these groups escaped entirely but the officers followed the other to Las Animas Valley and into New Mexico. Again the outlaws headed for Mexico with the posse close behind them. South of the Line the possemen followed the trail for three days, lost it, regained it three days later, and ran the outlaws back into the United States.

Charles Fly was a persistent officer. He was on that trail almost a month. On the twenty-fourth day they picked up a hot clue near Bisbee. This led them through the Swisshelm Mountains, across Sulphur Valley, through the San Simon Valley and back into Skeleton Canyon where the federal officers had been searching.

A few days later Fly's posse rode up

on the outlaws' camp and another battle followed. Two members of the posse were killed. Sheriff Fly killed his own horse when he saw Black Jack Ketchum make his way, under fire, to the horse and mount it in an attempted escape.

"I hated to kill that horse," the sheriff admitted, "but I couldn't let Ketchum get away and anyhow I didn't want him to get away on my horse and I didn't want him to have my horse."

But Ketchum did, otherwise, get away. All the members of the gang got away and none of them were even wounded.

By the middle of the following month the outlaws had all gotten together again at a hiding place on a cattle ranch near Dos Cabezas, Arizona. The ranch boss surprised them butchering a steer. Looking up from their jobs of beefing the animal they discovered him watching them. Black Jack arose both to his feet and the occasion:

"Rest your saddle an' eat," he invited.

Desperadoes Herd Cattle

The foreman accepted. "You must be Black Jack Ketchum. This looks like the gang!" the boss commented.

"You're right!" Ketchum assured him. Then the leader of the *banditos* opened up and told of the activities of his band. He concluded by saying: "It may be that a posse will be along presently looking for us. If so tell them I said if they keep on looking they'll really run into trouble. We're ready any time they are."

The herd, by this time, had become very much disconcerted by the fresh blood of the butchered steer. A stampede was well nigh inevitable.

"I've got to round up some riders and move these cattle," the foreman observed.

"No need for that," Ketchum answered, "me and my men will help you with the job."

They did, moving the cattle to a range several miles distant. Black Jack Ketchum then offered to pay for the steer that had been killed.

The gang next showed up at Rio Puerco in New Mexico, about thirty miles from Albuquerque where they robbed a train. Where they boarded the train is a matter of speculation, but it was at Rio Puerco that Conductor Healy

saw them on the tender. Thinking they were tramps he ordered them off. For answer Ketchum shot a lantern out of the hands of Ted Stevens, the brakeman.

On the train was deputy United States Marshal George Loomis and sitting with him was Cade Selvey, Chief Special Agent for the railroad company. With their sawed off shotguns the two officers opened war with the outlaws. Cole Young was killed while the others escaped into the night.

On October 28th, the stage running between San Antonio and White Oaks, New Mexico, was held up. The Ketchum gang was recognized by the driver and a posse was soon in pursuit. On November 3rd, while still in flight, the gang robbed the post office at San Simon, fled into the Sulphur Springs Valley, covered their tracks and holed up for several weeks.

Later that month they arrived at the station stop of Huachuca where they robbed the railway station, confiscated a large shipment of liquor and where, for the first time in his life, Tom Ketchum showed a bit of genuine kindness.

Ketchum Does Kind Deed

Sam Ketchum had taken all the worldly belongings from an old fellow who was loafing with the agent. When he carried his plea to Black Jack the outlaw's heart was touched with the old man's story of his sick wife. Black Jack ordered Sam to return the old man's money and to it Black Jack added one hundred dollars! For probably the first time in his life—since he played at his mother's knee—a prayer was offered for the soul of Black Jack Ketchum! The old man did that!

At this time Black Jack Ketchum's gang was credited with a score of murders, nine or ten of the victims having been officers. If he ever actually killed a man in self-defense that fact is unknown to the record.

In Grant county, New Mexico, the gang was sighted near Squaw Mountain by the son of a man they had killed. The boy hurried to the sheriff who organized a posse and went into camp at the foot of the mountain that night waiting for daylight. At two o'clock in the morning, when a member of the posse suspected the outlaws were making ready to move out and got out of his blankets to investi-

gate, he was accidentally killed by his companions. The outlaws, without any idea that officers were so near, heard the shots and retreated.

Early in December United States Marshal Will McClinchey of New Mexico led a posse to the Diamond A Ranch, fifty or sixty miles South of Separ. He had received information the gang would stop there for breakfast. McClinchey had his men posted in advantageous places around the ranch house and outbuildings. The trap was set.

When Jess Williams and a man named Hays had ridden, stirrup to stirrup, into the trap and the others were, unsuspectingly, following, an ambitious and nervous member of the Marshal's force discharged his gun by accident and precipitated the fight.

Slugs from officers' guns cut Williams and Hays into doll rags. The other outlaws escaped before the officers could locate and mount their horses. The members of this posse had \$5,000.00 divided between them for rewards for the two men killed. Williams was identified as Sam Hassells who had escaped from the State Penitentiary at Huntsville, Texas.

Outlaws Stay In Hiding

During the Winter of 1896-1897 the outlaws stayed in the Sierra Madres of Mexico. From here they ventured out but once when at Steins, New Mexico, they robbed a Southern Pacific train. In this affray two of the outlaws were killed and never identified. Three of the band were captured and sentenced to the Penitentiary. The posse continuing the search finally surrounded the bandits near the Perilla Mountains. Here six more of the outlaws were killed. How many men composed the Ketchum gang no man seemed to know.

The Southwest had begun to breathe easier and to presume that Black Jack Ketchum had either been killed or had departed for other regions when for months no news of him had been received.

Then followed a train robbery at his hands near Des Moines, New Mexico, in which little if any loot was taken. In flight, and on July 16th, 1899, the band unexpectedly ran into Sheriff Ed Parr and a force of deputies near Cimarron. In the ensuing battle Sam Ketchum was killed and the others scattered. Black

Jack made his way, alone, into what is now Rio Arriba county in New Mexico. In this section he worked for several months as a cowboy.

Again there crept upon him the urge to rob a train, but this time he was alone. No member of the old gang could be located with such discreet inquiries as he was obliged to make. The situation was growing desperate. It was necessary that a train, any train, should be robbed, and that he should do the job. Gang or no gang he decided that he could rob a train alone! If successful it was to be historic—the first one-man train robbery in history. The glory and honor, the way Black Jack Ketchum looked at it, was worth the risk!

The hunt for him was now more widespread than ever before. Grim-eyed officers were going about the business of locating him in deadly seriousness. Every peace officer in the Southwest was carrying his description. The railroad companies were financially interested in his capture. The reward posters all read: "Dead or Alive."

A One-Man Holdup

Black Jack Ketchum was short of money. The United States had gotten too hot for him. He had ideas of going to Argentina, of starting a ranch there, of taking a new lease on life, of becoming a law-abiding citizen, perhaps—but first, he needed money, much money and there was, so far as he knew, but one way to get it! Hence the idiotic idea of the one-man train robbery.

Not far from Folsom, New Mexico, he staked out a pair of horses in Twin Mountain Curve. In Folsom he boarded

a train operated under the direction of Conductor Frank Harrington.

As the train neared the place where he had located his horses he climbed over the tender, produced a six-shooter and obliged Hobart Kirchgrabber, the engineer, to stop the train. He then ordered the fireman to cut the express car loose from the train.

Fred Bartlett, the express messenger, opened the door of his car to learn why the train had stopped. Black Jack Ketchum shot him through the jaw.

Frank Harrington hearing the shot produced a sawed off shotgun and dumped the load of buckshot into Ketchum's arm, almost severing it. The battle was over!

The train was carrying a valuable shipment of gold and the crew not willing to run the risk of being attacked by the other outlaws they *presumed* were with the one they had seen pulled into the next stop to notify the officers.

The next morning Ketchum was captured wandering along the track not far from the scene of the hold up. He was sick and feverish and very weak from loss of blood. He was taken to Trinidad, Colorado, where his arm was amputated.

When he recovered sufficiently he was taken to Clayton, New Mexico, tried and found guilty. There he was hanged on April 1, 1901. Quite appropriately on All Fools' day.

Ketchum was a heavy man. The rope was small and stout. The drop from the platform was long.

And so—when he was dropped through to eternity he and his head didn't get there together because, the rope completely and *not very neatly* severed his head from his body!



TIP SHERWIN, COWBOY WAYFARER, BRINGS ABOUT A SHOWDOWN
WHEN DEATH STRIKES THE MISSION COUNTRY IN—

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Romance RIDES



"Somebody's climbing the canyon above us," Cherry reported to Darrell

I

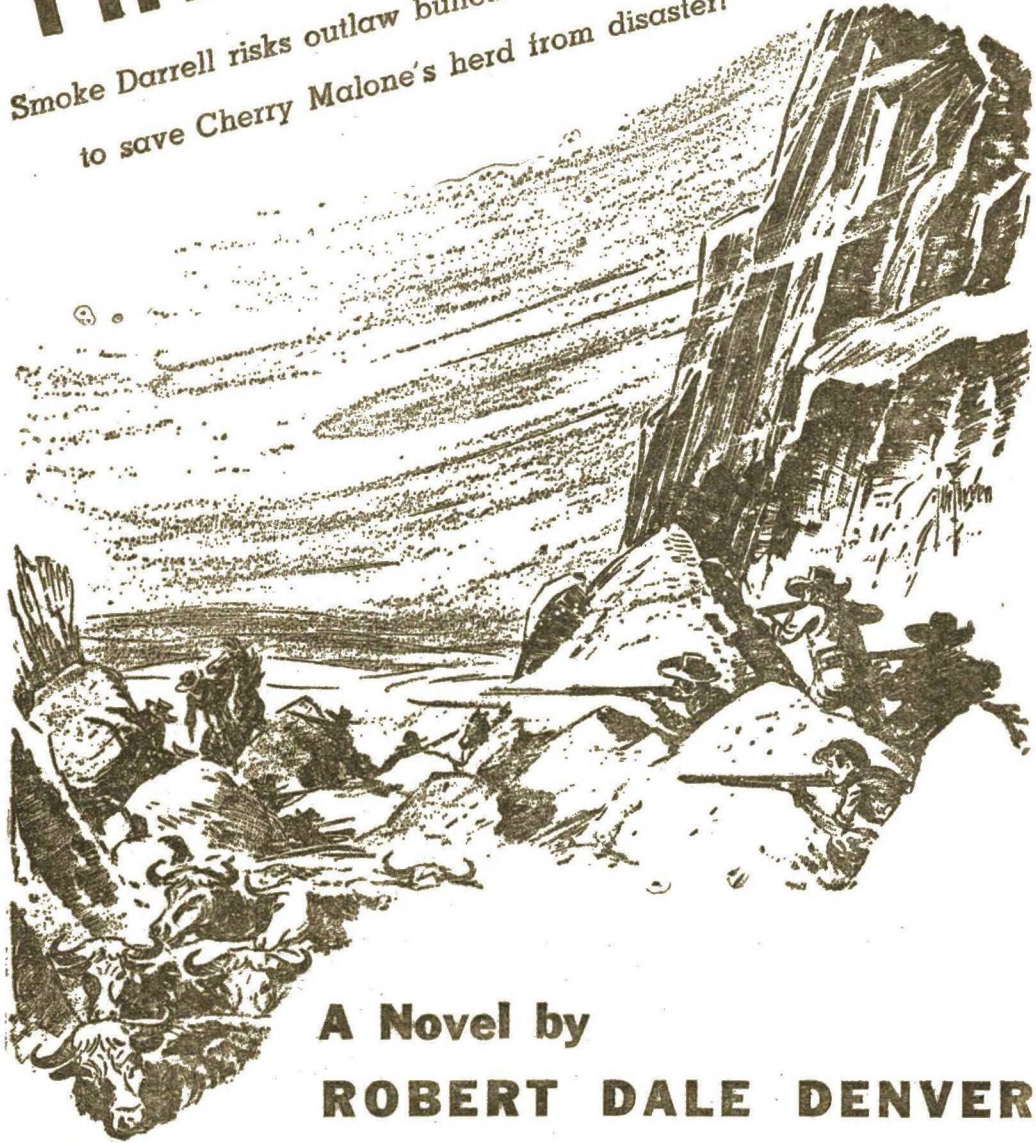
FROM the dust-gray rattler coiled below the ocatilla lances came an angry whirr. "Smoke" Darrell's grulla cow pony shied, lunged far to the side. The weight of the tall rider remained in easy balance, while his hand shipped

down to his holster. A black-stocked gun slid up. In the cowboy's hand it represented a menace far more deadly than the needle fangs of the diamond-back.

With the swift draw Smoke Darrell had thumbed back the hammer. Now,

THE TRAIL

Smoke Darrell risks outlaw bullets and a desert storm
to save Cherry Malone's herd from disaster!



A Novel by

ROBERT DALE DENVER

lightninglike, the gun titted down at the deadly coils—only to be suddenly slipped back into leather.

"No cartridges to waste, old-timer, on snakes," he muttered to his horse. "Not on the kind that crawl."

Horse and rider had just topped a rocky rise covered with jungle palm-like yucca. The cowboy's gray eyes swept the San Christobal, the great desert valley which lay between the walls of two distant mountain ranges. His

The Girl in the Crimson Neckerchief Swerves a

eyes lingered on the white line of the sands, then they dropped to the arroyo bottom below.

Darrell leaned forward in sudden astonishment. Crawling up the sandy trough of the arroyo were two wagons, heavily loaded, each drawn by four mules. Following them came a herd of cattle, strung out far down the winding arroyo bottom.

He stared unbelievably, but to add to the testimony of his eyes was the rumble of the wagons, softened by the heavy sand. The leaders of the herd marched slowly by him, swinging along wearily, wrapped in a coiling cloud of choking dust. The point man rode a little ahead, followed by flanking riders along the line, all with neckerchiefs muffling their faces.

The nearest of these to Darrell was a slender youth with a crimson neckerchief over his face, sitting his bay mount with the grace of one born to the saddle.

Unseen behind his cover of yucca, Smoke Darrell watched them—the riders yelling hoarsely at the cattle, swinging their ropes, hazing the herd across this burning waterless waste. The signs were plain. The white-faced cattle were dying on their feet—from thirst. The weaker staggered as they walked, near utter collapse. All had been pushed nearly to the limit of their strength.

Up ahead the two wagons had stopped. The point man had ridden up to indicate a spot in the arroyo bottom. The two drivers took spades and began a frantic digging. Plainly they were trying to find water.

The herd halted, and two of the trail drivers rode up to join the digging men. They all took turns sinking a hole down deep into the dry sand. They had no luck, evidently, Darrell saw, as he kept under cover of the jungle of mesquite and soapweed to drift nearer.

Smoke Darrell had a faraway look in his eyes. He was seeing a similar scene that he had witnessed long ago. Ten years before another cattle herd, dying of thirst, had passed close to this very spot, and a man had showed them where to dig.

But they had not found water. Nor did these people.

THE digging stopped. Two men stepped a little apart, one a stocky, old cowman with an iron-gray walrus mustache. The other, who had been on point and who had chosen the spot to dig for water, was younger, a hawk-faced whip-stock fellow. Two guns were slung low on his hips. Darrell was so close that he could hear their talk.

"I done the best I could," maintained the younger man.

"You did the best you could—to wreck us!" rasped out the old cattleman. "I think, Moore, you hired out as our guide so you could lead us in this hell hole and let my herd die of thirst."

"But I tell you," insisted the other, "this is the first time I saw these water holes dry. Your only hope now, Mr. Malone, is to make the Rawls ranch—up ahead, on the edge of the White Sands. Rawls has plenty water. Don't yell before you're hurt."

The whipstock younger man was a gunman, Darrell knew, the kind of man who practises a swift draw for hours at a time, and burns up dozens of boxes of cartridges.

One of the teamsters stepped over, a little chunk of a bearded fellow. "Boss," he said, "I heard of that Rawls ranch. I remember a story years ago of a herd like yours, lost in a desert, dyin' of thirst. The crew pushed up to a Rawls ranch and asked for water. But Rawls he only laughed and said, 'No water for strangers; but I'll pay a dollar a head for the herd.' An' the herd owner had to take it, or see his cows die."

The cattleman turned to the tall guide. "What do you say to that, Moore?" he rasped out.

A grin, a hideous, wolfish lifting of the lips, appeared on the face of the man with the two guns, Moore.

"Here's your answer, Malone!" he snapped, and then it came without warning—the lightninglike flash of his hands down to his pair of guns. They swept up, hammers back, one barrel to cover the accusing teamster, the other the herd owner, Malone, and the two men standing near him.

The men about the dry hole were caught off guard. None of them had thought it necessary to wear a gun on the slow, dragging drive across this

Hard-Bitten Cowboy from the Path of Vengeance!

desert country. Their glances toward one of their wagons told the location of their weapons. The little bearded teamster who had boldly accused Moore of treachery knew he faced certain death for it, even though the guide was delaying firing the shot, getting a certain pleasure out of playing with his victims.

The delay gave the teamster his chance at life. He sprang aside. The trick somehow fooled the gunman. Star-



SMOKE DARRELL

led, he shot hastily, one gun spurting lead and flame at the teamster, the other at the old cattleman.

The one bullet sailed far wide of the teamster; the other struck the herd owner in the center of the forehead, killing him instantly. Snarling, the gunman backed behind the wagon out of Darrell's view, edging toward his horse as he held the others covered.

It had all happened in seconds. Darrell, yards away and behind his screen of brush on the hill, had been helpless to interfere. The guide had drawn his guns unexpectedly, and a shot sent from Darrell's own weapon into the swiftly moving group of men would have been as likely to hit one as another.

The killer from behind the wagon flung two more shots at the men, and made a wild grab for his horse, got the reins and swung aboard with the speed of a relay racer making a change. It was high time. The men, as he mounted, raced for the wagon to get their guns. As Moore spurred for cover, one of them snatched a rifle from under a bedroll and leveled it.

Glancing back, the rider saw his danger and twisted around in his saddle to throw back a hasty shot. It struck the side of the wagon, knocking splinters in the eyes of the rifleman and making his shot go wild. The next instant Moore was out of sight, crashing through a thick growth of desert brush and around a sharp bend in the arroyo.

Behind him the scattered riders swept into their saddles to go in pursuit, after stopping at the lead wagon to yank rifles from under bedrolls. So intent were they on vengeance that they had ignored the danger of one of their number.

The last of the shots sent back by the fugitive had struck the bay horse ridden by the slim youth with the silk neckerchief. The horse reared high, pawed the air a moment, and then went over backward.

SMOKE DARRELL gave a great shout, spurred his grulla to the speed of a race horse getting away from the wire. Leaning far down, his right hand snatched at the collar of the fallen rider and dragged him from danger.

As he hauled the youth away, one hoof of the dying horse struck glancingly on the small high-heeled boot. There was a little scream of pain. Astonished by the cry, Darrell got down and put a propping arm under the rider. The big brown sombrero had fallen off, revealing a thick mass of curly reddish hair. A girl this, slim, slender, hard-muscled—but a girl, startlingly pretty in her range clothes.

"I'm all right," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "Thanks!" She sprang to her feet, went on to the rancher, reached him just as Darrell got down to examine the dead man. The girl knelt on the other side. Tears sprang suddenly into her blue eyes.

"Your father?" asked Darrell.

"My uncle. Jim Malone."

A few shots sounded up ahead; yells came back faintly. The rancher lay in the sun, looking up at the sky from sightless eyes. Behind them the weary, thirst-racked cattle bellowed mournfully under the furnacelike heat that flowed down on them from the glistening White Sands.

A vast pity rose in Smoke Darrell, for this girl.

"What do you aim to do, Miss?"

"I don't know. What can we do?"

"Nothing much," said Smoke Darrell. "Your cattle will never make it back out of here. The only water they could possibly reach is this Rawls ranch. Ma'am, your uncle got lured into a trap. Rawls has got too many fighting men for you to take water by force, and the law is with him in protecting his property. Your uncle was killed to throw fear into the rest of you. You'll have to go on to the Rawls place and sell the herd to him. There's no way out I know of, and I've scouted this country for the last couple of weeks."

"How about the sheriff? There must be some law here."

"Not the kind that'll stick up for strangers—against Buck Rawls."

The soft mouth lost its curve. "We'll drive on to this Rawls ranch. But when he get there, we'll fight."

"I like your sand," said Darrell frankly. "What's your name?"

"Cherry Malone."

"Cherry Malone, I reckon you're in for a heap of trouble. But don't make it worse; sell out to Rawls. He's got you any way you turn."

He looked at the dead man again, then rose to his feet. "Yore men are coming back, so I'll be ridin' along. I can't afford to be seen by too many people in here."

The hard look set again on his face. He stepped on his horse, said, "*Adios.*" The girl thoughtfully looked after him until he vanished into the yuccas.

Old Dick Rutledge and Sandy Starr were galloping back to the wagons, their faces carrying news of their failure to avenge the murder of Jim Malone, cowman.

The girl lifted her shoulders as if already the burden of her new responsibilities weighed heavily on them. Jim Malone had to be buried and the herd

had to move on to the nearest water—Buck Rawls' ranch. She had a sudden wish—that the grave-faced young stranger were riding with them.

II

SMOKE DARRELL stopped on the hill above the Malone herd to take a final look. He remained there for long minutes. He could see the band of the crimson neckerchief which marked Cherry Malone's slender figure.

Smoke Darrell was fighting a hard battle with himself. He had come to the San Christobal country with one set purpose, one that had been a part of him for ten years. And a man does not easily let himself be swerved from a ten-year-old purpose.

The Malones were strangers; what happened to their herd was none of his business. And yet against that cold fact was the girl in the crimson neckerchief, left to carry a burden that was too much for a man.

He took from a chaps pocket a cartridge, a .44 caliber bullet, with the lead nose of it gashed by a knife. Slowly he turned it over in his hand. It was a passport, a passport to the outlaw kingdom of Buck Rawls, a grim identification that would take him safely into the circle of Rawls' gunmen.

The hard-bitten cowboy hated to use it, disdaining with a proud independence to take an easy advantage of his sworn enemies, but to assist that girl, he would feel justified in using it—if he decided to help her. It took him two brown paper cigarettes to decide. Standing up, he ground beneath his high-heeled boot the cigarette butt. The bullet he put back into his chaps pocket, buttoning the flap securely over it.

His horse's hoofs thudded away under the hot glare of the setting sun, pounding straight toward the Rawls ranch. In something over two hours he traveled the distance which the Malone herd, even moving all night, would not cover until late the next day.

At sunset he was looking down on the ranch of Buck Rawls. He had watched it often during the past weeks, had studied it with field glasses, observing the comings and goings of its people, until he knew every rider by sight.

The building was low, long, made of

blocks of black rock from a formation that cropped up here close to the edge of the White Sands. Against the background of the white snow of the mesa behind it, the ranch had a strange, weird look. About it were square stone corrals, for not a tick of wood grew within many miles. Enclosed also in black rock walls was a huge square reservoir, its stored water gleaming red in the sky's afterglow.

Built like a fort, on closer inspection the house gave an even stronger impression of a building designed to resist a siege. The windows were so small as to be almost slitlike.

Darrell was some fifty yards from the house when someone opened the door, a heavy plank affair with an inner sheathing of iron, and a man stepped out. He was a hawk-nosed fellow with a reddish stubble of beard, fifty or so, with eyes shadowed by heavy brows which had been bleached white by the wind and sun glare. At least six feet three inches, powerfully built, with a brace of guns at his hips, Buck Rawls was fit owner of his fortresslike place.

"Rawls?" asked Darrell curtly. "I'd like a word with you alone." Two other men had appeared behind Rawls. "I come here from a town west of the White Sands. Mogador," he added.

Rawls started a little. "Mogador, eh?" he said. He walked out close to the rider. "And what word do you bring from Mogador?"

Darrell put his hand into the left pocket of his batwing chaps. It came out closed, and slid something into the outstretched hand of Rawls.

The rancher turned his back to the others and inspected the contents of his hand. A .44 cartridge, with the nose of the bullet gashed across.

His eyes narrowed again. "Light," he said. "What's your name?"

"Smoke, they call me," he drawled. "And Smoke is about as far as I care to go in the way of names.

Rawls' hostility faded. "Room for your horse in the lower corral, and we got some hay and oats in the saddle shed. What's doin' at Mogador?"

"What would be doing in yore line, Rawls, except cows?" returned Darrell. "A herd of black Angus bein' drove out of the Puerco drought country, lookin' for grass. Six hundred head. Bull Lyons says if it's rigged right, you'll have

black cows to graze up against those White Sands. You wouldn't object to that, I reckon? I'll talk it over with you and go back and report to Lyons, after I rest up a day. Crossin' this desert is hard on a horse."

"Six hundred head," repeated Rawls. "Sure, we'll talk it over." His manner warmed toward his visitor. "We got a bait of grub in the kitchen; help yourself. Stick around a couple days. Meanwhile if you want to see some fun and maybe join in it—you'll see some 'long toward evenin' tomorrow."

It was the time the Malone herd was due in at the Rawls ranch, if the herders shoved them along fast.

"Fun, eh?" said Darrell. "And maybe some Fourth of July fireworks?"

"There might be." And his lips lifted in what was intended for a smile, but was like the snarl of a dog.

A BURNING blast straight from hell's furnace fanned the Malone herd, lifted dust into the red nostrils of the tortured cattle. Occasionally as they moved under the hot sun a low bellowing ran back along the strung-out herd. They were more dead than alive, like a ghost herd, the ghost of cattle that had moved through this desert and had left their bleached skeletons to mark their trail.

The trail drivers shouted and swung ropes. Back of them, under the dead arms of a tree cactus, lay the grave of Jim Malone.

After a rest the herd had shambled on, through the night, through the day. A few of them fell and remained for the coyotes. Those that went on were little more than alive.

At noon when they rested again, old Sandy Starr came to the girl and said: "Me and some of the rest was raised with your Uncle Jim. The strings of us old-timers is about played out, Cherry. We got nothin' much to lose. Why don't you ride back and wait? We'll make out against this cultus Rawls somehow."

Deeply touched by the offer, she shook her head determinedly. They were on a forlorn hope, but they would stick together.

"I don't see no way out," said Sandy Starr disconsolately.

The only youthful rider in the group came up swaggeringly. A distant relative of the Malones, he had joined the

drive at the last minute.

His last name was Tolliver and the men had promptly given him a first one — "Windy." Big-faced, big-bodied, lazy, he had been more of a hindrance than a help on the trail. He counted himself a lady-killer, and several times during the drive the girl had been forced to repulse his clumsy advances.

"What you mean—no way out?" blustered Windy. "Cherry, I want to speak to you. I can get you out of this."

She stepped aside, prepared to listen to some braggart solution of their difficulties. "What I've got to say is this, Cherry: promise to marry me, and I'll guarantee this herd will get out of this mess."

"You feel certain you can get us out?"

His chest swelled. "Your troubles will be over the minute you say 'yes.'" He leaned nearer. "Say, you're so dang sweet, I just can't help takin' a kiss!"

"You do and you'll have your face slapped red," she told him. "Keep your pants off me."

"Aw, listen," he begged. "Don't be sore. I want to help you. I'm tellin' you I can get you out of this fix. But I ain't doin' it for nothin'. I got my price. You get to promise to marry me before I tell you my plan. When we're hooked up, we have the herd to start ranchin'."

Cherry did not put an ounce of belief in his claim. Windy Tolliver was notorious for making wild statements. She ignored him.

Slowly they got under way again, for the last burning miles of the cruel march to the Rawls ranch. An hour, two; more cattle went down, had to be left. But the wagons were creaking on over the hard ground of a ridge and a driver waved back. The Rawls ranch lay below.

As the leaders of the herd topped the rise, a curious change ran through them. It was as if they had taken a new lease on life.

The cattle had gotten the faint smell of water, borne on the heated wind. Under its promise they moved along fast, stronger ones pushing far ahead. As they came nearer to its black rock house and the white sand glimmering beyond, some of the stronger ones managed a swaying trot.

From the corrals a savage barking started up. And from the house men

began to file—six, eight, ten, and still others—all carrying rifles.

Drunk with the smell of water, the thirst-maddened brutes pushed by the point man, plunged toward the stone reservoir with its walls that rose some five feet above the surrounding ground. The plank troughs outside were supplied by underground pipes which could be opened and shut by a valve worked by an iron wheel.

Those troughs were empty, drained of their last drop. Frantically the cattle put their muzzles into the moist bottoms, crowding in, fighting, pushing, to let their tortured tongues lick at the wet planks.

Cherry Malone rode ahead of the rest of her crew. She was the first to see Rawls' men, sitting on top of the wall, with rifles in their hands, watching the antics of the maddened cattle, grinning at the tortures of the poor brutes.

At one side stood a little group of three men—a bullet-headed, short, heavy-set fellow and a tall hawk-nosed, stubby-whiskered man. And to the girl's sudden astonishment, the third was the young stranger who had pulled her out from under the threshing hoots of her horse the day before. So he was in this pirate crew, leagued with Buck Rawls. She ignored him, not by so much as a look giving him any hint that she even saw him.

Sitting erect in her saddle, the girl rode straight toward the men, holding her rifle over the horn of her saddle.

III

MOUNTED on her spirited sorrel, the girl was a tantalizing mixture of angry determination and alluring femininity. She was clad in heavy leather chaps and man's shirt. An angry flush dyed her cheeks, but she handled the rifle as if she knew how to use it—which she did. Her mouth was a firm, straight line, and her blue eyes blazed.

Watching her, the men fell quiet. Even Rawls as his bold gaze drifted over her straightened his shoulders a little to give a greater effect of manliness.

When she spoke her voice seethed with anger. "You, I suppose, are Buck Rawls?"

"You guessed it the first time, Miss," said Rawls with a bow to show his gallantry. "And may I offer you the hospitality of my ranch, ma'am?"

A cowboy sitting atop the reservoir wall guffawed at this polite speech, but as the girl turned swiftly in her saddle, moving the gun barrel with her, the puncher lost his balance and after frantic windmillings of his arms, tumbled into the tank with a splash. He climbed out dripping, to the jeers of his companions.

The girl looked at the herd crowding around the troughs.

"Water?" asked Rawls, who had followed her gaze. "Why, yes, we have water. But I'm sorry none to spare for herds belongin' to strangers. These here springs—we put 'em in at big expense. Yes, ma'am, little lady, at big expense. But if you want a drink, of course, that's a different thing. We wouldn't have you suffer. Permit me. Boys, a cup of water."

The girl was thirsty. Their coffee at breakfast, a mixture of canned milk and a little alkali water, had been their last drink. The water was torture to look at, but she would not take a drop from the hands of the man whose gunman had killed her uncle. Before the contempt in the girl's face, even the thick-headed Rawls squirmed a little.

"Back where I come from," she stated, "you'd be strung up by your neck for doing half as much. To send a gunman to kill my old uncle, Jim Malone, in order to steal his cattle. You low cur; you wouldn't even make decent coyote bait."

"Look here!" yelled Rawls. "I've stood about enough! I didn't come out here to take any lip from even as pretty a mouth as yours. Who asked you to come in here with your ribby herd of thirsty cows?"

His voice suddenly became wheedling. "Now, look here. Your uncle Jim Malone, played the wrong card in crossin' this San Christobal with a man that didn't know his water holes. Your stack is down to a few lone worthless white chips, but I'll cash them. Them cows as they fight out there to lick mud ain't worth the hides on 'em. They ain't no man alive would buy that herd, if they couldn't get water here. The White Sands to the east and north. Desert back of you, desert ahead of you, and a herd that couldn't crawl five miles."

Cherry Malone stared at him. "You've got some terms I suppose. What value do you propose on those white chips when you cash them in?"

"A dollar apiece for those cows," said Rawls. "Cash on the barrel head. A handsome price."

"They're worth thirty on the hoof, as they are. Jim Malone was offered that much for them back in drouth country."

Rawls shook his head. "They ain't worth nothin' without water. What do you say? You're Malone's nearest kin, I suppose. I reckon what you agreed to would go in court. I want a bill of sale signed by you in behalf of these boys. The courts here realize that things have to be done in a hurry with a trail herd, and they ain't so formal."

"Which means, I reckon, you've got a judge that'll listen to reason and the jingle of your money."

"Maybe I have," admitted Rawls pleasantly.

"And maybe you've got a court that'll listen to reason in the shooting of a woman?" she said. "If so, here's your chance." Her gun swung on the cowboy who sat by the iron wheel that closed and opened the valve letting water into the watering troughs. "Untrack yourself!" she ordered him curtly.

Her move took them completely by surprise. For a moment they stared in astonishment.

"Stay where you are!" Rawls gruffly ordered his man.

The cowboy hesitated. "I said, get away from that valve!" Cherry snapped, and he obeyed. "Sandy Starr," she went on, "go over and open that valve. They don't dare shoot you."

HER look passed from man to man, bitter with contempt. This time her glance rested an instant on Smoke Darrell. It should have burned a hole clear through him. But he was not troubled. He seemed to grin a little and then became grave, guessing what opinion the girl had formed about him.

"Go on, Sandy." The aged cowboy rode his pony up to the reservoir. The man with the round head, Torp, started forward, and then quailed before the girl's blazing look. Torp glanced back at his boss. It was up to Rawls to handle this situation.

Rawls took one step forward, and

then as the gun barrel shifted his way, he also hesitated. "I believe you would shoot, you little wild cat," he growled.

The bullet-headed man had an idea. At his feet lay a round rock. With his foot he rolled it toward Cherry Malone's horse. It rattled against the front hoof of the sorrel. Startled, the skittish animal jumped to the side. The girl kept her seat, but in the effort to maintain her balance, her rifle barrel dipped.

Before she could raise it again, Rawls had darted in with the speed of a cat, and had seized it. She struggled with him savagely, but compared with his strength, hers was that of a child. He twisted the gun from her hands and drew her from the saddle. For a moment he held her to him.

"Well, the little wild cat has had her claws pulled," he boasted, chuckling.

Cherry struggled desperately to free herself. Old Sandy Starr and another of the Malone crew were moving in, but before they got close, the girl twisted from Rawls' grasp, and her hand arose carrying with it the long braided rawhide reins of her bridle. She drew back her arm and brought the leather tips across the rancher's face.

With a roar of rage, Rawls charged in, only to have his arm caught from behind, with such force that he was half whirled about. He turned to glance into the blazing face of Smoke Darrell.

"I wouldn't do anything hasty," advised Smoke. "You had it coming, Rawls."

Rawls let out another roar. He struck out with a hard fist that was like a hammer, and which would have felled the cowboy—if it had landed.

With the speed of a trained boxer Smoke let the blow slide glancingly over his shoulder. Then with the timing of the same trained boxer, his right hand came up in a short jolting blow that had all the cowboy's muscle behind it. There was a loud crack. The blow, landing on Rawls' jaw, lifted him from his feet and sent him to the ground, where he lay on his back for a moment half-stunned.

The bullet-head, Torp, rushed toward Darrell, and the cowboys hopped from the wall. There was one lightninglike movement of Darrell's hand and it swept up the gun from its holster, turned the barrel first on Torp, then on the rest.

"Calm down," he said. "This fight is just personal—between me and Rawls—if he still wants it to be a fight. The rest of you keep out."

The girl turned to him, perplexed. She was completely at sea. The day before he had pretended to give friendly advice. She had next seen him here in the enemy camp, on good terms with Rawls. And just now he had come to her defense. Rawls got up, cursing, mouthing threats at Darrell. But he made no effort to resume the fight or to go for his gun.

"I come," said Darrell, "from a country where men don't manhandle women. Maybe it's different here. You can't blame her, Rawls. She's a kid. Gone through a lot of grief. Let her alone!"

Rawls cursed him luridly. "I'll fix you!" he threatened.

"Any time you decide to stop swearing and start action," said Darrell, "it'll be plumb agreeable with me." But Rawls' hands kept away from the pair of white handled guns in tied-down holsters. He had not been too stunned to see that flashing draw. And there was no chance of bluffing this Smoke.

The cowboy stood, bleak-faced, jaw tight, and his gray eyes were suddenly glinting like green ice. He was looking at Rawls like a hungry mountain lion might look at a sheep. To Rawls it seemed that Darrell was praying that he would try to draw. Doc Moore, the Rawls hired gunman who had shot down Jim Malone, had that same eager look just before he killed. This stranger, Smoke, wanted to kill him, wanted Rawls to give him the slightest excuse to shoot.

Rawls, used as he was to death and facing it, shivered a little. He quieted suddenly. "There's something about you, feller," he said to Smoke. "I'll investigate later. Don't get in my way now."

"I got no intention of getting in your way," said Darrell. "You run your business, but keep it strictly business—like having men shot down by your gunman. Don't bring women into it."

Rawls delivered a final snarling ultimatum. "I've stated my terms, Miss Malone," he rasped. "The next move that's made to open that valve is the signal for my men to start shootin' at your crew. Maybe we wouldn't go quite so far as to shoot a girl. When you get ready to accept my terms, let me know."

HE turned and stalked toward the black-walled house. Darrell turned away, apparently indifferent to what happened, and rolled a cigarette. The cattle continued to bawl and fight and mill around the troughs. The girl looked at them and the sight turned her sick.

The hard-eyed, round-faced man called Torp had been left in charge of Rawls' men. They stayed about the tank, with their guns ready, waiting for the Malone's next move.

By this time all the Malone crew had ridden up, including the loud-voiced, swaggering Windy Tolliver. And again he brought up the strange offer he had made before.

"What about that proposition now?" he said to her in a voice that reached her ears alone. "You marry me and we take these cattle and set up ranchin'. You think I'm bluffin', but I ain't. I know a way out of this mess. And it don't have nothin' to do with Rawls."

She looked at him contemptuously. "You pretend to be in our employ, and you hold something like that back?" she demanded. "Haven't you any heart?"

"I got plenty of heart—for you, Cherry," he told her. "Say the word and I'll get you out of this. I had a reason for coming on this trip. I had an idea what might happen. And you can save these cows by promisin' to marry me. I don't mean just to marry me and then you leave me. I mean to marry for keeps. To live as my wife. I'll take your word on it. I know it's good."

She did not even consider the big, swaggering cowboy's terms. She did not believe him, of course, but even if she had, his terms were impossible. While she would work, teaching school, doing anything else that was honorable, she would not consider a hateful marriage to Windy Tolliver.

She was beaten. To hold off would only cause the suffering cattle further tortures. To sell at a dollar a head meant plain robbery, as much as a bold-faced theft. She would give in, tell the bullet-headed man, Torp, to call Rawls back.

First, however, she talked to Sandy Starr and the others. They offered to try to seize the reservoir by force, but she would not permit that. The odds against them were hopeless.

She turned to call to Torp and met the eyes of the stranger she knew only

by the name which Rawls had called him, Smoke. He drifted over, raised his hands to adjust the cinch on her saddle, and spoke to her in a low tone, his lips hardly moving.

"Wait until tonight," he told her. "Don't give in." And then he drifted back.

She wavered for a moment. What did he mean? Did he have some plan for help? But why put any faith in him, a man here in the camp of the enemy?

Yet something about his face, the straight, honest glance of his eyes, the quiet strength behind the young rider, bade her pause. Yesterday he had snatched her from under the flailing hoofs of her dying horse. Today he was offering some way of snatching her from the deadly power of Buck Rawls.

She turned to Sandy Starr and the rest. "We'll wait," was her decision.

IV

JUST before dark half of Rawls' men came in to eat supper, leaving the rest on guard at the tank. The stranger, known to the men simply as Smoke, and who had shown no special sociability toward any of the crew, did not appear.

Buck Rawls noticed his absence. "What become of that Smoke?" he asked Torp, the thick-bodied ruffian who was his *segundo*.

"Last I seen him," said Torp, "he was startin' out for a walk toward the Sands."

"He's goin' to draw a six-foot hole in the ground for hornin' in on my play this evenin'," growled Rawls. "I'll string along with him until we get that bunch of black cows over here, and then I'm settlin' with him. No man can crack me in the jaw and live."

"You better have Doc Moore fix him for plantin', boss," advised Torp. "Don't take no chances. This Smoke is fast. Too fast. He could just about shade Doc."

Rawls for years had carried two guns. In the San Christobal country he was counted as dangerous as his chief gun-slinger, "Doc" Moore, who, acting as guide for the Malone herd, had killed Jim Malone. But Rawls preferred to let Moore do his killings. Why take chances himself?

He had already sent for Moore, fig-

uring that with the Malones being stubborn, an extra gun could be used. Before now it had always been Moore's role to disappear after acting as guide for the helpless herds that found disaster in the San Christobal.

Rawls was a little uneasy about the attitude of the Malone temporary trail boss, the slip of a girl who had single-handedly bulldozed his gang of men. Yet what could the girl and her crew do? The cattle were still milling and bawling for water. Their situation was as hopeless as ever. What were they waiting for then?

"I thought they'd decide to take your terms, Chief," said Torp. "Yessir, the girl and some of her men talked together and from their faces it sure looked to me they'd decided to give up. And that girl, she looked over toward me as if she was goin' to tell me she'd quit."

"Yeah? And what changed her mind?"

"I don't know," growled Torp. "But what happened was that this here stranger, Smoke, he strolled over, and he tightened the cinch on her horse. Maybe he said something to her."

Rawls, swearing wholeheartedly, poured a drink from a whisky jug into a tin cup and downed it. "Something fishy about him. He ain't exactly the kind that Bull Lyons would send over from Mogador."

"Nope, he don't look like a cow thief," said Torp with a frankness that got an angry look from his boss. Buck Rawls had a certain pride: he did not regard himself as a cow thief. The measures he took to buy cattle cheaply he claimed were merely "good business."

He had an arrangement with half a dozen men like Bull Lyons, in various towns, "lookouts" who could persuade owners of herds in search of new range to cross the San Christobal country. The scheme was not worked often, and usually against small outfits, so the word of it would not get around. Bull Lyons of Mogador, who had sent over a messenger with a marked .44 bullet as passport, was one of these lookouts.

So far it had been a very profitable business. Never once had they failed. Doc Moore generally got a job acting as guide across the desert to lead the herd far astray. When the owner accused him of treachery, Moore would kill

him and make a fast escape.

Leaving the herd with only a foreman in charge, with title resting in an estate, helped make for a quick settlement. The quick settlement was always an arrangement by which Rawls got a herd for practically nothing. The profits he split with his helpers and lookouts.

At dark Moore arrived. The slender, whipstock gunman came in through the back, with a noiseless catlike step that hinted at the man's smooth speed.

"Well, I done a good job—killin' old Malone," said Moore boastfully. "Didn't I, hey, Buck?"

"Yeah," admitted Rawls. "But that business ain't over yet, as you can tell by the cows bawlin' out there."

"Aw, that outfit'll have to buckle under," said Moore confidently. "That girl is too soft-hearted to stand by an' see cows die of thirst."

"Soft-hearted!" spat out Rawls. "Who? That wildcat? But I'll tame her right." His face still smarted from the blow delivered by the braided rawhide ends of Cherry's bridle reins. "She's a looker, I'll say that. A looker."

"But she's sure lookin' the other way when it comes to you, boss," put in Torp playfully.

RAWLS resented this ill-timed jocularity. He scowled at Torp.

"We got a stranger in here," remarked Rawls. "Calls hisself Smoke. Come from Bull Lyons at Mogador with news of another herd that Bull is aimin' to send over this way. This hombre seems to be a fast worker with a gun. I ain't likin' this hombre much. An' he don't like me. Him and me is due for a ruckus, soon's my business with him is done."

"Speakin' of Lyons," said Doc Moore, "I got word Bull's headed over this way. A cowboy from that country said Bull told him a week ago he was driftin' across to see you."

"That's bully," grunted Rawls. "We'll find out about Smoke. Don't tell him nothin' about Bul' comin'."

Smoke Darrell meanwhile had drifted over the hill as if to take a look at the White Sands. But as soon as he got out of sight of the ranch, he turned down an arroyo and kept along it until he was not far from the Malone wagons. He was still within easy sight of the

ranch, but he was able to signal old Sandy Starr without attracting the attention of Rawls' guards near the tank.

Starr came over at once.

"Sandy," said Darrell, "I wish you'd ask the big boss of the outfit to come over for a powwow. If she don't want to come alone, she can bring you back with her."

Evidently the girl was not afraid to come alone, for no sooner had Cherry got the message than she started for the arroyo. The men were making supper over a camp fire. In the arroyo bottom Smoke faced her. The girl was neither hostile nor friendly; plainly she reserved judgment.

"Ma'am," said Smoke, "I'm realizin' the bad company I keep needs considerable explainin'. I never figured on crawling into a hole and associatin' with the rattlers in it, but I've the same as done it by chummin' with Buck Rawls and his bunch."

He stopped, regarded the girl anxiously. "But maybe you won't believe what I tell you."

She looked at him steadily for a moment in turn. "I think I will," she told him. "Try it."

"Well, then," said Smoke, "last night was the first I ever spent in the black ranchhouse. I never talked to those men before, any of 'em. But although they ain't hospitable to strangers, they received me. You see, I had a passport that made 'em friendly. I hadn't planned to use it except in an emergency."

He did not tell Cherry that the emergency had been the disaster which had come to her.

"Those men are my enemies, although they don't know it yet. When I was just a youngster something happened—something that's got to be settled with 'em. I've decided now it can wait," he finished awkwardly. "You're in a tough place, Miss Malone. If I can help out any, I'll do it. And I think I can."

"But how can anyone help us?" asked the girl. "Our cattle need water. We're not strong enough to take it."

Darrell smiled. "There's ways of takin' things without being strong," he said. "I'm telling you a secret. Your cows are going to have all the water they can drink, just as soon as it gets good and dark."

"You mean that?" The girl's head lifted in sudden hope.

"I promise you. Your cattle are goin' to get filled up with water. Move 'em out toward mornin', straight back over the hill, and turn towards the White Sands. It's a long, tough drive across the Sands, but there's no other way out. You'll see a peak across the White Sands, shaped sort of like the round, flat horn of a Mexican saddle. Head straight for it. If yuh shove along steady, you can make a dry drive to a ranch right under that peak, and they won't charge you for water. You'll get through if you don't happen to strike a wind storm on the Sands. Storms on the Sands is bad, I've heard. Nothin' can live through 'em."

"But Rawls? Won't he attack?"

"He may be mad enough to after your cattle get water tonight," Darrell admitted. "You want to be ready for him. Take your crew into the rocks back of the wagons. He'll be slow to jump you there. By morning when you move out, he'll be calmed down. Rawls ain't no open cow thief. He wants his deals to be half-way legal. A battle with a lot of men killed means the end of his little game. Another thing; he'll figure you won't try the White Sands, and any other way he'll figure you can't make it to water. He'll think he's still got a chance to buy your herd cheap."

"And you?" she asked. "Do you intend to stay in this rattlesnake den?"

"I don't know. I got to play the cards as they're dealt. If I get enough aces, I may be riding up to your chuckwagon soon. If I do, set a place for a cowboy named Darrell."

"That cowboy named Darrell will have the place of honor," the girl said warmly. "I wish you could come with us—I don't mean for your help. If they find out you're here under false pretenses, they'll kill you."

"Likely," he said indifferently. "But maybe by staying with 'em, I may be able to help you more than by an open break. As soon as you're safe out of the country, I'm telling that gang who I am and what my business over here is. Four men of this bunch specially: Rawls, Torp, Doc Moore that killed yore uncle, and another man named Bull Lyons."

A GAIN the grim set look came to his face. In it could be read the indomitable, fierce determination to accomplish some task—though certain

death lay ahead. With her feminine intuition Cherry guessed his errand to the White Sands country. He had business with four men. She knew suddenly what kind of business. Guns.

She wanted suddenly, as she had never wanted anything before, to persuade him to stay with them, to get safely away from Buck Rawls. Her hands came out impulsively to meet his strong brown ones, to be held tightly.

"So long, Miss Cherry Malone!"

"So long, Smoke Darrell!" The hands drew her close, and he bent to brush her lips with his own.

Cherry went back to the camp fire. Windy Tolliver at once sought her out.

"How about it?" he said. "Ready to make that bargain? Don't expect me to weaken and tell you how to git out of this mess. I won't do it."

"Your great secret may not be worth so very much after all, Windy," she repulsed him. "I've got a hunch we're going to get out of here—and without your help."

On his way back to the house by the roundabout way he had come from it, Darrell noticed that all of Rawls' men had withdrawn a little from the reservoir. He strolled over, sat down with his back to the rock wall and rolled a smoke. He seemed to have a lot of trouble in getting the cigarette lighted, and finally he had to squat down behind the tank away from the wind to get a match to burn.

Then he ambled on into the house and helped himself to a belated supper from the Dutch ovens and skillets on the stove in the kitchen.

"Meet some company, Smoke," said Rawls with deep sarcasm as he brought in his plate of grub. "Friend of mine. Name of Doc Moore. Doc, meet Smoke Darrell. Where'd you say you was from, Smoke?"

"I don't know as I said," stated Darrell calmly. "Why?"

"You kind of remind me of somebody," said Rawls thoughtfully. "Somebody I knowed long ago."

Darrell finished his supper and leaned back for a smoke. "As I was sayin'," said Rawls, "you kind of remind—"

B-O-O-M!

It came without warning, a heavy explosion that rattled the poorly-fitted windows of the house. Following the "Boom!" alarmed yells came from the

direction of the big water reservoir.

Torp burst into the house. "The tank's been dynamited, Chief!" he bawled. "One side of it fell, and the water's all flowin' out. That Malone herd is standin' knee-deep in water."

V

RAWLS' Black Rock Ranch was at once thrown into a shouting turmoil. The guards at the corrals had dashed madly out of the way of the water that swept down on them. None had been hurt by the explosion, since the men had been squatting some forty feet from the tank at the time of the blast. The explosion had not thrown fragments of rock; it had merely undermined the wall so that it fell over.

Through the great gap left, like a dam disaster in miniature, the water poured. The reservoir was both deep and large; in it enough water was stored to supply a small village.

To the surprise of the tortured Malone herd they were suddenly knee-deep in water. There was water for them to wallow in, to drink and drink and drink—clear, good water that was no relation to the bitter, alkaline mud-holes from which they had drunk on their desert drive.

It was fortunate for the Malone herd that cattle, unlike humans, do not often die from taking on great cargoes of water after long periods of thirst.

Rawls and his men ran helplessly about, and finally stood still and cursed. They could not dam that flow, and they could not keep the herd from drinking it. The guards were loud in their claim that the Malones had not been near the tank, could not have placed the dynamite that wrecked it.

At any rate, wherever the blame was placed, it would not be easy to vent their anger on the Malone trail drivers. These had retired to the little rocky point behind the wagons, in a spot which lent itself well to a defense if an attack came.

Rawls considered this new development. Beyond the loss of the tank wall, which would need complete rebuilding, the disaster meant that the Malones would no longer consider his purchase offer.

Cattle can stand a great deal of

punishment, especially a herd in good flesh like the Malone's. They would be capable, Rawls realized, of trailing several days on the strength of this watering. But they would be unable to retrace the route over which they had come—he was sure of that. They had exhausted all of the available water holes. Nor could they make it to the nearest water on the east. While the White Sands raised their forbidding group to the north and west. No stranger would ever attempt to drive cattle across that barrier.

Meanwhile, the cattle, with their thirst slaked to capacity, had stopped their mournful bellowing. A little later, driven by hunger, they began to graze on the available grass and shrubs.

Silence fell over the ranch, leaving moonlight gleaming on the isolated pools of water, in which a few cattle still stood, as if to soak in the water they could no longer drink. A steady stream still ran from the broken reservoir to trickle into an arroyo.

In the house Rawls was turning over things in his shrewd mind. For all of his ruthlessness, he knew he could go so far and no farther. The sheriff was leagued with him, but the official would not string along with him in wholesale murder. If Rawls should start a general massacre of the Malone herders, the result would be an investigation and probably murder charges. It would also certainly put an end to his little spider-fly game of inveigling herds into the web of the San Christobal desert.

He sat at the table, drinking heavily from the white whisky jug, and the more he drank, and turned over the affair in his mind, the more enraged he got. Smoke had come back and sat playing solitaire.

"Ever since you come here, there's been trouble," Rawls burst out finally, looking at Smoke. "This is the first herd I ever slipped up on."

"I hope you don't mean to accuse me of blowing up your reservoir," said Smoke blandly. "Where would I get the dynamite, and when did I have a chance to put it under that wall? Furthermore, if you don't like my company, say so, and I'll go back and tell Bull Lyons it's all off. I came over here to make plans for this herd from Mogador, and you done nothin' but act suspicious. I don't like it."

"Well, maybe I'm wrong," half-apologized Rawls. "But watch your step, feller!"

Smoke shrugged his shoulders, yawned and got up. "I'm turnin' in," he announced. "Wake me for breakfast, and make it a good one. I've eaten better chuck than you furnish here, Rawls."

Rawls turned in an hour later, still in a bad temper. He was in a worse one when at the first pale sign of dawn one of his riders rushed into the big room where all the men, including Darrell, bunked.

"Them Malones have pulled out, boss!" he reported. "Slipped out over the hill, headin' back south. What we goin' to do about 'em?"

RAWLS was torn between two courses. One was to rush out with all his riders and seize the herd by force, shooting down even the girl if the drive crew resisted. But the wiser one he realized was to wait.

"Back trailin', huh?" he said. "They won't get far. They already have cleaned out all the water holes on that trail. They'll be cryin' to me to buy their herd at two-bits a head before they're done."

"Me," said Doc Moore, "I'm in favor of takin' 'em with guns. Don't play around with 'em. They dynamited that tank. Who else could of done it?"

"Beter not spoil our chances on this black herd comin' this way from Mogador," said Darrell smoothly. "News of a bad shootin' here would get out to the drivers of that bunch, and they'd never fall into this trap."

"Smoke's right," said Rawls. "We'll play along. Let 'em try to make it out of this country. They won't get far."

Even Darrell had to admit that Rawls might be right—they might not get far: The Malone herd was taking a desperate chance in trying to cross the White Sands. It was a dry drive all the way, not only across the miles of white desert waste, but another drive to the ranch under the horn-shaped mountain. It would take the herd's last ounce of strength to make it. At best it was a gamble against long odds. Yet it had been their only chance.

No effort was made to hold back the Malone herd. Leisurely the ranch stirred into activity. The wrangler brought in the horses and put them in

a rock-walled corral below the house. Darrell dressed and went to the kitchen to rustle a breakfast.

Rawls on rising went to his jug for his usual morning eye-opener. He was taking it in the company of Doc Moore and Thorp when there was the sudden hammering of hoofs up to the house. They stopped.

The gorilla-like Torp went to the door, flung it open and he shouted a greeting. The newcomer got down, leaving his reins grounded.

"Where at's the boss?" he demanded. "I been ridin' all night to get here; couldn't get a drop of water out of that dang desert." He strode into the house, black-bearded and as husky as Torp, and larger, with little, black, glittering eyes.

"Why, hello there, Bull!" said Rawls heartily. "What brings you over this way? What's up?"

"That's a fine question to be askin' me," growled Lyons. "What's wrong with you, Buck? I sent you word over a week ago of a chance to get a bunch of Angus cattle headed this way. And here I ain't had no answer. I sent over Slim Early with a message. Why didn't you get in touch with me?"

For a moment the hawk-nosed Rawls stared. He had last seen Smoke going into the kitchen to get his breakfast. He glanced at the door which led to the kitchen, saw it was shut.

"You say you sent Slim Early?" Rawls muttered, slipping his twin guns from their holsters. "With a bullet, eh, to show me?" His voice, while it kept its low tone, dripped with menace. "That soft-talkin' sneakin' hombre must of fell in with Slim Early, got out of him what message he was bringin' over and got hold of that cartridge. And maybe killed Slim. Then he came over here and pretended to be Bull's messenger. He's a spy of some sort."

"Whoever he is, he's choused up things right," rasped out Bull Lyons. "That black herd has turned aside; ain't comin' through here. If not for something happenin' to Slim we'd have had 'em crossin' by this way. They'd of been our meat."

"That settles it!" Rawls snarled. "We'll kill this gent, and then go and jump that Malone bunch and grab their herd. We'll wipe that crew out—massacre 'em. All except one. That little red-

haired filly. Cherry Malone is her name!

"Doc, get yore guns ready," he ordered. "You, Bull, and Torp, too." His voice fell to a husky whisper. "He's in the kitchen eatin' beef and beans. But we'll feed him lead. When he comes through the door, all of us let him have it right through the stomach. Don't take no chances—he's a hell-on-wheels."

"Hey, Smoke!" called Rawls. "Bring in your breakfast and be sociable. Better have a drink of whisky to go along with that beef and beans."

There was the sound of a pair of high-heeled boots clicking across the kitchen floor. The knob of the door turned slowly. The four men waiting for Smoke Darrell tensed. The black barrels of their guns shifted to point at the doorway through which in another minute Smoke Darrell would pass.

THE door swung in. In another second a hail of lead would be thudding into the man opening it. Then the faces of the four relaxed. It was the cook who had entered.

"That Smoke ain't in here," he said. His eyes suddenly popped at the sight of the guns trained on him.

"Where at is he?" bawled Rawls.

"Don't turn your guns!" snapped a voice from behind him. "I'm right behind you, gents." The voice came from the door that opened to the back of the house. Steel in that voice, beneath its soft tone. "I happened to see Lyons ridin' toward the house." They looked back over their shoulders, twisting their heads but keeping their six-shooters to the front. "Drop your guns!" he ordered. "Let 'em fall."

"You can't get away with it, Smoke," said Rawls hoarsely.

"I stand ready to be corrected on that," drawled Darrell. "But while we argue that point, Buck, let's see if you can hit the floor with your shootin'-irons. Drop 'em! Pronto!"

Rawls' guns dropped with a clatter. Torp followed suit, and then Lyons. Only Doc Moore hesitated.

"Are you hard of hearin', Moore?" asked Darrell. "Or just stubborn? Or maybe thinkin' up some kid trick?"

Moore's guns followed the rest. They turned slowly, hands raised shoulder high. The cook who was unarmed also raised his hands.

"The four horsemen of the Black Rock Ranch," commented Smoke bitterly.

Bull Lyons was staring with small eyes suddenly opened wide. "That's the hombre thât was in town makin' inquiries about that black herd that trailed in here ten years ago. What was the name of the owner of that other black herd, Buck?"

"Darrell," Smoke answered him. "Darrell." His voice was filled with so much hatred that the four men flinched away from him.

"I was with that herd. Just a kid. Come in with my father and his partner. A man volunteered to guide 'em through the desert. Doc Moore was his name. A gunman. He didn't dare try to shoot my father from the front. Scared to try it. Remember that, Doc? I see you're still at the same game.

"My father had a new bunch of riders, half of 'em in your pay, Rawls. You killed him, his partner and three riders who stuck with 'em on the show-down. The only one who got away was a boy. Me. I rode out of there across the White Sands, escaped from your gunmen, happenin' to be on a fast horse. A button I was then, but I'm grown now. Grew up on a Mountana ranch with some relatives. Plannin' for the time I could come back here as a man, and shoot you snakes down like you did my pa, savvy? But not in the same way—in the back. Face to face."

His words held them so still that the ticking of Torp's big silver watch could be heard when he stopped talking. Rawls had paled a little. Moore stood defiantly, gaunt, tall, lips drawn back from broken-off teeth tusks. The pig-gish eyes of Bull Lyons and Torp were fastened on the hammer of the gun Darrell held.

"It'd be easy to end you four right now, while your guns are on the floor. Four shots would do it, while you scrambled to pick up your weapons. But it ain't my way. I'll finish you all, but it'll be while givin' you a even break."

Torp cringed away from the gun that at any moment might belch out a stream of avenging flame and lead. Too close to it for comfort, he shifted position, moving a little in front of the bulk of Bull Lyons.

It gave Lyons a chance. A chance to let his right hand fall a little lower, to

send that hand darting like the head of a striking rattler under the jacket for the gun hidden in a shoulder holster. The hand never got out. The gun roared in the doorway, caught Bull squarely in the forehead. For a second he stood erect, as if he still lived in spite of a shattered brain; then with his hand still thrust in his jacket he went down.

The others did not move, but steps sounded outside.

"Hey, what's happened in there?" one of Rawls' men demanded without coming in. Trouble between gunmen of the caliber of those inside meant real trouble—trouble one did not burst in on until ordered.

"I'm seeing you again, the three of you who are left," whipped out Smoke. "I haven't got the heart to kill rattlers like you without you havin' a chance. But don't forget—I'm coming back."

He stepped forward, picked up the men's guns, kept one of them as an extra gun for himself and flung the rest through an open window and then he was gone flashing through the doorway.

"After him!" roared Rawls. "Give me a gun! Cut him down! Where's everybody?"

But Darrell was already outside, running for the corral. His first act was to throw down the bars and release the remuda. Then he leaped upon his grulla, which was waiting, saddled and ready. Spurring the grulla toward a nearby arroyo, he overtook the fleeing horses, turned them in the direction he wished them to go, and raced toward the sheltering cut, using them for cover.

MOST of the outlaws had been sleeping and, when they appeared at the ranchhouse doorways and windows with rifles, he drove them back to shelter with a few well placed shots. By the time they had recovered from their confusion, Smoke Darrell had already vanished from their view up the arroyo, behind the excited horses.

Darrell's last act, before he disappeared had been to drop the exhausted animal Lyons had used, with a bullet from his Winchester. Thus he had left Rawls' men horseless. He knew it would take the outlaws several days to collect their scattered animals before they could pursue him and Cherry Malone's herd. Setting Rawls afoot would give the Malones an extra day's leeway, may-

be two. They needed it. Darrell had overheard Rawls' decision to wipe out the Malone riders. . . .

The Malone herd, once it was out of sight of the ranch house, had turned to head straight for the White Sands and the peak landmark beyond. Old Sandy Starr was at point. The herd was swinging along briskly over the hard-packed surface of the gypsum crystals, exactly like dry, powery snow.

The wagons they had left at the edge of the Sands. They could go back for them later. The heavily-loaded vehicles would sink in too far, and meanwhile the services of the two teamsters were needed as riders. They packed necessities on some of the mules and threw them in with their extra saddle horses.

And then like a fleet abandoning part of its ships in mid-ocean, they had set out into the uncharted white sea that rose before them.

The girl was on a flank, riding her sorrel, wondering what was happening to Smoke, when a grulla horse trotted alongside.

"Hello, Miss Cherry Malone," the rider greeted her.

Her face lighted up radiantly. "You—Smoke!" she exclaimed. "Back—safe. You got away from them! Smoke, don't go near Rawls again. I can guess why you came here. Perhaps your family lost a herd in here?"

"You've guessed it. My father and his partner. Shot down by this polecat outfit. They knew my father was fighter enough to take water for his herd if he couldn't buy it for a reasonable price. He was shot in the back. But that can wait now. I'm going with you through this mess."

"You dynamited the reservoir wall last night?"

He chuckled. "Yes. I had the sticks and caps and fuse already placed under it, and hidden. Went down there a week ago and did the job when the ranch was deserted. All I had to do last night was light the fuse. I had some idea that I could take their horses and shut them up at the ranch without water—make them suffer as they made cattle and men suffer. As it is, I left them afoot. We've got a day, maybe a couple, to make tracks. Then they'll be comin' hell-bent after us."

"But it'll be after 'us.' It's mighty kind of you, Smoke Darrell, to risk

your life for a bunch of strangers."

"That was day before yesterday—when we were strangers. Last night I never wanted to do anything else so bad as ride with you. But I've still got to end the men who ended my father."

She nodded. "I know. They killed Uncle Jim."

"It's got to come to a showdown soon," he said.

She sighed. If he knew he were riding to his death, he would return to Rawls' ranch. Nothing would turn him from what he had believed to be his duty.

"I understand, Smoke," she said. "I'll be praying for you."

Windy Tolliver came riding up to them. "Meet the new boss of the crew," the girl told him. "Smoke Darrel. We're taking orders from him."

"Yeah?" said Tolliver. "New trail boss, hey?" He stared angrily. "Don't you see it's a new trap? Rawls sent him to go with us. There's a storm whippin' up here, and you don't know what it means to be crossin' the White Sands in a storm. We're goin' to catch hell. I know!"

VI

TUT of the northwest wind moved in, coming straight off the sands, increasing little by little in violence.

Beneath the hoofs of the cattle and the horses the gypsum particles began to drift down in earnest, at first in little spurts that whirled against the legs of the animals and sank in tiny drifts. Then they rose in thicker clouds to hit the flanks and bodies of the horses and cattle; sweeping still higher, they swirled about the heads of the riders.

After that in less than an hour the whole space between earth and sky was filled with the drifting sand, literally tons of it floating in the air, driven by the powerful and constantly increasing force of the wind. There was no longer any sky; instead an atmosphere of flying white grains through which the sun's rays filtered feebly.

The sand swirled up so thickly for a moment that the herd was hidden. But before long the leaders changed their course. Leaving his position at point, the old-timer, Sandy Starr, rode back to help the other men drive them back into line. And still the wind rose in velocity.

Soon the sky was one great white blanket. The sun, after a few attempts to shine through, sullenly retreated, left only a pale saffron blur to mark its place.

Darrell galloped up the line to Cherry Malone's side. He made no attempt to hide the seriousness of their situation. "No telling how long this will last," he shouted above the howling of the storm.

She nodded. "You're in charge, Smoke; whatever you say goes."

"I know of a place near here where we could lay over," proposed Darrell. "You saw the two long rock ridges south of us sticking up out of the Sands? There's a sort of canyon between those ridges where we'd be out of the wind. It's rimmed in by high rock walls and protected against the wind and the drifting of this gypsum. Used to be a ranch there—old stone house still left, but not a drop of water. Still it means protection from this wind and a way to hold the herd from wandering back on the desert. We'll hole up there."

He gave his orders to Sandy Starr and the herd was allowed to swing south, to drift partly with the wind. Darrell on point, riding solely by sense of direction, since all distant landmarks were blotted out, led them in a straight line over the dunes.

In an hour, they were at the lower end of the canyon, the only entrance into it. By a good deal of hard riding, the weary cattle were headed up the canyon bottom. As they proceeded up it, the sloping walls became higher and narrower and the drifts of white sand grew less deep and finally stopped entirely. Near the end of the canyon, where the ridges joined to block egress, they came to the deserted little rock shack.

Judging by the looks of the place, Cherry knew that the ranch here had never been a prosperous one. There were too few acres of grass in the canyon itself to support many cattle. The owner finally must have given up in disgust, abandoning his ranch to the slow drifting over of banks of snow which no sun would ever melt.

Safe from the fury of the storm it seemed like heaven to riders and cattle and horses alike.

Night was already dropping, a night that was to be only a little darker continuation of the day's twilight.

They made camp near the house, found a few sticks of wood and built a fire. The herd was shoved on up the canyon, to be held against the joined walls of the two ridges. Here were a few acres of grass that no stock had grazed on for many years. The starving cattle fell on it hungrily, eating it down to the roots.

The night passed and the day came without sunrise. On the mesa and in the lower canyon again the wind howled with undiminished fury. In the upper canyon by the rock house they could hear its steady roar through the stunted pines under the rimrocks.

NEVER in the memory of old Sandy Starr had he seen such a storm. All night and the next day, the next night and the following day, the continuous sweep of the drifting white walls, driven by a hurricane, went on without slackening.

The cattle milled uneasily and tried to move out of their shelter. They were again suffering the torture of thirst. Each additional hour the wind held them made that trip more impossible. The poor brutes might well have been in a deep pit from which there was no climbing. The strain began to tell on the trail crew. They avoided each other's eyes and listened with a growing despair for a lessening in the roar of the wind along the canyon rim.

On the third of the long, dragging days, just as Darrell was coming off guard, he, with old Sandy Starr and Cherry, saw a single horseman beating through the storm toward the canyon. Darrell identified him as the thick-headed lieutenant of Rawls, Torp. The man saw them at the same time and whirling his horse around, fled.

"His seeing us means we can expect trouble in chunks?" asked Cherry.

"You're right," agreed Darrell. "I had hoped the wolves would keep to their den in this storm. They'll be here in a pack."

"Cherry," said Darrell slowly, "maybe we'd better leave these cows to Rawls to try to get back to his ranch. Some of them may pull through."

"Quit?" faltered Cherry. "You mean give up?"

The big round-faced Tolliver moved over to Cherry's side. "What did I tell you?" he muttered. "Your friend Smoke

has got us in a bog and can't pull us out. I can. My offer still holds good. I can save these cows if you'll give me your promise." He sounded so convincing that, wild as was his claim, the girl suddenly believed him.

The girl sought out Darrell later. "Windy knows something," she told him. "Something about this place, I believe. I remember that years ago his people were over in this White Sands country for a while; he might have been at this very ranch."

"Windy asked me on the way here if I was heading for a ranch with an old rock house on it," said Darrell. "And so he claims he's got some secret that would save us even now, has he? And won't tell you unless you promise to marry him? Cherry, the only thing that can save us is water."

He took three strides toward Tolliver, caught the big cowboy by the arm, whirled him around. And as Windy turned, Darrell's gun came out to be jabbed into the cowboy's middle.

"All right, talk, feller!" ordered Smoke. "Talk fast and straight or we'll send you out to join Rawls' coyotes. How about this water?"

Windy's eyes half popped from his head. "W-w-water!" he stuttered. "I don't know nothin' about no water. I was just jokin'."

"Listen," said Darrell sternly. "You lived here once. And once there must have been a spring on this ranch. There's ways of killing springs; forcing the water to come out somewhere else. The Indians used to play that trick. I'll give you a minute to take me to that spring, savvy? If not, out you go afoot, down this canyon where you belong—to join the other bunch—Rawls and his men."

"I—I—" stammered Windy Tolliver, his face paling. "I don't know nothin'!"

"March!" ordered Darrell, and he started the big fellow down the canyon. Windy knew he would get short shrift from Buck Rawls, that even if he escaped the outlaw, afoot he would be overwhelmed by the storm and drifting sands.

"Wait!" he yelled frantically, and he turned, and on a half-trot led Darrell to a cliff wall which had been broken and weathered, leaving little deep passages back into the rock. Panting a little from fear of Darrell's gun, he clam-

bered up over three low ledges and stopped at a pile of rock lying against the cliff.

"The old spring used to come out of here," he explained. "The bunch that lived here, they covered it over when they left. There's caves back in there with deep tanks of water in 'em. The ranchers dammed up the hole, and now the water rises to a crock in the rocks and sinks down to come out below where you see the seep. The bunch here give it out that the springs had gone dry on 'em."

"That the truth?" demanded Darrell sternly. "If it isn't, I'll kill you, Windy."

"It's the truth, so help me!" said Windy.

Leaving two men stationed as guards near the canyon entrance, they hastily brought up the picks and shovels to the naked cliff itself, and a roughly-hewn slab of rock, which had been cemented in a hole of the wall. This they attacked at once, pecking away at the holding cement, breaking it up bit by bit, taking turns, working like mad.

The cement crumbled beneath their blows. They finally got a pick point between the rock slab and pried it out. It left a narrow opening into the cliff approximately three feet square.

SMOKE poked in his head. There was a cave or a series of them, as Windy had declared, low-ceilinged, extending for an unknown distance. From the darkness came a grateful moist smell, and as he lit a match, the rays revealed a pool of gleaming water.

He tossed in a rock; it plunked with the satisfying sound made by a deep pool. More, he saw directly before him, lying in the water the end of a bent length of thick iron pipe. This he realized at once had been used as a siphon to conduct the water out of the cave tank into a rocky little creek bed which led down the canyon. Through that pipe could pass enough water to satisfy the Malone herd of white-faces.

Filled with water, its ends plugged, the pipe was stuck into the pool so that it projected through the cave aperture. When the ends were unplugged, immediately a flow of water started.

"We got it!" said Darrell. "Water! We can stick it out for a week if we have to. Let Mr. Rawls come."

As an echo to his invitation, came the

distant explosion of a rifle, fired three times rapidly. The signal agreed on with the guards. Other guns crashed. Rawls' men had already come and were starting an attack.

The great storm gave Buck Rawls his chance to wipe out the Malone crew entirely, with no danger of murder charges being placed against him. It would be accepted that the herd and herders had perished in the storm.

Meanwhile, he could blot the brands of the cattle and sell them. It was all safe—if the Malone crew were wiped out to the last person, even to the girl. To carry out this cold-blooded scheme, he and his men were now slipping up the canyon intending to finish it all in a whirlwind attack.

VII

THE crashing of the guns in the canyon increased to a booming, deafening chorus. Rawls' men were coming with a rush. Darrell's two guards were being forced to retreat hastily to the rock house.

"Sandy, you pick half the men and take the left side of the canyon," called Darrell to Starr. "I'll take the right. Spread out and hold 'em."

Hastily the Malone crew hunted cover to form in a rough line across the canyon. Their rifles shortly got into action. The oldsters like Sandy who had all been in similar battles, shot deliberately but accurately. Rawls' bunch, sweeping up the canyon, yelling, shooting as they came, struck a sudden snag. The rifles booming out from the line of hidden men ahead, brought down two of the attackers, causing the rest to jump for cover.

Plainly the attempt to sweep the canyon had failed, and Rawls' men had learned to respect the rifles of the old-timers and Cherry Malone also.

Darrell, after opening his mouth to order her back out of danger, closed it again. This was a fight for life—against massacre! Realizing this, how could he order back even Cherry Malone? The girl, lying outstretched behind a rock near him, firing her carbine occasionally, was as cool-headed as Sandy Starr.

Sandy Starr's gun burst out in a rapid rattle of shots, and Big and Little Casinos', Dick Rutledge's and Joe Burn-

ham's rifles joined in. Rawls' men were trying to crawl Indian fashion up the canyon. For a few moments screaming bullets filled the air. Darrell joined in from his side, helped by the two teamsters, Dan Brawley and Mort Smith and Cherry.

Then, they were forced to keep low. Shots were thudding in, a terrific hail that slapped viciously into the rocks about them, to ricochet off with the loud whirring buzzes of misshapen bullets.

But Buck Rawls evidently was determined to win this battle now. Undaunted by the still figures of two dead men left in the sandy bottom, they pushed up close, snaking among the rocks, taking advantage of every bit of cover.

"Somebody's climbing the canyon above us," Cherry reported to Darrell. "One or two men, I'm sure I saw, Smoke. But not long enough to get any shot at them."

Smoke watched patiently, caught a movement himself. "Don't shoot," he warned her. "There's a narrow ledge up above: they figure to get behind us. Two can play at that game. I'm takin me a extra six-gun and goin' up to try to deal that outfit some misery. Cherry."

She nodded. "But you be careful, Smoke, and come back."

Then he was gone, slipping quietly to the scraggly brush that grew on the slope of the lower canyon wall.

That was the last glimpse Cherry had of him, so quietly did he crawl upward to the ledge.

Four men, Rawls had decided, was the right number to carry out the slick maneuver of climbing to the narrow ledge and getting to the rear of the Malone crew.

Buck Rawls himself went, and he had picked his two best fighting men and *segundo*, to accompany him—the quick-draw two-gun artist, Doc Moore, and the thick-bodied Torp. With them went a little Mexican who, as active as a goat, led the way, picking out the easiest route up the steep canyon side.

Careful to dislodge no rocks, which, tumbling down the slope, would advertise their errand, they climbed steadily, pushing through the thick spiny brush until they emerged finally on the rocky shelf that clung to the cliff.

The going was easier along the shelf,

until they came to a section piled with broken rock fragments split off from a cliff above. The Mexican, still in the lead, stopped with a cry.

"Step on a rattler?" asked Doc Moore. "What's wrong?"

His words were punctuated by the roar of a gun. It was not the Mexican's gun, however; it came from a six-shooter held by the man he had met.

The Mexican toppled and slid back, blood running from a bullet hole in his chest. And as he slid back Smoke Darrell appeared, a six-shooter in each paw.

"All right, you killers, start your massacre!" said Darrell.

What followed then was a turmoil of fast action, of crashing guns—all in time that was measured by split seconds.

"Get him!" said Torp, his thick hand darting down for his gun. But the words died in his throat as one of Darrell's guns spoke again. Torp, hit through the throat, went back, to fall on top of the Mexican's dead body.

Doc Moore, at the first shot, had whipped up the pair of guns, sending out twin streams of lead and flame. But a second before they exploded, Darrell's raised guns boomed.

Moore himself, hit in the head, took two staggering steps and disappeared over the lip of the cliff.

BUCK RAWLS, alive to his danger and next in line, fired hastily at Smoke, aiming at his heart. But the Slug struck Darrell in the left arm, slashed through the outer muscles, disabling him on that side. His right hand gun answered Rawls. The bullet struck Rawls in the shoulder, toppled him backward.

Buck Rawls was not yet done; he tried to fire again. Another bullet from

Darrell's gun hit him in the side, and a final one from the avenging iron tore along his head, ending his life.

Smoke Darrell slid back down the canyon side, holding his injured arm close to his side. Near the bottom he met Cherry Malone, fearful of the result of the gun battle she had heard, climbing determinedly up to meet him.

"Rawls' men have gone," she said, "so I knew you had won. But I was afraid they had got you, too."

"It was mostly luck they didn't," he admitted. "Luck and their not expecting to run into me." She exclaimed at sight of his bloody arm, but he only grinned. "I'm all right. This arm may be slowed up for a gun, but I'm hopin' I never have to use one again. And Rawls and his pals won't trap any more trail herds.

"Cherry," he went on, "so far our trails have been filled with a heap of trouble. If you'll let 'em go together, I'll try to fill 'em with a heap of happiness. Moore, Torp, Rawls are through. My job is done, and I'd like a plumb new one—of making you happy, Miss Cherry Malone."

"Wanting a new job so soon?" she said teasingly. "You must like jobs."

"I'm going to like this job a lot better than the other one. If you'll give it to me."

She clung to him, laughing, crying, all in the same breath. "I like it better, too. Smoke, I'm so darned happy."

Smoke's good arm closed about her, drew her close, while his lips lowered to hers.

For Cherry Malone, all the terrible menace of the desert and the White Sands faded into a dream.

"I want to belong to you, Smoke," she whispered. "To belong to you—until the White Sands melt!"

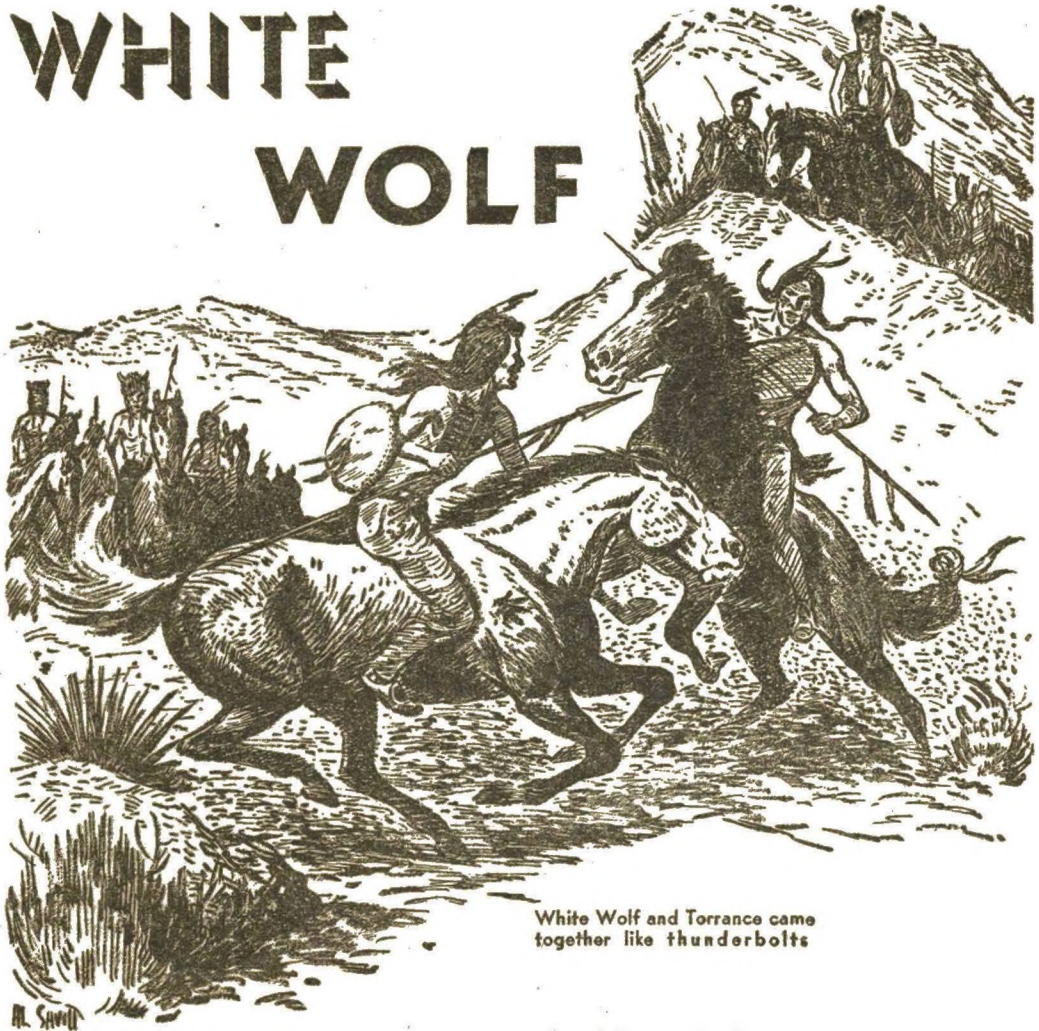


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WHITE WOLF



White Wolf and Torrance came together like thunderbolts

M. Sewell

A Novel by **SYL MACDOWELL**

I

THE campfire was a pinpoint of light in the vast darkness of the prairie. Around it, sprawled in exhaustion, lay the survivors of the ill-fated Shorb party.

Two months ago, they had bravely set out from Kansas City, a hundred

strong. A trail of graves nearly five hundred miles long reached out behind them now. Perhaps it was the spirit of his fallen followers that stirred old Sam Shorb this night, and denied him merciful oblivion.

Sam rose on an elbow, staring at the

On the savagely-contested Frontier, blood brothers clash in primeval combat while Shirley Anne, prairie blossom, waits to meet her destiny!

embers of the fire. He was a giant of a man, or had been. His long, white hair capped shoulders broad and strong enough to bear the yoke of oxen. They bore a tragic burden of responsibility as he pushed himself to a sitting position.

He tried to stand. But his swollen feet, wrapped in tattered burlap, ached unendurably. Abandoning the effort, he crawled closer to the fire. He thrust a handful of dry grass into the glowing coals. By the brief, weak flare he extracted a sweat-stained journal from the front of his shirt, and with shaky fingers he feverishly wrote:

There are only nine of us left tonight. Or should I say eleven? For Tom Torrance's widow clings to her month-old twins. We buried poor Tom back yonder two days ago.

Sam paused to replenish the fire, touched pencil to his parched lips, then wrote on:

Our last oxen died yesterday. Perhaps the meat will last us until we reach a buffalo run. But if we do not come upon water inside another 24 hours, God help us all. Each mile afoot under this blazing Dakota sun is agonizing. At dusk, from a hilltop, I sighted a dark, wavering line of trees that may mark a river course on ahead. A flowing stream will save us. But dry sand has mocked us for days past.

We all cling to some cherished possession, as the Widow Torrance clings to her baby boys. I to this record; little Zuckerman to his fiddle. He has a hallucination that it is destined to become an instrument of Divine Providence—

Sam Shorb's strength had dribbled from him. His tired head sagged down. A stupor claimed him.

Dawn roused him. Pink-rimmed, the world was taking form under the fleeting stars. He sleeved sleep from his burning eyelids and swayed to his clumsily swathed feet, calling out to the others. Toward that far line of trees they must march while the cool lasted.

ONE of the Torrance twins whimpered. The other fumbled with a tiny hand to the warmth of his mother.

As Sam turned, a nearby rise was suddenly peopled with vague shadows. They moved and took form, and in the next instant the dawn hush was shattered by shrill, blood-thirsty yells as a scythe-shaped line of riders swooped down on the forlornly small band of whites.

Jagged against the sky, Sam Shorb recognized the dreaded war bonnets of Ogallala Sioux. As the hostile half-circle stormed down on the immigrants, Shorb made no move, uttered no command. Among the nine in his party, five were men; and there were three rifles among them.

The attackers numbered thirty easily.

Eb Mills, a mule raiser from the Ozarks, was the first to sink to his knees. He began to pray. Two of the women joined him, beseeching God to spare them.

Little Zuckerman reached behind him. An arrow slithered into his shoulder. It jolted him for an instant. As a hideously daubed chief reared to a halt, with lance balanced in his grasp, Zuckerman tucked his violin under his chin and swept the bow across the strings.

The Sioux chief's lance was pointing at the little man's breast. But Zuckerman played on. Blood crept down his arm, darkening his hand. It spread to the violin and muted the strings. The Indian gazed down wonderingly. The music was soft at first, then quickened to a gay overture.

From Chief Tired Eagle's belt scalps dangled thickly. Fresh scalps, the scalps of hated palefaces. But he seemed not eager now to add to them. His lance slowly lowered until the point touched the ground.

A one-feathered warrior slid from his horse. He came toward Zuckerman at a menacing crouch, his long-bladed knife upraised. He paused to cavort in measure to the music, then made a lunge for Zuckerman's scalplock.

Before the knife could slash down, Tired Eagle jabbed his unprotected rear with the spear.

"Wait. It is like the good west wind in the pine trees," he said.

Eb Mills stopped praying.

THE savage on the ground rubbed the injured section of his anatomy and glowered up at Tired Eagle. Never before had his chief lowered his lance before palefaces.

"They bring bad medicine!" he declared.

"They are touched by the Great Spirit. Look. No stock, no wagons. See the hair-faced one, their leader." He motioned toward Sam Shorb. "He is una-



Tom rode through the herd of Indian ponies, stampeding the mustangs

fraid. The arm of Manitou is around him. These are brave people."

The widow Torrence had hidden her nursing twins under the ragged coat. But now one of them uttered a smothered wail. Tired Eagle kned his horse forward, and before the woman could prevent it he had jabbed the coat with the spearpoint and jerked it free.

The twins, identical in size and form, snuggled against their mother's breast. Under its mask of warpaint Tired Eagle's hard, cruel face softened. A moon ago his own tepee had resounded to the small cry of a man-child. But that cry was stilled by evil spirits. And now his lodge echoed to the death chant of the mourning squaw.

He reached down and wrested one of the twins from the mother. He held it aloft with one hand as she sprang up at him, clawing like a she cougar. Sam Shorb dragged her away.

"It's no use, gal," he whispered hoarsely in her ear. "They got a passion for this sort o' thing, the plains Injuns have. Kidnap white young uns, and bring 'em up to fight their own blood an' kin. Besides which, you can't ever pull through with the two o' them. Better to keep the one and—"

Tired Eagle was speaking. Although Shorb was ignorant of the Sioux dialect, the solemn gutturals told him that the chief was uttering some solemn decision.

"The Great Spirit will smile on us," he told his braves. "A great white warrior will lead my people in the days when my own eye dims and my hand falters in battle."

He whirled with a shouted command. As quickly as they had come, the Sioux sped off and vanished over the rise.

Zuckerman's fiddle came to a tremolo pause. A low groan escaped his lips. Sam Shorb caught him as he careened to the ground. He snapped off the arrow and drew the bloody shaft from the little man's shoulder. He called to the women and they helped him to bandage the wound.

Before the sun peered over the edge of the world, the whites, reduced to ten in number now, plodded on toward the distant trees. The widow Torrence clung tenaciously to her lightened burden. At noon they reached a cooling stream and Eb Mills swore with gratitude to the Almighty.

II

EAST WIND was the name given the white baby by the squaws because the shaman or medicine man who had failed to save the life of Tired Eagle's son told them that evil would come of the adoption. To the Sioux, the east wind was the harbinger of evil, as the west wind brought rain and plenty, and the north wind brought snows to refresh the prairie, and the south wind in season brought warmth to encourage the grass.

So little East Wind was attended sullenly in his infancy. And as he grew to play age, the Sioux children tormented him. Such treatment might have cowed a weak child. But East Wind was strong for his years. His bright blue eyes were quick to flash with resentment. His chubby fists could double into surprisingly hard knots.

One day in his fourth summer, he approached a knot of young Indians playing at a game of deer and wolves. They turned their backs on him.

"I will teach you a new game," he told them.

Tired Eagle was watching anxiously. But he smiled as the white child hurled himself at the group. He knocked one to the dust. The others leaped at him, and for a moment he was borne down by the weight of numbers. But he was up quickly. He fought free. The gleeful cries of his tormentors turned into pained yells and they scattered.

Tired Eagle chuckled. "They have all become deer," he told his squaw. "Look, they run! There is no more East Wind. For East Wind has become White Wolf."

Thus the white boy won his tribal name. The name that clung to him as he grew and his skin gradually deepened in hue to a light copper and his slim body toughened from the rigors of his neglected upbringing.

He ordered the Indian boys about in the games now. His leadership was rarely challenged. But he soon lost his taste for childish pastimes. When a hunting party came into camp, the scent of fresh-killed game filled him with a strange fever.

With a small bow that Tired Eagle made for him he quickly grew proficient. Along the creek beds he killed rabbits and birds. Often in the dusk he

stole out from the tepees and in a grove of quaking asp brought down ruffed grouse as they came to roost. The fire in Tired Eagle's lodge was savory with tender meat of feathered game which the older hunters seldom killed.

One evening, as he stalked a flock of grouse, a hunter came through the grove bearing an antelope across his shoulders. The noise of his approach alarmed the grouse and they whirred off.

Little White Wolf, his eyes flashing with anger, swiftly strung a bird arrow to his small bow. He twanged a reckless shot and the hunter staggered as his ear was painfully pinned to the flank of the antelope.

Unable to free himself, the hunter scurried into camp. When his plight was seen, the camp was in an uproar of merriment. On his knees, head in the dust, Dark Knife was obliged to snap the small bird arrow and free himself amid the gleeful onlookers. Dark Knife never forgave White Wolf for that.

That night, when he returned to Tired Eagle's lodge, little White Wolf slung his small bow and pack of arrows into a corner of the tepee.

"It is too small, too weak—a plaything," he said.

"When you grow to my shoulder," Tired Eagle told him, "then you will draw a long bow with three-feathered war arrows, like my own."

The boy made no answer. He squatted by the fire and ate in silence. Next morning he was gone. Gone, too, were Tired Eagle's powerful bow and the three-feathered arrows. Up from where the horses grazed in the meadow came a young Sioux who reported:

"Your pony, the gray with river-running-over-stone spots, it is gone."

"Some Blackfoot thief!" rumbled Tired Eagle.

"No. The moccasin tracks, they were not those of a Blackfoot," the horse-tender told him.

Two days later little White Wolf returned with the tail tassels of three buffalo hanging from his waist. Tired Eagle was still angry. But he relented when White Wolf presented him with a pouch containing the breadth feathers of a golden eagle.

To kill a great eagle with such breadth of feathers was no small feat for the most skilled grown-up hunter. Tired Eagle accepted them with grave

pride, for his ceremonial headdress was badly worn. And the season of the Sundance was at hand.

AT THE Sundance festival, young White Wolf underwent the ordeals that all Sioux youths were obliged to endure as they came on manhood. It was a bloody, inhuman affair. Unspeakable cruelties were inflicted on the candidates. How they withstood the manifold torture determined their standing in the tribe.

With two other youths, White Wolf survived the devilish ingenuities invented by untold generations of ruthless medicine men. At last these remaining four were brought to the pole dance, the climaxing ceremony.

Under their chest muscles the head shaman thrust sharp sticks, as long as his forearm and as large around as his thumb. To the sticks were tied long ropes of braided grasses, and the ends of the ropes reached to the top of a pole around which the youths danced to the chant of celebrants and the incessant beat of drums.

Because he was furtively disliked, White Wolf wore the thickest, stoutest stick. And it was thrust deeper through the muscle wall of his chest than were the others. When the stick broke, or the muscles tore loose, or the youth fell in exhaustion and agony, not until then was the Sundance ended.

Slowly, painfully, the trio began their circling shuffle. Gore dribbled down their torsos and legs and clotted on their toes, staining the dusty circle they trod. From time to time they surged back on the ropes. Blood gushed anew, and sweat drenched and stung the raw, quivering flesh.

One of the youths, a thin, sharp-featured one called Swift Hawk, was the first to succumb. With a strangled cry he fell. His kinfolk covered their faces with shame as he was freed and carried from the scene, limply unconscious.

White Wolf and Fire Cloud were matched now. Fire Cloud was coarse-featured, raw-boned, heavy. He had won early renown at wrestling. His voice was deep, like a man's, and he joined at intervals in the chant, drowning out White Wolf with his loudness.

But to Tired Eagle, it was evident that White Wolf surged oftener and

harder at the rope. Not in a steady, back-swaying gesture, to rest himself as Fire Cloud did. But with determined, savage jerks.

It was also plain to Tired Eagle that the white youth wore a stick that was not likely to break. And so deeply was it thrust that to rip it free he would be maimed and partially crippled for life.

What use was valor and endurance if a youth was permanently weakened? The urge was strong in the old chief to halt the ceremony. To fall upon some ruse whereby he could honorably end it.

White Wolf's eyes traveling over the watching circle, met with Tired Eagle's gaze. They were deep, like a wounded animal's, were the youth's eyes. But blue fire burned in them and although his breath was coming in spasmodic gulps and his legs were not as strong as at the beginning, his spirit was not flagging.

A message flashed between them in that brief and fleeting instant. It was then that Tired Eagle knew that this rash, scorning youth had a spark of affection deep in his heart. And that, in some day soon to come, that spark could be fanned into a consuming fire.

The shaman screeched a command, in sing-song measure to the chant. And now White Wolf and Fire Cloud began to circle in opposite directions. Their ropes wound about the pole, overlapping and shortening to each gory, lurching circuit.

At last they came face to face at the base of the pole. Fire Cloud's head was rocking on his shoulders. His face was the hue of a doe's belly. He swayed and would have fallen had he not hooked out a heel, wrestler-fashion, for White Wolf's legs.

White Wolf tripped and fell. The chant rose to pandemonium. Already Fire Cloud's people were leaping crazily, jubilantly. The weight of White Wolf's body jerked the stick free, endwise. Between his ribs and the pole it snapped. He rose to his feet, free!

Fire Cloud made a froglike sound in his throat and collapsed, still tethered. The triumphant outcry of his people became chagrined silence.

A moon waxed and waned over the Ogallala country before White Wolf recovered from his ordeal, and his chest wound healed to a jagged, lasting scar. His reward for that coveted but hard-

won championship was to select any bride of his choice. Indeed, his lithe, splendid body, his reckless exploits and unpredictable temper, together with his fair hair and eyes had already attracted the eyes of all willing, dusky maidens.

But he scorned them, even as he spurned friendship of other young braves. And all other human attachments, except a certain fierce, unswerving devotion to old Tired Eagle.

MORE than all other honors he had won at the Sundance did he cherish the gift that came from Tired Eagle. It was a long, powerful bow, and a packet of steel-pointed arrows that would pierce a tree as thick as his own wrist.

The old chief laid a hand on White Wolf's shoulder. "My son, the points are bright. But soon you shall stain them with the blood of palefaces."

"I have slain bear, O Tired Eagle. No man is as big and fierce as a bear."

"The paleface brings new weapons which speak like thunder, and make death farther than any arrow. I hear the whispering of the Great Spirit, now that the years are heavy on me."

"And what does the Great Spirit say, O Tired Eagle?"

"He says that even as the Chippewa drove the Sioux out of the north, and the Sioux drove the Comanche beyond the Platte, that the sun of the Sioux nation is setting. Iron monsters are coming to drive the buffalo from the plains. White men will appear on the wings of the East Wind like grasshoppers in plague time."

Battle lights gleamed in the eyes of White Wolf. They were cold and brilliant like the stars. "Who is Tired Eagle to speak of defeat!" he snorted.

"It is the Great Spirit who speaks. In numbers like the autumn fowl the palefaces are coming. Out of the east."

White Wolf's lip curled and he spat contemptuously. "Palefaces, bah! Do they not live in settlements, like prairie dogs? Dark Knife tells me it is because they fear the night."

"With brave leaders, they do not remain in the settlements. I knew such a paleface."

White Wolf lifted his new bow to the level of his challenging eyes. He twanged it. "Ha, a myth!" he said. "I have yet to see!"

That night a runner came out of the east. Exhausted he swayed into the lodge of Tired Eagle and he was there a great while. The squaws listened and spread sinister whisperings from tepee to tepee. In the meadow, hoofs of many ponies turned restlessly. The squaws started a sing-song. War drums beat when the moon was high.

Next morning, at coyote howling time, Tired Eagle rode out of the village with sixty eager young warriors at his heels.

Among them, mockingly confident, was White Wolf.

III

IN THE time when old Sam Shorb led the perishing members of his ill-fated wagon train northwesterly across the plains to find the Platte, there were no state lines, no boundaries except those fixed by nature to hinder the free movement of a free people.

Years passed before Shorb knew whether the spot was in Nebraska or Wyoming. The Platte River marked the main westward route for trappers. In the course of time the south bank became a part of the Oregon Trail. New settlers came. The original band diminished. Little Zuckerman was frozen in a blizzard and buried with his beloved fiddle. Eb Mills turned religious and wandered south. But old Sam Shorb, shaggy-bearded as a bull buffalo, remained. He opened a trading post and store.

The widow Torrance, a little, wren-like woman with graying hair, stayed on at Shorb settlement. She lavished all her affection and care on the remaining twin. She named him after his father. As soon as Tom Torrance was strong enough to lift a barrel of flour from the tailgate of a wagon he went to work for Sam Shorb.

The boy was blue-eyed and fair, though sun-bronzed to almost Indian complexion. He was restless, too, as a nomad savage, hunting alone and making widening journeys in quest of game and adventure.

This restless spirit, that Tom himself could not explain, worried his mother. She had heard, somewhere, that identical twins were unhappy if separated. But she had resigned herself to the be-

lief that the other child had long since perished. She had never told Tom about his lost brother.

Too, the rough, frontier life put a whipcord quality into his sinews that dumfounded a burly teamster one day. The teamster accused the youth of short-counting a bale of furs. Then trouble began, rough-and-tumble style.

From the store doorway, old Sam Shorb looked on, untroubled. He knew that deceptive strength in young Tom's rawhide frame. He saw the teamster properly subdued, and he grinned complacently as the youth heaved the half-stunned man up into his wagon with the ease of handling a bale of beaver pelts.

But the grin vanished and he raised a shout of warning as the defeated teamster dragged a heavy-barreled Sharps rifle from under his wagon seat.

Tom was walking slowly back toward the store. He turned just as the rifle roared. The heavy slug, narrowly missing his heart, tore through his chest muscles. He whirled and fell with the shocking impact.

He did not stay down. And the teamster had neither time to reload nor repent. Like a maddened bear Tom Torrance swarmed up into the wagon. He clamped the bellowing teamster's head to his crimsoned bosom. He hurled him back across the wagon seat. Something cracked like a pistol shot.

That evening Sam Shorb buried the teamster.

"I never before seen a man hanged without a rope," he declared.

Tom Torrance needed all his vitality to recover and for a long time Sam Shorb was without a helper. The enforced inaction of weeks roused the youth's restlessness to an uncontrollable mania.

Spring had come, and with it a constant procession of prairie schooners crawling westward along the Platte. A thirty-wagon train under the leadership of a Kentuckian named Caffin paused at Shorb. With Caleb Caffin and his buxom wife was their daughter, Shirley Anne. She was a vivid blossom in that bleak, wind-swept prairie settlement. She wore thick, long braids, dark as midnight and with the sheen of a mallard's wing.

Her eyes were blue-black, like the timbered hills of the blue grass country.

She was rounding into glorious young womanhood and the moon made a magic, silver carpet on the quiet Platte the night that she and Tom Torrance met.

For the first time in his eighteen years, Tom was gripped with an elation that made him as strong and agile as he had been before his wounding. He was ready to play leapfrog with the stars when he returned to his cabin home. His mother was waiting for him in the doorway.

Tom pointed to the flickering firelight in the circle of Cafflin's wagons. "Their Pawnee scouts deserted 'em," he told her. "The hostiles are whoppin' down the trail. Some o' those folks, they're going to lose their scalps before they reach Oregon."

Her woman's intuition prepared her for what was coming. "So you're going to guide them," she said quietly.

Tom laid his arm across his mother's shoulders and drew her head against his heart. He stroked her gray hair gently.

"Mom, that teamster's bullet, it must of done something to me. Sometimes, way deep inside of me, I hear a voice in the wind. A voice a-callin' to me."

SHE hastily wiped away a tear and forced a smile. "I saw her, Tom. She's lovely."

He patted her affectionately, laughing softly. "They say Oregon is a fine country," he said. "If Oregon is the fine country they say, I'll be comin' back for you." He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

Next morning, with the east wind whipping dust ahead of the plodding oxen, Tom Torrance led the Cafflin wagon train up the muddy Platte. For leagues in all directions the grass swayed like the rolling bosom of an endless sea. The short .45-90 carbine, slung across his shoulder, had given much meat to the people of Shorb.

Tom knew every foot of the trail to the junction of the north and south forks of the Platte. They forded the south fork ten days out of Shorb, following the north fork. Though he led the wagons well back from the winding stream, their progress became slower. A few days before Tom had met a returning trapper.

"She's goin' ter be a bad Sioux year," the trapper had informed him. "For ten

year I've knowed the Ogallala people. There're on the warpath."

On the morning that Tom sighted the mountains ahead, he saw a spiral of smoke. Was his party overtaking wagons ahead? He loped on, motioning Cafflin and the others who formed the scouting line to stay back.

In a dip, bright as a flower-laden grave with lupin and buttercup, Tom came upon a shocking scene. Smoke in thin shrouds, lifted from the charred skeletons of many wagons. He saw the bloated carcasses of oxen, arrow-pierced. And under the searching sun pallid, putrefying human bodies, stripped naked and revoltingly mutilated. Sprawled there together, in the sad intimacy of sudden death, were men, women, animals.

A clutter of buzzards rose and flapped heavily off from their ghoulish feast. A satiated coyote raised its head and looked at Tom across a thing that had been a young girl of about Shirley's age. She, too, may have worn long braids. But they were hideously gone, to adorn some savage belt.

Tom Torrance, with bared head, rode into the vale of tragedy. He dismounted and scrutinized the ground until he found a moccasin track.

He nodded grimly. "Sioux," he breathed. "Ogallala Sioux."

For a while Tom lingered at the massacre scene—just long enough to determine that the redskins had forded the river and retired somewhere to the north, loot-laden and drunk with victory.

Then he rode back. Cafflin, with one glance at the youth's tense face knew that their days of untroubled travel were at an end. They routed the wagons in a southerly swing, then went to the vale of death and dug graves.

"Reckon we better keep this from the others," proposed Cafflin. "It'd be a mighty ugly surprise to the wimmen folks."

"There's uglier surprises," Tom told him. "From now on, every man in our outfit takes his turn at night guard. There were sixty redskins in the band that committed this outrage. Our only chance against so many is to be ready to fight at the drop of a hat."

The Cafflin party camped that night with their wagons tight-circled around them, and the oxen feeding close to

their fires. Tom organized the guards and kept watch till midnight. His brief sleep was broken by violent dreams.

Shirley Anne studied him searchingly as he breakfasted. She waited an opportunity, when none of the others were near. Then she came close to his side and said guardedly:

"You're worried, Tom, and Dad has aged ten years overnight. What is it?"

He shrugged and raised a tin cup of coffee to his lips. "Mountain fever. Folks get upset at their first look at the Rockies. Crossin' the Divide, it's no light undertaking."

"We're mountain folks," she said, unconvinced.

"The Rockies, they'll make your Cumberlands look like ant heaps."

His words had an undesired effect.

"I'll love them. From now on I'm riding ahead with the scouting line."

Tom dropped the tin cup. His voice was harsh with alarm. "You're stayin' with the wagon!" he ordered.

The girl tossed her dark head defiantly. "I don't take to bossy folks!"

"I'm bossing this train through and everybody in it! Or else I'm quitting it!"

CAFFLIN came up from the wagon circle. "Shirley gal, you're drivin' for Regan today. He's needed out front. And his missus ain't no hand with oxen."

The girl pouted. Then she smiled ruefully. "You men have it easy. I'm tired of the dust of the wagons."

Dutifully she took charge of Regan's outfit, her own horse, a white-foot sorrel from the Bluegrass country, tied behind the wagon. A halt was called a little before sundown at a spring. Without a word to the others the girl mounted her sorrel and rode out across the foothills and when Tom noted her absence she was gone from sight.

A strange panic seized him. From the top of a butte that afternoon he had seen the telltale dust of a party of riders up towards the Platte. He was convinced that there were no white travelers in that vicinity. The nearest civilized humankind were at a tiny outpost to the southwest, where a troop of United States Cavalry had recently been ordered.

Fort Laramie, the post was called.

If that dust column marked the presence of the warring Sioux, they were

waiting for a favorable opportunity to strike. A lone and attractive girl would be a tempting lure.

Swiftly he changed his saddle to a fresh mount, then without alarming Cafflin he trailed the sorrel out across the hills. It was easy to follow the track, plain-marked through the grass, in the late, slanting light of the sun. But when it dipped beyond the crimsoned mountains, he was no longer able to pursue the horse sign.

When dusk settled down, he was some two miles north of the camp. At anxious intervals he paused to listen. Had Shirley Anne returned to the wagons? Or had she become confused, lost? He climbed the crest of a hill. He saw the fires in the wagon circle. He scanned the country in all directions. His keen, far-visions eyes made out a smaller gleam to the north.

The fear gripped him that Shirley Anne might have headed towards the wrong camp. Without pausing to consider his own danger, or the effect his absence might have among the emigrants, he spurred his horse into a lope away from them. Dark came quickly. The stars appeared. Tom pushed on unsparingly. He was near the other camp now. He could see the play of firelight on a low chalk cliff. And then his horse stumbled and went down. Kicking free of the stirrups, he was thrown clear. He struck the sod jarringly, but got up unhurt.

The horse struggled, but stayed down. Tom made the discovery that it had broken a foreleg. He dared not shoot. So he steeled himself to do the humane thing with his long-bladed knife.

He did not stay to strip off his saddle and gear. Afoot he went on towards the camp by the chalk cliff, carrying only his gun. He circled and crossed a shallow creek below the camp, then from the cliff, at a distance of several hundred yards, he confirmed his belief that it was a war party of Sioux. Some were lazing around the fire. Huddled forms of the others lay in sleep. He could smell meat cooking.

He found relief in the assurance that they had no prisoner. The girl, then, had not wandered this way. He prepared to return when he heard horse sounds up the creek. A daring plan came to him. Instead of making the return circuit downstream, he stole well

back from the brow of the cliff and came out on a grassy depression where the Indians' mounts were close-herded.

The Indians feared no attack, that was plain. Else their animals would have been closer to their own bedding ground. And the guards were few.

Tom, silent as a stalking cat, crawled down among the horses. Once a watching rider passed within a stone's toss of him. By the starlight, Tom dimly made out the long, thick flutter of a scalplock at his waist.

He thought of that slain girl back yonder. A great fury rose in his breast. He laid down his gun and he waited till the horse-guard made another circuit. This time, Tom was in his path, and he came up, like a rattler uncoiling. His blade made a wide powerful sweep.

The Indian had no time to cry out. But he came down fighting. Tom's knife thudded deep and in the same instant he seized the hackamore of the riderless horse. He caught up his gun and vaulted to the animal's back. The Indian twitched lifelessly in the grass. It had all happened so fast and with so little commotion that the grazing herd was unfrightened.

TOM rode back to his dead beast. This time he peeled off his saddle and cinched it on the Indian pony. He got back late into the Caffin camp. He saw the bright, red pattern of Shirley Anne's calico dress in a group by a fire.

He joined them. A stubborn pride prevented him from telling what had taken him from camp. A curious reaction of his relief was indignant resentment towards Shirley Anne.

She brought his supper. To her talk he responded in curt monosyllables.

"You've been acting mighty strange lately, Tom," she said.

He restrained his feelings with difficulty. When he had cooled down, he decided, he would tell her what a plight she had caused him. For the present, a final and positive order would do, without explanation.

"Don't leave camp again," he blurted.

He saw her stiffen, her proud, lithe form outlined against the fire.

"I can take care of myself," she retorted coldly. "As good as any man. Why are you so set against any of the wagon folks getting a look at the country, Tom?"

A step sounded behind them. Tom glanced over his shoulder, scowling a little as a lank young Iowan slouched out of the shadows.

Seth Soto was in his mid-twenties. He had small, light-colored eyes that had a trick of blinking rapidly as he spoke. His nose was long and a thin wisp of blond beard gave a half-moon contour to his face.

Tom and Soto swapped words when Tom organized the night guard. Seth Soto seemed to resent the younger man's authority. He was a fault-finder, forever forwarding plans of his own in opposition to those in effect. Soto saw a lot of Shirley Anne, too. Or he had before Tom Torrance joined the company.

"Been a-wonderin' some myself," he spoke up.

"Wonderin' what?" Tom grunted.

"Why nobody's allowed to leave the wagons except at night. I've wondered a lot since you rode in tonight. Unless I can't see straight, that buckskin is a new hoss. A Injun hoss!"

"And what else have you been wonderin'?" demanded Tom.

"Well," Soto drawled, "it's a mite unusual. To ride out of camp on a critter wearin' a white man's brand. And returnin' on a Injun pony. Don't you think so, Shirley Anne?"

The girl's eyes swung questioningly to Tom. "Is that true?" she demanded breathlessly. Her brow was knotted.

Tom knew the thought that had leaped into her mind. More dreaded than the savages themselves were the occasional cold-blooded white mercenaries who bargained with the redskins to betray their own people. Though it had seldom happened on the long trail, the few instances had been retold until they became legends of horror.

After all, he was something of a stranger to Caffin's party. So he thought, at least. Tom did not know that Shirley Anne and his own mother had held a long, heartfelt talk before the wagons entrained from Shorb. He did not know that his mother had given one of her most cherished belongings to the girl. And had confided to her the tale of that Indian attack of long ago, and the loss of Tom's twin brother.

The girl drew a fine gold chain and brought from her bosom a locket which she opened. The suspicion faded from her eyes.

Soto's long neck craned over her shoulder. He saw a tintype of Tom Torrance. It had been taken some two years before by a wandering photographer that had come to Shorb.

He rubbed his long nose disconsolately. "Reckon I might as well o' stayed home an' follerred a plow," he said. "I ain't seen nuthin' but ruts in the dust since we left Shorb. Before that, a feller could hunt some, when he had a mind to. We had some freedom, and some excitement." He started away.

Tom called after him: "You'll have all the excitement you can handle, right soon, Soto."

The long-nosed Iowan had cause to remember that remark a few hours later when he was abruptly awakened by a gunshot. It came from one of the guards, on the flank of the circled wagons.

He jerked erect. Dawn was graying the east. Another shot sounded. And then, as though the gunfire had aroused some hovering fate, the air resounded to a shrill chorus of warwhoops. And out of the north charged a yammering mass of impish phantoms that closed in around the circle of wagons.

IV

WHITE WOLF—had conducted himself with valor in the massacre on the Platte. At least, with the Indian notion of valor. In that holocaust of hate and brutality, no bow sent arrows more unerringly into white breasts. No knife flashed faster and more redly in the bloody coup-taking.

"Bah, the paleface weapon is clumsy!" he told Tired Eagle as they crossed the river. "He cannot load on horseback like the Indian. And even when he puts bullets in his guns, I can send a quiver full of arrows!"

Tired Eagle was not so jubilant. It was his generalship, his swift surprise attack, that had given the Sioux their easy victory. Not always would strategy be so easy.

"Before the buffalo goes south again, they will come with more wagons, more guns. It will not be like this always, my son," he answered.

White Wolf had left the Sioux village a brave. He wore warrior feathers when the war party paused to feast and

celebrate. Only one thing irked him. Fire Cloud had won the long, silky scalp of the white girl.

It was Fire Cloud who rode guard on the horses the night that Tom Torrance made his lone-handed raid and captured the buckskin mount. By some miracle of vitality, his thick-muscled body contained a spark of life. Enough, after Tom had fled the scene, for him to crawl agonizingly to the Indian campfire and gasp out the story of the paleface's audacity. He died as he spoke.

But he told enough to send the flames of hate leaping to new heights among the hostile Sioux. Tired Eagle allowed the impetuous young warriors to persuade him into an immediate attack on the Caffin train, instead of waiting for an advantageous spot, with opportunity to study the lay of the land in advance. Haste proved costly. The shot of the outflung guard flung warning to the wagons.

Tired Eagle's charge was thus launched too great a distance from his objective. A withering hail of fire met the racing, screeching Sioux. Tired Eagle lifted his hand to signal his riders to circle. But White Wolf, giving tongue like a crazed lobo, ignored the command. The charge thundered on. Lead-pierced warriors thudded to the ground. But White Wolf reached the wagon barrier unhit.

There a bullet downed his horse. He was flung under one of the wagons. He rolled and in the next instant was on his feet, inside the enclosure. Seth Soto swung at him with an empty gun. White Wolf, dodging nimbly, caught the weapon by the barrel and wrested it from Soto's hands. Soto fled.

White Wolf's scalping knife was in his teeth now and his eyes blazed with bloodlust as he saw Shirley Anne reloading guns for a knot of men bulwarked beside a wagon wheel.

The young warrior, swinging the captured gun like a club, sprang at them. A skull crunched under one terrific blow. The knot of men scattered. White Wolf struck again. Leaping over battered, broken white victims, he closed in on the girl. He dropped the gun. Uttering a mad whoop, he raised the scalping knife.

Shirley Anne screamed. Tom Torrance heard that stricken cry. He raced across the enclosure. Just as White

Wolf's knife descended Tom leaped and seized the bare, hard arm. About them was a bedlam of guns, battle yells, a human tempest of rushing, struggling men. And arrows, piercing the wagon tarpaulins, rained into the circle.

White Wolf whirled and slashed. Tom eluded the blade. His elbow jabbed into White Wolf's windpipe. They went down together, locked in a desperate embrace.

Shirley Anne was reloading a Sharp's as the two men fought for possession of the knife. She was confused, frantic. Her fingers, adept enough at this work in the past, were clumsy. She fumbled powder and ball as they smashed and panted—the breath of each hot on the other, their finely-matched bodies strained and laboring.

Tom's shirt was ripped from him, as with a final, powerful jerk he freed himself from White Wolf's clutch. He gained his feet and saw the knife flash as the other dropped it. Tom kicked it under the wagon.

All at once, then, the two of them were up and face to face. It was lighter now. Under the war paint that distorted the face of white Wolf, Tom gazed into eyes as blue as his own. For a second he was spellbound. And as his own nerves froze, he saw the blue-eyed warrior falter and gape at him.

Bare to the waist, they were perfect counterparts even to the jagged, whitish scars under their chest muscles. It seemed, in that moment of awful revelation, that they gazed into a mirror of placid waters, each seeing his own image reflected before him. And then a new note pierced the blather of fighting that surrounded them. It was the high, clear note of a bugle. It was the sounding call to charge.

SOMEWHERE outside a Sioux howled a warning. The fury of the Indian attack suddenly abated. White Wolf with one last, awed look at the paleface who bore his own perfect likeness, dived under the wagons.

He captured a bewildered, riderless horse. By the time Tom Torrance had clutched the Sharps from the girl and found an opening in the wagon wall, White Wolf was in full flight.

Those of the Sioux war party who survived that fierce and devastating dawn attack were in scattered retreat.

For out of the south, the shod hoofs of their horses shaking the earth, came the blue-coated charge of cavalry troops from Fort Laramie. Not many minutes later, the living members of the Cafflin party were rejoicing in their miraculous deliverance, even as they tended their wounded and mourned their dead.

Captain Littleton, stalwart West Pointer, with brightly gleaming buttons and sword, was jubilant, too. For at the point of his Army pistol he held captive the wounded but defiant Tired Eagle.

"We got word of the massacre of the Rayburn party and we've been in saddle for twenty hours," he told Cafflin. "Only one man survived that affair."

He called to a sergeant. "Bring that chap Dagley up," he commanded.

"Why ain't you pursuin' them devils?" demanded Cafflin.

Captain Littleton jabbed his muzzle toward Tired Eagle, who leaned against a wagon, staunching the blood flow from his bullet-pierced right arm.

"This old devil is worth a hundred warriors," he said. "That is to say, if he's the bloody rascal I think he is."

The sergeant brought the man Dagley, a pale and shaky wreck of a man. For the horror of that shambles on the Platte was revived by sight and sound of the dreaded redskins. The identification was instant. He leveled a quivering finger at Tired Eagle.

"That's him!" he screamed. "That's the fiend that murdered my pore Marty—that led them whoopin' devils on us!"

Captain Littleton's hard, square jaw closed like a trap. "By the Sam Hill, we'll tame these Sioux!" he vowed. He thrust his pistol into Dagley's hand.

Tom Torrance burst through the group and wrested the weapon from Dagley's grasp. Captain Littleton staggered back with an amazed exclamation.

"Who is this fool boy!" he demanded.

Soto swaggered up. "I've been a-wonderin'," he said slyly.

Tom blazed: "Fightin' Injuns, that's one thing! Murderin' a helpless prisoner is another! And it shore don't become a white man, in United States uniform!"

Captain Littleton flushed angrily. "What's your notion, youngster? To turn him loose?"

"Send him down to the fort! Send out word that the Guv-ment is holding

him for hostage! It'll save more emigrant lives than any move you can make!"

"By thunder, that sounds like good horse sense!" blurted Cafflin. He slapped Tom on the back. Tom handed the pistol back to Captain Littleton, who shrugged.

"I promise you, we won't coddle him at the fort," he said ominously.

Tired Eagle, his black eyes enigmatic, were glued on the youth that had saved him. If he felt any emotion, he concealed it as completely as he had hid any tremor of fear the moment before. Expressionless though it was, his steady, boring regard of Tom Torrence was not lost on Soto, who looked on from the outskirts of the group, wondering, suspicious.

With prayers on their lips, the Cafflin party bravely set their faces to the west and the long procession of arrow-riddled wagons pushed on up the long slope that led toward the mountains.

But Tom was strangely silent. His face was clouded with recollection of that blue-eyed warrior he had met in handgrips. The glimpse had been tantalizing, too brief.

The wagons camped that night in the foothill country. Around the fires voices joined in hymns of thanksgiving.

BUT Tom Torrence, moody and with no song on his lips or in his heart, sat apart from the others. Shirley Anne came to him. She kneeled before him, her hand warm on his knee.

"I—I'm sorry, Tom," she whispered. "I'm sorry that I doubted you, even for the tiniest part of a second."

Tom gave no sign of having heard. She gripped him hard and shook him a little.

"I trust you, dear. I'll trust you always," she said. Then she left him.

Roused by the bugle's reveille, the wagons rolled again at sunup. Soto, his small eyes brilliant with malice, spurted to the head of the column and reined up beside Cafflin.

"You seen that Injun lover, Torrence?" he asked.

Cafflin scowled at him. He grunted a curt "No."

"Neither has anybody else," Soto declared with satisfaction. "He's gone! Vanished over night, that's what. And that buckskin Injun pony, it's gone, too.

It looks like he's slipped through our fingers, that feller Torrence has. Spite of all I could do or say to warn you about him."

The Sioux trail was fresh. Tom Torrence was following it, determined to solve the mystery of the white chief who had mystified him, this strange savage who resembled him so closely. He had no compunction about leaving the wagon train. He knew that Captain Littleton and his troops could guard the wagons far better than himself, and that a guide was no longer needed.

For two days he rode, following the Indian trail. Then he lost it. Unknown to Torrence, the Sioux had turned back, persuaded by the fiery eloquence of White Wolf to resume their hostilities against the settlers and Littleton's troops. But Torrence, pressed on, plunging through the unknown wilderness, heading in the general direction of the Sioux' home grounds.

A month later he reached that territory. But investigation soon convinced him that White Wolf and his band were not in the vicinity. Knowing that he had missed the white-skinned chief who had fascinated him, he camped in the woods to wait for White Wolf's return.

Only one incident occurred during this interval. He encountered an Indian scout in the woods and killed him with one lucky shot with his rifle. In doing this he unwittingly performed a great favor for White Wolf. He had killed one of White Wolf's bitterest foes—Dark Knife.

In the meantime White Wolf's band had attacked the troops and been repulsed with heavy losses. Captain Littleton was jubilant. He persuaded Cafflin that it would be wise to build a hasty stockade and for the wagons to take refuge behind that while he pursued the Sioux with his troops. Also Seth Soto had finally persuaded him that White Wolf was Tom Torrence. He revealed these suspicions to Cafflin. The wagon boss turned pale.

"You mean Torrence is a traitorous renegade?" faltered Cafflin.

"It's just as Soto hinted," the officer said. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen him myself. Torrence is the white leader of the Sioux!"

Cafflin seized him by the arm. "Hush, man!" he said. "We must keep this from Shirley Anne!"

V

IN an island of grass, dark-rimmed by dense timber, the weary emigrants camped. Under soldier guard, every able-bodied male member of the Cafflin expedition assailed the trees with ax and saw, oxen and drag-chain. A stockade of logs was quickly erected. Then Littleton led his command out on the trail of the stubborn Sioux.

But White Wolf had anticipated the strategy. He led his wild adherents out of the Bighorn country. His trail was cold when Littleton found it. He was miles to the east, depredating, killing, laying waste to trains that followed in the wake of the Cafflin party. He was seen in several engagements, his blond scalplock shining like a battle banner as he slashed with a ferocity that brought Indian warfare to a new, high peak of terror.

Across the plains word flashed that a white chieftain led the Sioux. And the word reached the tepees of other Ogallala villages. By mid-summer, White Wolf's war party had swelled to a formidable young army, at times several hundred strong. They were restless. There were other hostiles who infested the Oregon Trail.

But in the forts, and back to the settlements beyond the mountains, the rumor carried that the white chief was committing all these outrages. His deeds became legend. And from Indian prisoners, who had cultivated a broken vocabulary of the white man's tongue, it became known that his name was White Wolf.

But White Wolf gradually tired of his victories. He was satiated with bloodshed. He had reached the peak of savage existence. His coups were greater than he could count. He had brought glory to his tribesmen. Westward travel was paralyzed for the year. The season of the hunt was coming on. Winter was ahead. The warriors began to trickle back to their villages, gloating in having permanently rid their hunting ground of white aggression.

White Wolf did not go with them. For the memory of the girl with the long, dark braids was strong upon him. He had sworn that he would never return to the lodges in the north until he found Tired Eagle. And laid the ghost of his own likeness.

It was his privilege as chief to seek the solitude, so he set his face on a lone trail that led him back to the Bighorns, and to the tree-rimmed meadow where the stockade stood.

He found the logs dried and peeling, the meadow grass drying under a rainless summer. This gave him cruel pleasure. He lurked in the vicinity, waiting for several days. Then the time he waited for came. Out of the empty clouds a great wind scoured the Bighorns.

In the middle of the night he lighted the powder-dry grass. A sheet of flame swept down on the stockade. Almost before the whites were aware of their peril, the stockade wall was ablaze. The oxen, maddened with fear, bawled in stricken chorus. The gate burst open. Men scurried out, pulling their wagons hastily heaped with the few, forlorn possessions, risking a death at Indian hands rather than roasting alive.

But the attack did not come. White Wolf had an arrow strung to his bow, but he did not shoot it. Screened back among the trees, eyes cavernous with longing, he sought only one trophy.

Presently he saw her. In the flaming firelight she pleased his gloating eye more than ever before. Wind-whipped calico mantled a body of a goddess. Her smooth, bare throat was like the shaft of a flower. She was running toward him, along a path that led to a spring, her arms laden with a heaped basket.

She reached the spring and dropped the basket. She leaned back against a tree, one bare arm upflung to blot for an instant the sight of that inferno in the open she had fled from.

A step sounded before her. She dropped her arm and saw him, his muscles high-ridged by the firelight. Baring his teeth in a savage grimace, he sprang. With scalping knife upraised in one hand, he clutched her roughly by the hair.

He expected some resistance or outcry which would have impelled him to the deed he had so long planned. Instead, she dropped to her knees, in an attitude of prayer. He jerked her head back, crouching over her. Her eyes closed and she sagged over limply in a faint.

Others were running along the path to the spring. Hesitating for a fraction of an instant, White Wolf grunted. Then he scooped her up in his arms and

carried her effortlessly away and around the edge of the meadow.

He could feel the pound of her heart against his own and her breath was sweet in his face. Her hair lay across his shoulder and the touch of it was a caress, like the foam of a clear river. In this lax unconsciousness, it seemed to him that she slept trustingly in his arms, with a trust that relied on his great strength.

IN that moment, White Wolf experienced an emotion such as he never before had known. Though he knew it not, it was the instinct of protection that flooded him—a gentle forbearance toward a weaker creature.

He came to an opening in the trees where the towering fire flung penetrating brilliance. He paused there to gaze into her upturned face. He watched the warm pulse in her throat as though it were some unfamiliar wonder. The perfume of this exquisite fawn-thing intoxicated him.

He stroked her cheek with his fingertips and it was like silk. He touched the glittery chain at her throat, letting it sift through his fingers. The locket emerged from her bosom. His fingers tightened to jerk it loose, as he had other loot.

It sprang open in his palm. This was something new. White Wolf had seen mirrors and bright, colored stones, but none of them were capable of tricks. Something inside the locket brought a catch to his breath, and he bent closer, studying it in the play of firelight. "The image-thing!" he exclaimed.

He turned it over, to be certain that it was not a mirror that he was gazing into, a thing that made his face seem elfin small, enchanted. No, it was not a mirror. His brow puckered, then, with a mental effort that was almost painful in its intensity.

And then he uttered a low laugh, a thing that the dignity of a chief seldom permitted and he was glad that he was not seen. For he was amused that this wisp of a she-white, this budding pale-face squaw with a throat that he could snap in one hand, had accomplished a deed that he for weary months had striven to do and failed.

She had caught the image-thing, that other self of his in the clothing of a hated paleface, and she had imprisoned it

in this small, thin, bright thing. Had caught it and held it there, at her breast! It was White Wolf's first glance of a tintype.

Her eyes fluttered open, and he was caught in his momentary amusement of the good joke on himself. She looked up, making no move to struggle or free herself. The corners of her bright mouth trembled ever so slightly as she answered his mood with a smile.

White Wolf's head was whirling among the stars. He forgot the blazing stockade, his ears were closed to the oxen bellows and the shouts, and he was blissfully unaware of his danger there until a gunshot rent the lesser sounds and a bullet smashed bark from a tree at his back.

Clutching her closer, White Wolf crashed through the forest, taking great leaps like an elk, until he came to the spot where his horse was tied. Somewhere behind him he heard the agonized outcry of a man.

"Help, help! For the love of God, come. The savage, he—he's got—Shirley Anne!"

White Wolf had the strength of ten men racing through him. Burdened though he was, he got to the back of his horse. Away from the firelit meadow, he thudded through the night, and yonder, behind him the stricken cry of Caleb Caffin died into silence.

* * * * *

A mellow moon in September. Fort Laramie. In front of a crude barracks, half logs, half dugout, a knot of soldiers looked out across the plains, toward a column of troops that rode, dejected and weary, toward the fort.

"Littleton, he's at the end of his rope. Been on the trail all summer. Ain't found hide nor hair of the bloody killer!"

On the bulletin board, beside the barracks door, a yellowed notice fluttered in the autumn wind. It said:

For the body of Tom Torrance, a white man and chief of the Ogallala Sioux, the War Department of the United States, offers a reward of \$10,000 in gold, to be paid to the person or persons delivering the wanted man, dead or alive, to any Army post or Army officer west of the Mississippi River.

Another soldier, squinting under a shading hand, spoke up.

"Littleton's got a civilian with him."
"A refugee, likely. The fort's been

snowed under with emigrants all summer. My notion is, they all ought to be turned back to Omaha and Kansas City, these wagoners! The frontier won't be safe for many a year for the likes of them."

The column plodded on, nearing the fort. The very attitudes of the troops, the draggle-tailed horses under them, bespoke defeat, discouragement.

CAPTAIN LITTLETON reached the small parade grounds and heading to a hitchrack in front of a hut labeled, "Headquarters," he dismounted, motioned the bent, tragic-eyed man with him to follow, and went inside.

The soldiers hovered closer toward the headquarters hut, where the voices of Captain Littleton, reporting to the commandant floated out to them.

"Colonel, I regret to inform you that White Wolf, as he is known, is still at large. His latest atrocity was to abduct the daughter of this man, Caleb Caffin, in the Bighorns, a month ago. Since that time we have had no report of the activities or whereabouts of the fugitive."

"Fugitive? Why do you call him that, Captain? A fugitive is an escaped prisoner!"

"This White Wolf, or Torrance, is a fugitive, sir. He was captured by Major Watkins on the edge of the Badlands. He murdered Major Watkins and escaped. That was in June."

The commandant exploded an impatient interruption.

"I know what came after that, Captain! Word of it has been coming into this outpost all through the summer! Good heavens, here the winter is practically on us! And back at Washington, all the rocking chair campaigners are raising Ned! The Secretary himself claims it was an outrageous waste of money!"

Caffin cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, Colonel, but I've done a heap of thinkin' about all this. A man sure has a torment of thinkin' when his own daughter is a captive of the Sioux. I have a plan."

"A plan for what?" barked the commandant.

"A plan to bring this man Torrance to justice! He must be mad. But that's all the more reason. A mad dog ain't entitled to much consideration."

"All right, Caffin." The commandant's gruffness had abated a little. "Explain your idea."

"Well, sir, the captain tells me you've got a big Sioux chief here at the fort. Old Tired Eagle," Caffin said.

"We've got a stockade full of redskins, but little good has that done us. Except to give some of my men a chance to learn a few words of Sioux. And for the redskins to pick up some skookum talk."

"Turn Tired Eagle loose. Tell him to find Tom Torrance. Send him with a message to the Ogallala Sioux, that if Torrance surrenders, and brings my daughter back to me, you'll free all the other prisoners here at the fort."

The commandant uttered a scornful laugh. "They'd never swap on a basis like that! Besides, you can't trust Indians, any Indian."

"Then promise 'em anything!" Caffin beseeched. "Colonel, I can't stand it no longer. I can't! Suppose it was your daughter that was in the hands of those redskins?"

The other man got up and began pacing the limited space of the headquarters hut. His cynicism had gone. He was plainly impressed. Tensely Caffin watched him, waiting, hoping.

All at once the commandant halted and addressed Littleton.

"Captain, bring that old scoundrel of a chief up from the stockade. Bring him here!"

Naked to the waist, his feet bare beneath the ragged bottoms of a pair of cast-off Army pants, Tired Eagle entered headquarters between two armed troopers. Weeks of captivity had embittered him. The years were drying the marrow in his bones.

But his head was erect and proud as he faced the colonel, his arms folded over his chest, across the desk.

The commandant's voice had turned persuasive.

"Tired Eagle, my heart is soft. I am sending you back to your people."

The old chief's breath came rapid under his folded arms. But his face did not change.

"White man takes. He no give," he uttered.

"We talk of peace."

"Uh! White Wolf make peace. He make Sioux peace. With arrows."

"There is a better peace. The Ogalla-

las can use their arrows for the hunt. In a country where the white man's guns will never be heard. Tired Eagle, go back to the Black Hills. Tell your people that the Black Hills are theirs!"

The corners of the chief's hard mouth tightened.

"Always the Black Hills the Ogallala's hunting grounds. White man can no give what the Ogallala people have."

"The Ogallalas shall have gifts. Many gifts. We send all Indian prisoners back to their people. You send all white prisoners to me. The white man and his white wagons will never be seen again in the country of the Ogallalas," the commandant promised recklessly. On the desk was a pair of field glasses in a leather case. The colonel seized the glasses and, rising, he tossed the carrying strap over the chief's shoulders.

"With this, Tired Eagle can see the buffalo far out on the plains. It is a gift to Tired Eagle, to seal our bargain. Yes?"

T IRED EAGLE'S arms slowly unfolded. He examined the glasses. He turned and, putting them to his eyes, he gazed out across the parade grounds, beyond the barracks, out across the unbroken land toward the north.

He looked at the country he had roamed free and unfettered since his youth. He turned to the commandant. There was a longing indescribable in his face, a hunger for freedom like the bird that was his totem.

"And a horse?"

"Two horses! Two good, strong horses, so Tired Eagle can travel fast!"

Tired Eagle nodded. "I go," he said simply. "The white people in the Sioux lodges, they come."

"And White Wolf comes with them, you understand that? He must come in peace. He must come before the snow falls, here to me. White Wolf and his prisoner, the white girl."

"White Wolf will come with white girl," Tired Eagle promised. "I have spoken."

An orderly brought the horses. Tired Eagle inspected them critically, picking up each hoof and seeing that it was sound. At the colonel's order, a pack saddle was put on one of the animals, and food was heaped on the pack saddle—meat sugar, flour that had gone bad. The colonel shook hands with Tired Eagle.

He watched the old chief ride off. And when he had gone, he went back into headquarters, opened a drawer in his desk and brought out a pistol. He caressed it with a throaty chuckle.

"When White Wolf comes," he declared, "Colonel Colt will do the talking."

Captain Littleton had witnessed the proceedings dubiously. "Pardon the correction, sir," he said. "Perhaps the colonel means, if he comes."

Cafflin ran a hand across his brow. "God grant that he does. And that some day my girl can tell her children that she was the price the Sioux paid for the Black Hills."

The colonel threw back his head and laughed unrestrainedly. "Cafflin, you're a good one! Don't you know that it takes an act of Congress to legalize an Indian treaty? But it's not likely," he added with a wink, "that Congress will ever be called upon to ratify this one!"

VI

ALTHOUGH Tom Torrance outwardly was calm during his period of waiting, inwardly he seethed with unrest. At last he had come to know that his long quest for the blue-eyed warrior was really a sort of strange crusade. That through the weeks of his loneliness on Olympian heights, he had come to dream of a harmonious relationship between settlers and the nomadic tribes who did not crave land except as hunting ground.

He dreamed of a land where the settler planted his crops and tended his stock unmolested. Where the Indian roamed and took his sustenance from a bountiful nature. He did not know that soon the day would come when wanton slaughter of the wild game would rob the Indian of his simple sustenance. Nor that the buffalo already were being eradicated as a step in bringing the red man into subjection.

The lookout point where Tom dwelt in time grew uncomfortable when cold winds blew under the frosty stars. He turned his back on it one day and rode down into a wide valley where a river flowed smoothly. Rising in the serene sunlight from the yonder bank he sighted smoke above the trees. And across the water he heard Indian voices.

He found a sand shallows and the buckskin forded it. Toward the camp glare he hurried, confident that his new-found philosophy of fraternity would protect him like an armor if he went unafraid among hostiles. He was among the tepees, his presence sent a stir through a group squatted around a central fire. But no challenge was given, no hand lifted to threaten.

Instead, as he entered the arena of light, a great shout rose. And Tom, as he slid from the buckskin's back, found himself in the center of a leaping, exultant ring of braves and squaws and barking dogs.

He was puzzled until, thrusting his way past them to the fire, and studying the faces in hopes of finding the one who bore his likeness, it burst upon him that these people were greeting him as the blue-eyed warrior!

There was a babel of voices. From some, who crowded close, words of greeting. For all that, he was a primitive himself now, to all appearances. But he could not respond to them. He knew no Sioux talk. And he dared not speak in his own tongue.

It was a moment that required quick thinking. He pointed to his tongue. He pointed to the sky. Their jubilation fell away to an awed murmur.

One old buck cried out: "White Wolf has been long alone with the gods. He speaks only with the gods!"

A squaw on the outer edge of the group said: "But even a chosen one of the gods must eat."

She brought him food. Tom ate ravenously. As he finished, from a dark tepee hobbled an aged, toothless shaman. At his approach the others fell back respectfully.

Tom rose slowly to his feet. The ancient medicine man thrust his face close, peering with an intense expression into Tom's face. He laid a skinny hand on Tom's arm and faced him toward the fire. He saw the breast wound, the one that the teamster's bullet had inflicted long ago. He fingered it, scowled and jabbered something.

The words were meaningless to Tom. But the shaman's face revealed doubt. There might have been jealousy there, too, for the medicine man himself claimed to converse with the unseen. Suddenly the old one stooped and seized a burning stick from the edge of the

fire. He thrust it against Tom's thigh.

Except for a sharp intake of breath, Tom was silent. The shaman drew the hot ember slowly across his skin. Tom steeled himself to endure it with the stoicism of an Indian, though the scent of his own scorched flesh assailed his nostrils. The shaman dropped the stick and backed away, wagging his head dubiously.

"It is strange," he pondered aloud. "In your youth, White Wolf, little use had you for the gods." He turned to the others. "If he brings wisdom from the mountains, why does he not speak of these things?"

"White Wolf will be wise in deeds, not words," ventured a brave. "Silence is the beginning of wisdom."

THIS wordlessness was the source of much conjecture and for several days Tom remained in the camp. He knew that his presence there was hazardous. But for him to go would arouse suspicion. For the Sioux were no fools. Wily by nature, they were quick to detect another's wiles. And the medicine man, it was obvious, was no friend of the real White Wolf.

There were moments in which Tom was tempted to go forth into the wilderness silence and live henceforth as he had in past weeks. But to reject life before he had fairly tasted it was for an old man. And he was barely on the threshold of manhood.

He was still struggling with this new dilemma when, from down-river, came a small band of warriors, members of this camp. They had a white prisoner.

In the instant that Tom Torrance glimpsed the luckless man, he wished that he had never come among the tepees. For the captive, haggard, spent, his head wrapped in a blood-stained bandage, was—Seth Soto!

The camp squaws, fiercely zestful to torture him, dragged the captive from his horse. One old crone seized the pointed beard and hauled him toward the fire.

"Two-scalp man!" she shrilled.

The others cackled.

Tom pushed through them. He shoved the old crone away. Soto, babbling, sniveling, pleading, looked up. His sunken, suffering eyes narrowed and his babbling ceased.

"Torrance!" he gritted. "Tom Tor-

rance, you limb of Satan! You ain't fit to live!"

Tom motioned to a squaw for food. She reluctantly brought a hunk of cooked meat. Soto clutched it hungrily. Then he shot a venomous glance up at Tom and hurled the meat into the fire.

"Never will I take a crumb from you, Torrance!" he raved. "Why don't you stick to these dirty squaws, since you've sunk to their kind? What have you done with—with her?"

Alarm leaped to Tom's eyes. The medicine man, watching covertly, detected it.

Soto wailed: "Why don't you speak, you rotten beast? Why don't you tell me? Shirley Anne? What have you done with her?"

It jolted Tom like a blow. Oblivious of the shaman's suspicious scrutiny, regardless of all peril, words rushed from him:

"Shirley Anne! What happened? Where is she?"

"Don't stand there playin' in-ner-cent! Old man Caffin, he saw you drag her away from the stockade fire! You've murdered her, that's what! By gravy, I'll kili you for it, you smirkin' squaw-man!"

He leaped at Tom, who seized his arms in a viselike grip and forced him to the ground.

"Shut up, you wretched fool! Where was this—when?"

The medicine man beckoned wildly to the camp people.

"White Wolf speaks in the paleface tongue!" he shouted. "He gives his wisdom to the white man! How could he have learned white speech and forgot his own, if he dwelt on the mountain tops?"

In the war party was a brave who had been the friend of Dark Knife, who had resented White Wolf's self-appointed leadership at the duel on the anthill.

"White Wolf has quit his bow for a white man's gun, as well," he observed. "He will speak now and tell us what is in his heart."

The warriors formed a close-packed circle around the two whites. On their faces were distrust, perplexity. They were ready to be swayed by eloquence. The medicine man had the eloquence. He began an arm-waving harangue. Tom, though knew not the words, realized that the time for action had come.

Already throaty mutterings came from the Sioux, and scowling glances were flung at him by Dark Knife's friend.

"Listen, Soto!" Tom said in a low, warning voice. "We've got to make a run for it! Jump for that horse, yonder, the sorrel! Light out downtrail! I'll hold 'em back with the gun, and I'll follow!"

He jerked the bewildered captive to his feet and shoved him toward the sorrel. Then he sprang to his Sharps, which was propped against a tree. Dark Knife's friend yelled and plunged after him. In the next instant, the camp was in pandemonium.

Tom jabbed Dark Knife's friend in the middle with the gun muzzle, folding him to the ground. Another warrior was mounted and in pursuit of Soto. Aiming quickly Tom fired. The pursuing warrior flung up his arms and pitched limply down.

There was no time to reload, for the Sioux swarmed on him now. The very preponderance of their numbers favored Tom in the shambles that followed.

GRIPPING the long barrel of his Sharps, he swung it like a club, mowing and battering a death circle around him as he fought toward the horses.

A young brave, at the medicine man's shrieked command, darted past him and was first to reach the uneasy animals. He vaulted to the back of one and kneed it among the rest, scattering them.

Tom, struggling from the choke-hold of a powerful warrior, got the young brave by the foot. He hauled him from the horse, but the brave clung to the hackamore rein.

Tom got it. He battered the brave with the Sharps, swinging the heavy weapon one-handed. He got on the horse as an arrow grooved his back. He rode it into the others, stampeding them. Another arrow sped, missed. Tom felt the welcome rush of wind in his face as he raced down-river. Soto was disappearing around a bend, a quarter-mile ahead.

In a pouch at his hip, Tom carried what was left of his powder and caps and lead. Once he had rounded the bend, he reached for it. The pouch came to his hand soggy-wet. Soaked with his

own blood that dribbled from the arrow slash across his back.

It was useless. He flung it away. It was harder to part with his cherished Sharps. But it was a heavy gun, and every ounce of weight counted now in this race for life.

He urged the animal under him to its best speed. He came within hailing distance of Soto. But the latter, sending a wild, backward glance, did not diminish his speed.

For a close-packed band of pursuing Sioux, their coup feathers slanted back straight from the speed of their dash, were crowding on the heels of the man who was now a renegade, a hunted fugitive from both white and red man's vengeance—an outcast of all human society.

VII

CURIOS changes were going on within White Wolf's heart. The spiritual side of his nature manifested itself for the first time in his life at the capture of Shirley Anne Cafflin. As the medicine man had observed, he had been little concerned with the forces of the unseen in his youth.

This may have been because some stern, inherent trait of Christian ancestry made him intolerant of the strangely complicated Sioux religion of many gods.

Never had White Wolf recognized any power greater than that which dwelt in his own physical self. But the image-thing at the throat of the white girl impressed him tremendously. Here was power such as no medicine man had ever demonstrated. That enemy paleface who had taken on the habiliments of his flesh, who fought so fearlessly, had become a dwarfed genie, bound to a delicate golden chain.

Perhaps this fawn-person might even command the image-thing to her bidding. It was almost too fantastic to contemplate. If he were correct in his conjecture, White Wolf reflected, it might be well to see that no harm befell her.

"If she should die, who can tell but that she may release the image-thing?" White Wolf argued to himself. "In such case, it might take refuge in me. My heart would become water. My strength and cunning would go. I would become like the foolish wagon people, who

are so much trouble to themselves and others."

So instead of taking her scalp, or inflicting the monstrous brutalities on her which he considered the victor's privilege, he treated her like a goddess.

To her own wonder, the girl felt no fear of him. Nor had she from the outset, at that moment when she recovered from her faint and looked up into his face that was so like that of the man she loved.

Choosing his trail with great vigilance, White Wolf traveled by easy stages out of the Bighorns. His pony was not suited to a double burden, so one morning Shirley Anne awoke, in her bed of soft, yielding sage topped with rock moss to find him gone.

A fresh-killed antelope hung in a thicket.

White Wolf returned early on the second morning, a horse under him that wore the hackamore and blanket of a Blackfoot. And he carried a sack of assorted plunder, mainly food that varied her meat diet. Though her hunger went for the time being when she saw the gruesome souvenir of the horse-stealing expedition that White Wolf wore at his belt.

She pointed to it with an expression of loathing and shook her head in disapproval. White Wolf was surprised and slightly disappointed. He spoke of his feelings, but the girl could not understand.

She determined to learn Sioux. After that, at their campfires, she pointed to various objects and he gave her the Sioux name for them. She, in turn, taught White Wolf the tongue he had never known.

HE found her tutelage pleasant. He rapidly acquired a vocabulary of thing-names and place-names—horse, tree, rock, river, sky, cloud, earth, rain, fire, sun, moon, stars, man and woman.

She taught him too, of evil and good.

"Man kill eat-meat good, man kill man no good," was her first lesson.

He was puzzled.

"Deer and deer friend. Bear and bear friend. Deer and bear no friend. Sioux and Blackfoot no friend. Sioux and paleface no friend," he declared. "Kill no friend."

She touched his blond hair, put her hand on his breast.

"White Wolf paleface," she told him. "No Sioux."

He laughed at this strange fancy.

"White Wolf big Sioux," he insisted. "Paleface, ugh!"

He did not know, then, the circumstances of his birth. He thought he was an Indian. Different from most, just as the albinos among the tribes were different.

She prayed for him that night.

"Dear Lord, forgive him, for he knows not," she whispered pleadingly. "Put love in his heart, that he may finish his days at peace and with Thy understanding."

He heard her and believed she was communing with the spirits. He slept confident that they protected him.

It was Indian summer on the high plateau where they wandered. There were berries along the streams. The game was fat and plentiful. But there was frost on the grass of mornings, and when he saw her linger closer to the fire, shivering in her thin, worn calico, he made hide frames. Though it was squaw work, he ash-cured antelope skins so that the hair fell from the hide. He showed her how to work the leather soft and pliable. With thorn and sinew, and thread drawn from the tougher plants, Shirley Anne made herself warm clothing.

White Wolf was particular as to the cut and style of the garments. And mocassins that he cut from the thick back leather of a bull elk were of Sioux pattern. With the quills of a porcupine White Wolf adorned her garments. The blouse fringe Shirley Anne called "Indian lace."

Their language grew. She pointed to the dead animal, her fingers outspread to the four winds.

"He points all directions, like White Wolf," she said. "Where go?"

She finally made him understand.

"Sioux lodges," he told her. "Sioux tepee when snow comes."

So they headed toward the Black Hills. On the banks of a river that flowed from them they struck a trail deep-rutted by the travel of generations of the Ogallala people. And there, on a certain fateful day, warwhoops rang from the rocks ahead.

The journey with his image-thing princess had been the happiest period in White Wolf's life. He had developed

unsuspected virtues. The girl marveled that one who had exulted in brutish cruelties was capable of such gentleness. Few men of civilized upbringing could have given so complete and unselfish a devotion.

But all this veneer fled now. Like a lobo that heard the hunt-cry of the pack, White Wolf's savage instincts returned. He dashed ahead.

Shirley Anne followed as best she could. She was sick at heart, for she knew that their strange idyll had come to an end. She reached a dark gulch, where a tiny waterfall spilled over a mossy brink above a small, round sage flat.

Circling and yelling, a war party of Sioux raged in the flat, pausing at intervals to shoot arrows at a rocky shelf where two men, two horses, were partly barricaded and rolling great boulders down whenever the attackers attempted to ascend.

With a shout of authority, White Wolf charged among them. As the warriors turned, recognizing him, their faces revealed astonishment such as seldom came to their kind. The whoops died. There was a long moment of stunned silence. Then one of them with a great red welt across his abdomen howled a challenge and stormed toward White Wolf, stringing an arrow to his long bow as he came.

White Wolf dipped down, one heel hooked over his pony's back, his body shielded behind it, the other gouging his flank. The pony dashed madly, and as it went Shirley Anne saw the arrow of the wounded Indian skim past the pony's withers.

Then, with an adroitness too swift for the eye, White Wolf sent an arrow from beneath the pony's neck. The pointed shaft targeted squarely on the red welt in the other's middle, and sunk for half its length. The victim clutched at it but his legs went limp and he fell.

White Wolf now came up, halted his pony, and faced the others with blue fury in his eyes. They seemed to wither under his lashing words.

Then came a hubbub of response. They pointed up to the rocky shelf, then at him.

One look, and it was White Wolf who was amazed. He sat rigid as a bronze statue. Then abruptly he whirled and sped to the side of the bewildered girl.

He clutched her wrist so roughly that it hurt. He was beside himself with anger.

"Image-thing, he escape!"

He jerked her from her pony. He reached down, clutching her hair. His scalping knife flashed and he uttered a wild, savage laugh.

"Friend, ugh! No good friend, you!"

From the shelf came a shout that awakened echoes.

Barely in time it interrupted White Wolf. He turned and saw his other self riding crazily down a rock slide, brandishing his bare arms, his scarred chest heaving, his blue eyes blazing as hotly as White Wolf's. Torrance was clad as an Indian.

He carried a shield and was armed with a lance.

He could have been riddled with arrows. The warriors fell back, perceiving that here was an issue of single combat. And the man who rode down out of the rocks was outnumbered but confident of his thick-muscled arms.

White Wolf was quick to perceive that. Whether it was some reckless valor, or a lust to match his strength once more against this paleface who had stolen his likeness, Shirley Anne never knew. But she saw White Wolf scornfully toss away his knife and bow, and strip the quiver of arrows from his shoulder.

He retained his lance.

They came together, White Wolf and Tom Torrance, like thunderbolts. They dropped their weapons. They grappled and their animals went from under them.

Since the age of mastodons, this tiny glade had been an arena while wild things dueled, the rocks ringing to their cries as they fought to the death to possess some desired mate that gazed upon them, even as Shirley Anne gazed now. It seemed that flesh and blood could not withstand the punishment they gave and took. Whirling, striking, falling and rising again, it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. Except that Tom Torrance battled with his fists.

And White Wolf sought numbing, bone-cracking wrestler holds.

The warriors were ringed tightly around them when, from the barricade above, the second fugitive started a dash for escape, slanting down across

the slide and making for the down-trail at the river's edge.

A cry of warning went up from a watchful Sioux. They broke and scattered, closing in on Seth Soto's line of flight. A billow of dust under rearing hoofs, a wretched scream. And then they had him.

The battling pair gave no heed. The power of their struggle seemed unabated, though their bodies were blood-smeared, and the blood of one mingled with the other's.

Tom, breaking loose from a headhold, sent a fist to White Wolf's jaw that sent him rolling.

Tom leaped on the downed chief shouting:

"Ride for it, Shirley Anne! Clear out, God with you!"

White Wolf came up as she hesitated. He scooped Tom on his back, straightened, and hurled him down with a force that shook the ground.

STUNNED by a rock that gouged his scalp deeply, Tom tried groggily to rise. Then he fell back as White Wolf pinioned him there.

The warriors hemmed the girl in. There was no escaping now. She crowded against Seth Soto's horse. Soto's eyes were maniacal with terror. He saw the two men on the ground, alike as the seeds of a pine tree. One astride the other, glaring down at the upturned face as though beholding his reflection in the water of a mountain lake.

The rest was a nightmare. White Wolf growled a command. Roughly the three captives were bound together with tough rawhide strips, back to back. Tied at the elbows and their throats, with only their feet free.

White Wolf, on his pony again, rode to the river's edge and came back gripping a bundle of nettles. He lashed them and pointed up the ancient trail.

Tom pressed his cheek against Shirley Anne's. "It—it's the end, honey!" he panted. "Whatever these devils have done to you, it's nothing to what's coming—once we reach their village!"

Soto was straining like a madman at the bonds, choking Tom's words. Already his muscles were twitching, as though already twisted and pierced in torture. He screamed like a woman, and White Wolf lashed him across the mouth and eyes with the nettles.

VIII

TOM TORRANCE was carrying Soto and the girl on his back when they reached the Sioux camp, the rawhide cutting deep into his flesh. For Soto had swooned. And exhaustion from their awkward and agonizing progress had claimed Shirley Anne.

White Wolf flogged them no more. His fury had passed. He rode ahead. A great cloud had dimmed his happiness. He was assailed by strange doubts. His heart pointed many ways, like the quills of the porcupine. It pained, too, as though thrust with many fine, sharp points.

Perhaps his image-thing princess had not willed for the escape of the dwarfed genie that dangled by the golden chain. Indeed, to ascertain this matter he had torn the chain from her. He had the locket in his hand, and the small likeness was still there.

It was all beyond his comprehension and he was weary inside. Why had this trouble come to him. Why did he no longer exult, as the others were exulting, to the exquisite delights of the tortures they were planning?

The squaws greeted the captives with shrill, fierce cries. For theirs was the privilege of minor tortures. And the word had spread that he who had come into the camp was only the shadow of White Wolf.

White Wolf drove off the blood-thirsty squaws.

"Take the weeping paleface with the hairy jaw. Do with him as you choose," he told them. "The two others are mine."

"White Wolf intends to spare them?" protested the shaman.

The troubled young chief did not reply at once. He was searching his soul for an answer. The captives were huddled forlornly in front of a tepee. He heard the image-princess call his name. He reined around and scowled down on her.

"White Wolf," Shirley Anne said gently. "The time has come for you to know. This man beside me, with your eyes and hair, he is not a shadow-person. He is no haunting image that seeks to harm you. White Wolf, he is your own brother! Your blood brother!"

Tom Torrance started as though struck. "Why do you tell him that?"

"Because it's true, Tom. Leave this to me, please. White Wolf is your brother, your twin."

"How can you make wild talk like that?"

"Your mother told me. It was just this terrible thing that she feared—that some day the two of you would come together!"

"Brother?" White Wolf was as scornful as Tom. He spat the word as though the taste of it revolted him. "Sioux and paleface, brother—no! Friend, no!"

She appealed to him again with an intensity which in itself carried a measure of conviction.

"White Wolf is no Sioux. He was born among the wagon people. The Sioux took him when he was very small. Before he could remember."

White Wolf swung around to the watching shaman.

"She says we are brothers, White Wolf and the paleface. Born at the same time of one mother. Do not the old men of the tribe remember?"

The shaman's eyes glittered. "She talk for her life. She lies!" he declared.

White Wolf said to the girl: "The shaman is very old. Yet he does not remember this thing."

The shaman hobbled to the captives and jabbed a skinny finger at the scar on Tom's breast.

"White Wolf was not born with the Sundance scar. How could his twin bear the same scar. These things do not happen. It is the work of evil spirits. The paleface girl must think the Sioux are fools!"

White Wolf tried to appear convinced. But the seeds of doubt had been planted.

"The old one speaks the truth. These are not birth scars," he declared with more confidence than he felt. "From inside of me the evil spirits have produced this image-man to trouble me."

"And to cheat you of a girl captive!" added the shaman maliciously. For the fondness, shown in touch and glance, between Tom and Shirley Anne had not been lost on him.

The civilized man that struggled for supremacy in White Wolf was eclipsed now in savagery. Always, until he found the image-princess, his had been a man's world complete. Perhaps by destroying her he could heal the mysterious hurt in his heart.

"Take them, wise one," he decided.

He made a gesture of finality.

Shirley Anne understood. "The gods of the Sioux, and the white man's god will be angry if White Wolf harms his brother! They will cloud your happiness forever!" she cried. "Do not do this thing, White Wolf! Spare your own flesh and blood, and I will come to your tepee. I will be your woman, and work over your lodge fire! I will obey you always!"

THE shaman well remembered the day when Tired Eagle had brought White Wolf, a squalling, naked infant, to the Sioux lodges. He had said that evil would come of it. Even now, he could feel the wind coming out of the east, and it chilled his marrow. It was a portent. White Wolf was a courageous warrior. The Ogallala people needed such a leader.

"Listen to me, White Wolf. This I do remember," he lied. "Many seasons ago, when the Sioux dwelt in the land of the Chippewa, men came down the great river from the north in canoes. They brought furs from the north, and though they were not our kind, they were our friends. They dwelt in our lodges, took our women for their squaws.

"They called themselves the French. Even today some of their words are on our tongues. We speak of the travois. We call the dogeaters to the south Cheyennes, which was the name the French gave them. Now, some of these French had eyes like the sky, and the color of the sun was in their hair. Is it not natural, then, that since that time, Sioux have been born with hair and eyes like your own? You have the blood of voyageurs, White Wolf. Not the blood of palefaces."

So long and earnestly had he spoken that the shaman was not aware of a movement along the trail that led into camp. Nor did he see the looming rider, leading a pack animal, for the night shadows were closing in around the fires. But, as he finished, he did see White Wolf looking past him. And he vaguely realized that his eloquence was not having the effect he desired.

He turned, following White Wolf's spellbound gaze. His jaw dropped. He ran a hand across his eyes. And then the rider emerged into the firelight.

"Tired Eagle!" croaked the shaman.

The old chief gazed long and accusingly at the shaman, who seemed to

recoil from the silent impact. White Wolf's chest rose and fell with a great joy. Adoration shone from his eyes, but he waited respectfully for his elder to speak. At last Tired Eagle's words came.

"The Great Spirit timed my journey well. For I come in time to hear the old one speak with two tongues, like the serpent. I come in time to hear him swaying my people with lies." He leveled a commanding arm. "White Wolf will cut rope with his scalping knife. With great care, so that the blade will not slip."

White Wolf slipped down from his horse to obey. The shaman leaped in front of him.

"They are our enemies!" he screeched.

"No more," said Tired Eagle. "For I come with a treaty from a great white chief."

"The white man is without truth!" howled the shaman. "He does not honor his treaties!"

"The Sioux nation will honor their treaty," Tired Eagle stated. "The promise is given that all palefaces in the lodges of the Ogallala Sioux be returned to their people."

"These three?" demanded White Wolf, his knife poised over the bonds that held Tom, Shirley Anne and the moaning Soto together.

A struggle was going on in the bosom of the old chief.

"Not three," he said, "but four." He dismounted and came to the side of White Wolf. He laid a hand on his shoulder. "It is like cutting off my own right arm, my son," he declared. "But you, too, must go. It is the word I have given."

Their eyes met and held. The old chief saw the unspoken question in White Wolf's eyes, drew a breath.

"It is true, what this white girl has said," he told him. "And it is good. For in the days to come, all white men, all red men, will be brothers. Even as you and this man in your own image is your blood brother. I have spoken."

He turned away then. For the people of the camp were assembling, and he gave his face to the firelight that they might know him and see that their chief had returned.

The shaman, beaten and humiliated, slunk away into the dark.

White Wolf slashed the rope.

The winter's first snow beat on the

backs of four travelers headed southward along the ancient river trail toward Fort Laramie. Tired Eagle had had his way. Shirley Anne, Torrance, and Soto went free. And along with them rode White Wolf, bound by no earthly cords, but by a tie stronger than any of these—the word of Tired Eagle.

WHITE WOLF rode a little ahead of the others. He did not speak. His chin was sunk upon his chest and dark thoughts moved in his brooding mind. At last he knew the truth; knew that under a lifetime of savage training he was a white man and that the image who rode behind him was indeed his brother. He saw the whole tragic tapestry of his life flow before him; the years of brave deeds and mighty battles. Now he knew it had been all wrong—wrong and in vain. But was it wrong? His mind told him so, but his emotions were still the emotions of a simple savage. It was too much for him.

A few paces behind him, Tom Torrance was nearly as wordless and moody. His mind too went back over the years and in them was something of horror. He was stunned almost beyond

thought at the incredible climax to his hunt for the blue-eyed warrior. Finally he broke a long silence by turning to Shirley Anne.

"I'm searchin' my mind and conscience to know what's right. I don't know what to do. If Mother ever found out—and Shorb—"

"They will!" Soto snapped. "News travels mighty fast along the Oregon trail these days. Faster than the wagons. Though I'd say the wagons will be rollin' again next spring when folks learn that White Wolf has faced a firin' squad!"

"They won't do that!" Shirley Anne quavered. "They can't! He fought according to his beliefs!"

"If they don't shoot him," said Tom soberly, "the best he can get is prison. And it wouldn't be best to him. I reckon he'd choose bullets instead."

"But it's not fair, it's not justice!" the girl cried. "In all the wars between so-called civilized nations, a captured officer is treated with respect and consideration. But here, in the west, a captured Indian chief is treated like a dog!"

"It sure isn't the way to peace," Tom agreed miserably. [Turn page]



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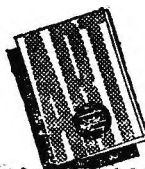
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"What's the matter with you two?" Soto raved. "Takin' up the Injuns' part after all we've suffered and gone through! As for yore dear brother, Torrance, he's as murderous a redskin as any of them!"

Tom Torrance reined in angrily and turned. But Shirley Anne thrust her horse between the two.

"Look here, Soto!" she flared, her dark eyes blazing. "Do you know why White Wolf's making this trip to the fort with us?"

"Sure. Because old Tired Eagle ordered him to. Because that was the only conditions they'd give the old cuss if they turned him loose down at the fort. Because if White Wolf didn't come, the soldiers would swarm up into the Black Hills and get him."

"You're wrong! He's giving himself up to save Tom! Because Tom is accused of the raids and killings that White Wolf did! And I'm not forgetting," she added, "that it was you who started the suspicions against Tom. Thank God there's not many white men as low and spiteful and cowardly as you! It's your kind that makes me ashamed of my race! And men like White Wolf who make me proud!"

Her words stung more than the lashing snow. Soto was silenced, if not defeated.

The flakes, drifting down softly at first, had become hard fine pellets, driven by an icy gale. Daylight faded early. And as they made camp in the shelter of a bluff, all vestige of the trail was lost.

By morning, the snow lay too heavily for travel. It was miles to any ranch or settlement. And White Wolf was gone. "Skedaddling back to the hills," growled Soto. "We're in luck if this storm stops."

About noon White Wolf returned, carrying the carcass of a small deer. Shirley Anne sought Soto's eyes, but that worthy avoided looking at her. The set of his shoulders, however, spoke as eloquently as words. He had nothing to say, but he still did not trust the redskin.

White Wolf still did not speak, eating his portion by himself and in silence. Afterwards he took his tomahawk and

began cutting brush for a shelter up against the bluff. He asked no help from the others and they, puzzled and unsure of how to approach him, left him alone.

AS soon as the shelter was done, White Wolf began gathering firewood and he worked at this until he had a pile as high as his head. Shirley Anne looked at Tom with troubled eyes.

"He seems to think we're going to be here some time," she whispered.

White Wolf heard the words. He turned inscrutable eyes upon her. "Long time snow," he said, and quietly began to prepare for sleep.

When they awoke next morning, he was gone again. And the continuing snow had covered all tracks.

"This time he's cleared out for good," declared Soto with satisfaction. "Can't blame him for wantin' to keep a whole skin."

Shirley Anne turned questioningly toward Tom.

[Turn page]

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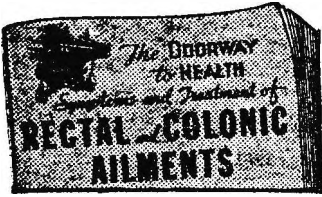


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"I don't know, honey," he said gravely. "I don't know what's in his mind. Must be a terrible struggle of some kind going on in there. Finding out he is white instead of Indian—knowing the things he's done must be considered awful by the whites—yet being an Indian at heart and not really regretting them. And then finding me—his pale-face brother. It—it's quite a load for any man to carry."

"You think he's run out—like Soto says?"

"I can't see him breaking his word to Tired Eagle."

"Then where'd he go?" Soto snapped. "Leavin' us in the lurch this way?"

Tom waved a hand around at the camp. "Lurch?" he said. "He's left you a shelter, firewood for a week and a whole deer. If he is going anywhere, for some purpose of his own, he certainly took care of all of us!"

What White Wolf's purpose was they did not find out for a week. It was near the end of that time before they could travel. The wood was gone, plus what else they scraped up from the vicinity. The last scrap of meat was eaten. The ponies were gaunt from the scant browsing through the snow. Game signs were scarce and they were weaponless anyway. And Soto was again cursing White Wolf for deserting them.

But they could move out. And when they reached a place where the river valley widened onto the vast, rolling plain, they saw a column of soldiers riding up slowly from the south. An hour later, Captin Littleton greeted them.

He came to Shirley Anne and pressed something into her hand. She looked at the cold, hard thing. It was her locket and chain.

"White Wolf gave you this?"

Littleton shook his head. "The poor beggar was starved and about seven-eighths frozen when he hit the fort. He died that night in the stockade, without uttering a word." Littleton's shoulders moved slightly under his buffalo coat. "So ends the legend of White Wolf, the scourge of the border. I can't help saying that a mighty sigh of relief is going up when the news gets out, from the Black Hills to Washington."

"How'd you find us if he died without sayin' anything?" Soto demanded.

"He drew a map with a piece of charred wood on the wall at headquarters."

Shirley Anne and Tom looked at each other. The same thought passed through both minds.

"He found the answer to his problem, Tom," she said softly. "He could not live a prisoner, yet he knew he must pay for what he had done—he must make retribution to the white man's gods, for he was, poor soul, a white man after all. And the blizzard gave him his opportunity. He exchanged his life for ours."

Littleton stared at them, not quite comprehending. But Tom Torrance moved over and put his arm around the girl.

"There's a pretty dark shadow has just lifted from over us, Shirley Anne," he said. "But maybe now we can see our way clearer?"

For answer she raised her lips to his. Littleton coughed and turned brusquely to his men.

"Break out the rations, sergeant!" he bellowed. "These folks are hungry!"

Next Issue's
ROUNDUP OF NOVELS

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THE TRAIL TO HELL

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THE PACK SADDLE

(Continued from page 9)

trails. Headquarters, Safford. Fair big game hunting, but grand scenic drives and pack trail trips, such as the 3,000 to 10,000 feet high Swift Trail on Mount Graham and the Coronado Trail in the Mount Galiuro wild area. Within the forest area are 24 camp and picnic grounds. Also in and near the forest are some dude ranches and a number of cabin resorts.

KAIBAB: On U.S. 66 and 89. Has 1,230 miles of forest roads, 220 miles of forest trails. Headquarters, Williams. Good big game hunting. Excellent for saddle and pack trips. Chance for wildlife photography. The forest on the famous Kaibab Plateau, exclusive range of the Kaibab squirrel has many large, accessible and visible deer herds and is near Grand Canyon National Park. Dude ranches and cabin camps are in and near the forest. The forest itself maintains 38 separate camp and picnic grounds.

PRESCOTT: On U.S. 89. Has 670 miles of forest roads, 450 miles of forest trails. It features fine saddle and pack trips and a chance to visit Jerome, "the billion dollar copper camp." Tenting and camping sites number 12 inside the forest limits.

SITGREAVES: On U.S. 60, 66 and 260. Has 920 miles of forest roads. Headquarters, Holbrook. Features deer and turkey hunting in season. Limited elk hunting. Exploration of the little explored pueblo ruins within the forest borders. Large scale logging operations in some sections. Only two improved camp and picnic grounds, but if you don't want to tent out there are dude ranches and commercial cabin camps inside the forest and in the nearby vicinity.

TONTO: On U.S. 60, 70, 80 and 89. Has 670 miles of forest roads, 430 miles of forest trails. Headquarters, Phoenix. A really grand summer and winter outdoor playground taking in such famous and picturesque areas as the Tonto Basin, breath-tak-

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ing Mogollon Rim and the weird, spectacular Superstition Mountain area, supposed site of the fabulously rich Lost Dutchman mine. The warm winter desert climate makes it excellent for winter pack trips. Good stream and lake fishing. Fair big game hunting. Wonderful photographic possibilities. There are 15 improved camp and picnic grounds within the forest, and other commercial cabin camps and dude ranches inside and near the forest limits.

Open and Free

That's just Arizona, remember, and a brief summary of what the National Forests there hold for the outdoor enthusiast anxious to do some vacation camping in this colorful section of the Southwest. Remember too that National Forests anywhere in the West are open and free of entry to all who come to enjoy them for recreation purposes.

The only assessments are for certain special services. For instance, on some of the more heavily used recreation and picnic sites, a demand exists for firewood ready cut into stove or fireplace lengths, or for bathhouses at which attendants are on duty and so forth. Because of this demand these special services have been made available for a small charge. But the use of such services is entirely optional with the individual. It in no way restricts his free enjoyment of the other facilities.

When or if you can plan a National Forest vacation trip one of the first things I would suggest you do is write to the Information Division, FOREST SERVICE, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Washington, 25, D. C., for literature and camp and trail data re-

[Turn page]

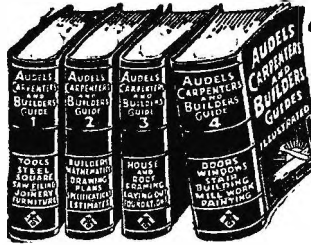
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garding the particular Forest you intend to visit. It is full, detailed—and free. Or if you simply want general information ask for a copy of the excellent, free booklet, "National Forest Vacations."

Data on individual forests can also be obtained from the Head Forester, if you address him at the Forest Headquarters at the headquarters town of the particular forest in question. And it is a good idea once you reach your destination to stop at the nearest forest supervisor, ranger or guard headquarters for further first hand information and maps.

Have a chat with the ranger in charge of the section of the forest you intend to stay in. He knows his part of the area like a book, back trails as well as the more travelled roads. You'll find him mighty helpful and co-operative, and a darn good friend to have when it comes to divulging little secrets like, say, the best fishing spots where the big ones have been biting lately.

That's about all for now. But hurry back next issue when we intend to discuss in detail the camper's important question of shelter and the best types of tents for different types of camping trips. It will be a summary on tenting you can't afford to miss.

—JOHN A. THOMPSON

THE NEXT ISSUE

WE hope you have enjoyed this issue of FIVE WESTERN NOVELS. It is our intention to bring you the best of Western adventure and action-packed novels of hard-riding, dangerous-living riders of the range—stories of exceptional merit which first appeared in magazines a number of years ago. Because these novels are so outstanding and their authors are without

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peers in the Western field we believe we are doing a great service to all Western fans by republishing them in FIVE WESTERN NOVELS, thus making them available to a new, wider audience.

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Now, for the next issue!

RIDER OF THE RANGE brings us in contact with a beautiful girl, "Ginger" Dace, who is heir to one of the largest ranches on Borrego Mesa. Ray Nafziger, author of this thrilling novel, weaves a plot that is filled with action and drama from the very opening roundup scene. Ginger, beautiful though she is, is not the clinging-vine type. This girl owner of the huge empire that makes up the Diamond Bar cattle ranch wears a smoke-smudged, roll-brimmed sombrero, levis, scarred chaps, a shirt—all men's clothes—but they don't hide her beauty. For her deep blue eyes dance with life, her lips are soft and curving, and her figure is slim and graceful.

Young Lance Larrabee was not unaware of this beautiful woman who was his neighbor, but he was more aware at the beginning, of Sull Tothero, hard-bitten foreman of the Diamond Bar. Sull was quite a man—so he thought—until he tangled fists with Larrabee. And his actions from then on to the end of the novel proved Lance's original contention that the ramrod was a crook. But to prove it—and save Ginger's ranch

[Turn page]

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from going bankrupt—Lance had to buck the rustling outfit of tough "Gotch" Crossett, who ruled his outlaw empire like a robber baron of old! Look forward to this epic of rustling, RIDER OF THE RANGE, in the next issue!

In another Western novel, author Lee Bond gives you BITTER CREEK BUCKAROO, a story of a kid who wanted to go straight but had a hard time doing so because of his family's reputation.

The name Brannon around the Bitter Creek country wasn't one that would lull babies to sleep. Young Jim Brannon's uncle, Zeke, was as tough an old rustler and outlaw that ever drew a six-gun. And he died as he lived—by gunfire! But Jim swore that there would be no stigma attached to the Brannon name as long as he, Jim, could keep it clean.

Jim was going to deal from a new deck, make the Bitter Creek country a decent place to live in and not the outlaw hangout it had been under old Zeke. Wilk Tutt, of the Walking M outfit, had different ideas, however. He couldn't figure a Brannon walking the straight and narrow—but he learned it the hard way, he and his crooked henchmen of the law, when he threw the challenge down to Jim. In BITTER CREEK BUCKAROO, Jim purges the name of Brannon from all outlaw stain!

A third novel of the West—THE TRAIL TO HELL—by Larry Harris, takes us to the Big Bend country of Texas, along the Mexican Border. Dal Barton had but two wishes in life: to raise cattle on his BF ranch along with his partner Bill Fenwick, and to marry pretty Jane Curry, daughter of rancher-neighbor Judge Curry. But when

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rustlers raided the BF and hanged Fenwick from a cottonwood, Dal knew his job was cut out for him. There would be no peace along the Border until the rustler gang was wiped out.

Across in Old Mexico lay Cibola—hell-hole of the Border, and Manuel Treba's town. That Treba was the rustler, there was no doubt in Dal's mind. It was an amazing situation he ran into, however, when in desperation he crossed the Rio Grande to bring the Mexican bandit to time. THE TRAIL TO HELL will give you the answer.

In another novel—BULLET SIGN, by the famed Western writer Jackson Cole—New Mexico and the mission country is the locale. Padre Ignacio's white-walled mission

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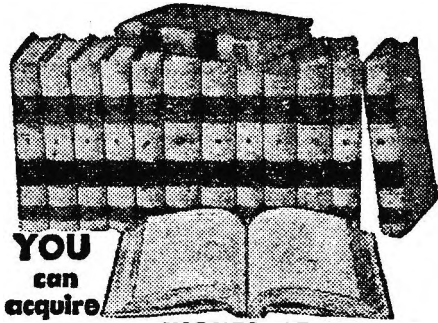
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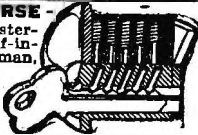
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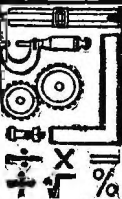
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was as peaceful as it looked—until death struck there, death cruel and vicious—and with six-gun. And the "why" of it was what Tip Sherwin, cowboy wayfarer, wanted to know. Why would death strike in a House of God? Tip, under another name, was heading for the famed Tomahawk Ranch to claim his part inheritance there—but the mission murder made him change his plans. For Tip knew beyond doubt that the bullet that had taken another's life had been meant for him! In **BULLET SIGN**, Tip Sherwin brings to a showdown the mystery surrounding the Tomahawk spread—and wins the hand of beautiful Spanish-Irish Carmella Burke.

As the last, but not least, of these five novels we give you **TRIAL BY GUNFIRE** by T. W. Ford. When a man comes back from jail where he'd been railroaded on a false crime situation, it makes it doubly hard for him. He not only has to live down his prison time, but has to prove that he was not guilty originally! That's the situation Lou Buckston finds himself in when he comes back to the cow town of Norcross.

His ranch is in ruins, his girl seemingly won't have anything to do with him—and Tuss Wellane, who hadn't been much in the past, is now riding high, wide, and handsome as king of the range. When they all seemed against him, Lou had to make a decision—a decision that was hard to understand, but one that finally cleared his name and gave him the love of Linda Major.

FIVE WESTERN NOVELS brings you these action-packed stories of men of the West battling under terrific odds. Battling for their lives—and for the love of women who would ride the range with them forever. You'll enjoy these gripping novels of love and laughter, of gunfire and death, in the next issue of this magazine.

Meanwhile, we'd certainly appreciate your jotting down your thoughts on this first issue of our new magazine—and sending them along to us via postcard or letter. Criticism is as welcome as praise—just tell us what you really think of **FIVE WESTERN NOVELS** and the individual stories within these covers. All comments and suggestions are more than welcome. Kindly address your communication to The Editor, **FIVE WESTERN NOVELS**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Many thanks, everybody—see you in our next issue!

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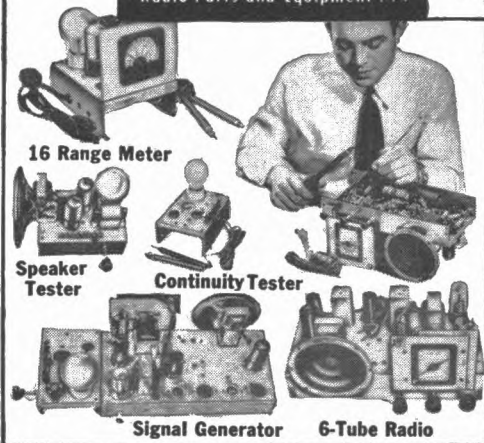


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