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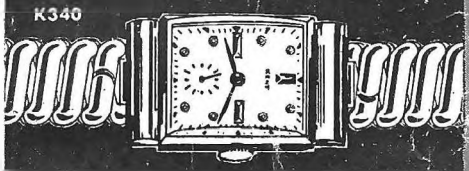

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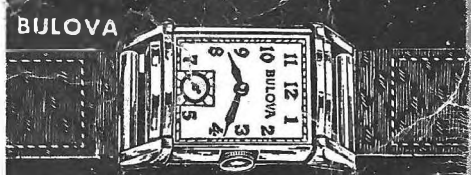

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(Four Big Book-Length Novels)

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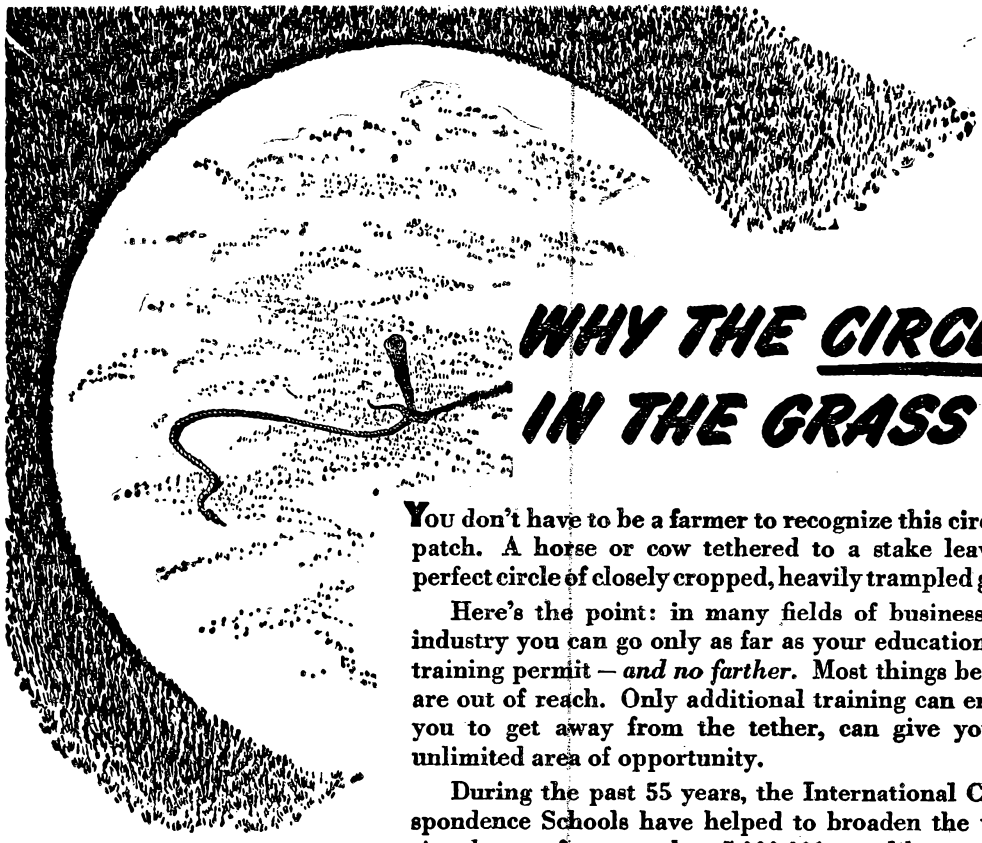

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LITTLE DOC'S .30-30 QUARANTINE

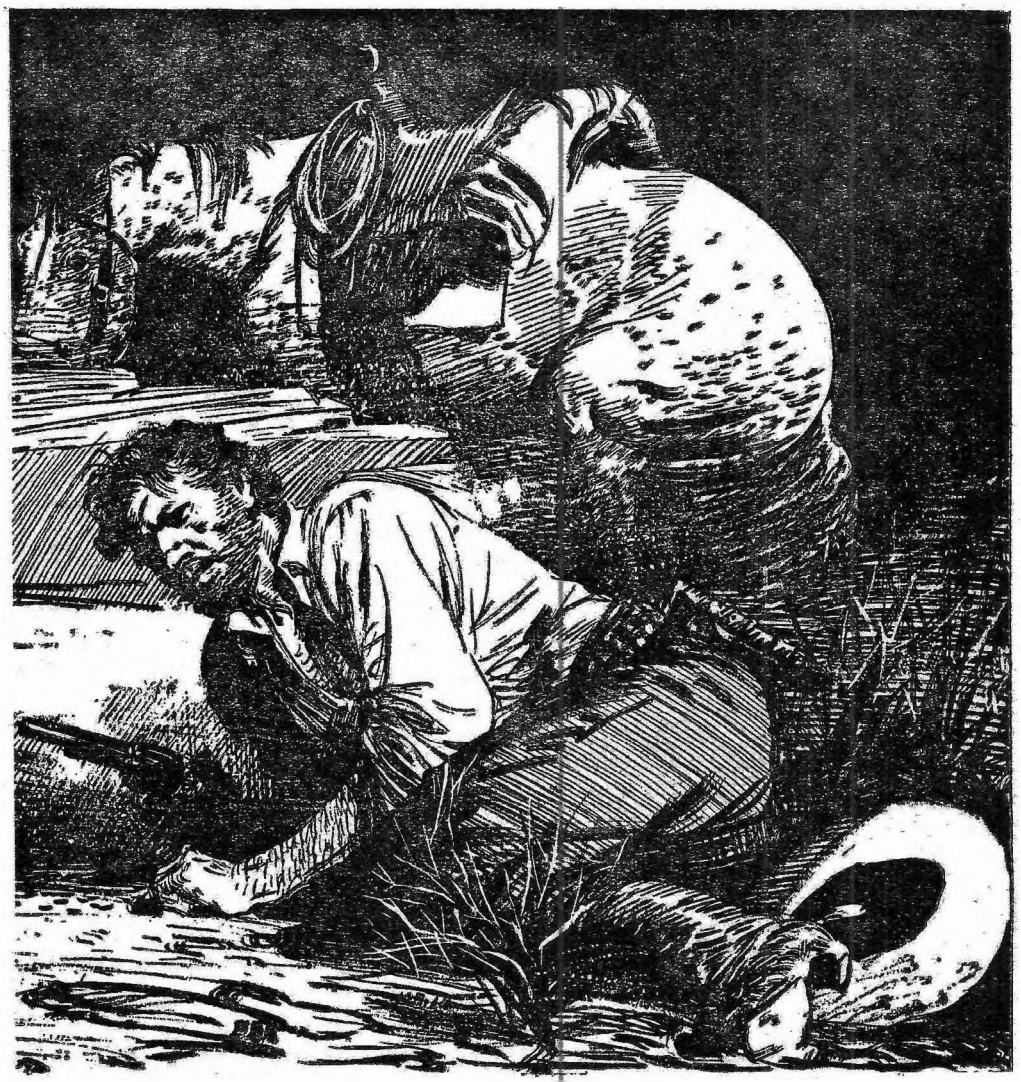
Chapter I

SHERLOCK OF RED HILLS

IT WAS somewhere around the middle of August when the six cowhands trailed their big cattle drive through the Notch and let them scatter into the broken badlands country called the Red Hills.

Late in the summer season is a bad time to fetch Texas longhorns up into the cold Montana winter, because it doesn't give the cattle enough time to become acclimated. Even in a well protected winter range like the Red Hills badlands, the first severe blizzard is apt to wipe out the whole herd. That's what any Montana cowman would have told the six cowhands who pointed their longhorns through the Notch.

But nobody ever got close enough to voice any such warning. The two men who rode



Smashing Epic of the Cattle Frontier

By WALT COBURN

After nine years, Ike Riggs' blood-mad kin came riding through the Notch to make their bullet-play for the Red Hills spread. But too-tough-to-die Jake Sherlock was waiting for them; Jake and his strange new pardner, who needed no gun to turn strong men into weeping, trembling wrecks!

the point, the two who kept the swing of the herd moving, and the pair who fetched up the drags, all packed saddle guns. And whenever any riders got within gun range they were warned off by 30-30 bullets—a grim language any man could understand. When the last of the drags had been shoved through the Notch and the laden pack mules and remuda of saddle horses had been driven through, the six cowhands had painted in big, black, crude letters on the high rock cliff walls of the Notch, a warning grim as the shots fired from their saddle guns:

"Keep Out. Or You'll Get Shot Out!"

So nobody had ever gotten close enough to identify any of the six tough cowhands, much less near enough to read the road brand on the longhorned Texas cattle.

The Red Hills was renegade cow country. Badlands. Scrub timbered, the feed was good and there were springs and creeks; the whole vast country broken up so that it made for a good winter range. You had to go in through the narrow, high, rock-walled pass called the Notch to get into the Red Hills and two men could stand off any posse that tried to force through the Notch.

Honest cowmen were wise enough to stay clear of the Red Hills. A law officer had to have more guts than brains to risk a ride through the Notch. Let the horse thieves use the Red Hills on their way through the country with bunches of stolen horses. Let outlaws ride in through the Notch and hole-up in the Red Hills badlands.

Let these six cattle rustlers drive their stolen trail herd into the Red Hills and paint their black lettered warning on the rocky walls of the Notch. The first blizzard would wipe out their longhorns and that would be a shame because it was too bad to kill off good cattle.

But as for the rustlers, nobody was going to take the trouble to bother them. Rustlers lived and stole and fought and died and nobody mourned their passing. Let them work out their own lawless destinies. Their stolen trail herd would die in the snow drifts, and they would be no richer when they rode out through the Notch where they had posted their grim warning.

There was some speculation as to what kind of a deal the six rustlers would make with Jake Sherlock. Sherlock had the only cattle ranch in the Red Hills. He had gone in there with no more than a good saddle horse and ketch rope and a running iron. In nine or ten years he had built up a sizable outfit, with the help of cowpuncher outlaws who had used his place for a hide-out. And because Jake Sherlock knew how to get along with these outlaws they had helped him drive out any other cowman who had the temerity to try to locate in the Red Hills. He claimed the Red Hills for his own range and he was big enough and tough enough and had the outlaw backing to hold this big broken stretch of badlands.

Some tough cowmen had, during the past half dozen years, disputed Jake Sherlock's lawless title to the Red Hills. Their bones were buried in unmarked graves and big Jake had survived. Outlaws whom he had befriended had, perhaps, done the gun work for him. He had no notches on his own guns. He claimed to be no more than a cattleman trying to get along. He rode where and when he pleased alone and every fall he rounded up his beef steers and drove them to the cowtown of Buffalo Run where he shipped out. Law officers, for the most part, let him alone. His ranch in the Red Hills might be what they claimed it was, an outlaw hide-out. But Jake Sherlock insisted that any man on earth was welcome to stop there; that he was any man's friend.

Sherlock was a big man. Six feet three. His two hundred and twenty-five pounds were all big bone and hard meat. His thick hair and drooping moustache were iron gray. His jaw was craggy and his nose jutted out. Jake's face seemed crudely chiseled of dark granite. His grin was hard and he was flat spoken. Set under ragged iron gray brows was a pair of eyes that were as gray and cold and glittering as gun metal. He had been a quart-a-day man until he sobered up from a bad drunk and found out he had killed his partner, Ike Riggs.

JAKE SHERLOCK and Ike Riggs had a small spread on Buffalo Creek, about ten miles from the cow town of Buffalo Run, at the time. A few hundred head of cattle and a little remuda of horses in their RS brand. It was generally understood that Riggs and Sherlock had been raised together somewhere in Texas, punched

cows together down there and drifted north with one of the first big trail herds to come up out of Texas. Riggs and Sherlock had decided to stay in Montana to try out the winter climate. For about a year they had dropped out of sight and then showed up at Buffalo Run with a lot more money than common cowhands had a right to be packing around.

Though no proof was ever brought to light, it was the general supposition that Riggs and Sherlock had been riding the Outlaw Trail together. A few road agent jobs, holding up stagecoaches, would net the kind of money they fetched to Buffalo Run. Before the tinhorn gamblers could poker them out of their bankrolls they pooled their money and put it into the RS outfit on Buffalo Creek.

Ike Riggs was taller than his partner. Nearly seven feet tall. Rawboned and lean muscled and red headed, with eyes as green and cold as old ice. Ornery and mean tempered and quarrelsome when he got drunk. Loud and foul mouthed when he got profane and abusive. But one of the best all-around cowhands that ever forked a horse. And without fear of any kind. But treacherous. He hadn't a friend on earth. Not even Jake Sherlock.

For that reason nobody at Buffalo Run was very surprised when Sherlock fetched the dead body of his partner to town one morning, Riggs's long carcass roped across the saddle of the horse Jake led.

"Me'n Ike got drunk," he told Little Doc Gray when he dismounted in front of Little Doc's office and staggered in, sodden with blood, three bullet holes in his hide. "We musta got into some kinda argument. I sobered up with my two hands still fastened around Ike's neck. Looks like I broke it and choked the wind outa his carcass. . . . Patch me up so's I kin git back to work. I'm movin' through the Notch into the Red Hills. I'll be harder to reach there case when some of Ike Riggs's kinfolks figure to pick up the fight where Ike dropped 'er. . . ."

It was while Little Doc, then a comparative newcomer to Buffalo Run, was getting the three .45 slugs out of him, that Sherlock refused the whiskey offered him to ease the pain.

"I'm done with likker, Doc. When that stuff blanks out a man's mind thataway so's he can't recollect the why ner wherefor er howcome he's killed a man, then it's time he let the jug alone. . . . Not that I got any regrets about killin' Ike. I bin intendin' gittin' at that job fer a long time. . . ." Little Doc saw a grin twist Jake's flat lipped mouth and a bright twinkle light up the pain seared gray eyes.

"I might git drunk and kill a good man, Doc. And be sorry afterwards. So I'm done with likker. . . ."

A man less tough would have laid down and died from those three bullet wounds. But Jake Sherlock was up and around in time for Riggs's funeral and he saw that the grave was marked with a big wooden slab. "Ike Riggs" branded deep in the wood. Then he hired some cowhands to help him gather his RS cattle and move through the Notch into the Red Hills. There he had them vent the R from the brand. And when it was finished he paid the cowboys off and sent them back through the Notch. They got back to Buffalo Run swearing no human being on earth could be as tough as that big bullet ripped Jake Sherlock. Never changing the filthy sweat and blood caked bandages, he hadn't eaten or slept or quit his saddle except to change to a fresh horse in the three or four days and nights since the RS outfit moved into the Red Hills. No human being on earth could be that tough. And they'd been willing enough to ride back through the Notch and leave Jake Sherlock alone to die there in the Red Hills.

At that time Little Doc Gray was still a young man. A pilgrim fresh from some medical college back East. He listened to what those cowpunchers said of Jake Sherlock, smiled faintly and shook his head.

"That man," Little Doc Gray voiced a strange prophecy, "is too tough to ever die."

* * *

Nine years later Jake Sherlock was still alive. Far more than that, he claimed for his own the Red Hills badlands. His cattle roamed there and most of those cattle were wild. But even the wildest of them wore his brand: the RS with a bar run through the R.

All during those years Jake Sherlock waited for some of dead Ike Riggs' kinfolks to show up. Who they were or how many of them, Jake Sherlock never said,

and nobody had the temerity to ask. Not even Little Doc, who was closer than any man to the big tough Jake Sherlock.

Little Doc himself was close mouthed. He was more than a surgeon and physician to the cow country. People trusted him with secrets they guarded with their very lives. And more than a few times Little Doc had been called in the dark of the night to go through the Notch to the Sherlock ranch in the Red Hills to take care of some outlaw.

"Feller at my place, Doc," Jake Sherlock would wake him up in the night, "needs patchin' up."

Jake Sherlock would put a wad or roll of money on Little Doc's desk in his office. There might be five hundred dollars in wadded banknotes, or a thousand or, once, it had been five thousand dollars in currency, neatly rolled and bound with a rubber band.

"It's mostly accordin'," Jake Sherlock explained the size of Little Doc's fee that he had dickered the wounded or sick or crippled outlaw out of, "to the size of the law bounty on his hide. Or how much he might be worth to me later on, alive. You just lemme figger all them angles. Ask no more questions, Doc. And don't be squeamish about the blood on the money ner where it come from. Any ten dollar bill that's in circulation long enough to git the new edge wore off, is bound to have bin handled somewheres by hands that ain't clean ner honest. Salt it down. One of these days you'll have enough piled up to build yourself that hospital you want here at Buffalo Run. . . ."

There was a thousand dollar fee once. And it came from Jake Sherlock's own pocket.

"It's a horse of mine, Doc. He's got a busted laig. I can't work up enough guts to shoot that ol' cowpony. If you kin put him outa his misery quick, somehow—?"

Little Doc had done a lot of veterinary work around Buffalo Run. He splinted the broken leg and a few weeks later the old cowhorse was grazing, pensioned. And Jake Sherlock made Little Doc take the thousand dollars.

The cow country described Jake Sherlock as the coldest-blooded man on earth. Little Doc heard that declaration made many, many times, but he never took the trouble to argue it. Nor would Jake Sherlock have wanted him to.

IT WAS at Buffalo Run, that the rumor about the six cowhands started and spread. It claimed that those rustlers who had shoved the big trail herd of stolen cattle through the Notch and into the Red Hills badlands claimed by Jake Sherlock, were six of the dead Ike Riggs' kinfolks.

"Ike Rigg's kinfolks waited," said the rumor that gradually took on factual dignity, "till Jake Sherlock was fixed so's he had somethin' worth losin'. Then when Jake Sherlock declared hisself the cattle king of the Red Hills, they moved in on his damned kingdom. And they moved in to stay. Fer keeps. . . . Now, by the hell, we'll see what happens. . . . . There's six of then tough Riggs gents. . . . Now mebbyso we'll find out how tough that big cold blooded Jake Sherlock actually is. . . . What d'yuh say, Little Doc?"

"Jake Sherlock," said Little Doc Gray quietly, "is too tough to die."

Little Doc downed his drink of watered whiskey and took his battered old black bag off the bar at the First and Last Chance Saloon where the cow country and citizens of Buffalo Run were wont to gather. His puckered bright brown eyes were shadowed with weariness. The long hard-driven years had whitened his thick hair and etched deep lines around the corners of his eyes and clean shaved mouth. His glance took in every man standing there at the bar. Cowmen and cowpunchers for the most part. And his faint smile touched them all. They savvied what he meant. Mostly, for one reason or another, they hated or feared Jake Sherlock and there wasn't a man among them who would not be glad to look at his dead carcass. But all their combined hatred and fear of the big cattle king of the Red Hills could not blot out the respect they had his toughness.

They savvied what Little Doc meant. Without quite grasping all its deep meaning. Those six Riggs kinfolks could kill Jake Sherlock. But the legend of Jake Sherlock would live on forever, as long as there was a cow country left. The saga of the big tough cattleman would be forever told around cow camps, sung at night to bedded beef herds. Jake Sherlock would never, never die. . . .

Little Doc Gray's warm keen brown eyes finally traveled on to meet the pale gray eyes of the only man in Buffalo Run or the surrounding cow country who hated him. Hated him with a silent poker-faced finality that nothing would ever change.

The man was Wade Calvert. Wade Calvert was a gambler. A high stake gambler. He owned the First and Last Chance, and every other gambling game in every saloon along the main street of Buffalo Run. Every gambler, and most of them were tinhorn gamblers, took orders from him. They paid over to him, each day, a percentage of their last night's winnings. His money banked their tinhorn games. They accounted to Wade Calvert for every dollar won or lost. And he did not allow one of his dealers to lose more than a few times. To double-cross him in any way, was very bad luck. And when a man's luck ran out with Wade Calvert, that man was through forevermore.

Calvert was a man from nowhere. His past was covered up, buried, though he had the polish of a gentleman who had come from fine, proud stock. He was tall and well boned and handsome. Lean jawed, hawk beaked, his hair was coal black save for the streak of snow white that marked its center part. His black moustache was neatly trimmed and the ends waxed to points, From under straight black brows his eyes were pale gray and merciless. He wore tailored clothes and they were of dark expensive material. His white shirts were tailored, his black boots polished. He carried two pearl handled guns in specially made armpit holsters. Somewhere concealed in tailored chamois lined pockets were a pair of small Derringer .44 pistols. The only mark of color that broke the almost somber quietness of his garb was the red silk necktie he always wore. That one touch of scarlet accented the lean closely shaved olive color of his skin that was unlined save for the tiny sharp-etched crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes and his straight-lipped mouth. Wade Calvert might be forty years old. There was no way of telling the gambler's age. His voice was quiet, strangely toned. Little Doc had silently termed it the voice of a choir boy grown to maturity. A choir boy who had sung hymns with the voice of an earth-bound angel—and the black heart that already was poisoned in early youth by the sins that had broken all of God's Ten Commandments.

Women of all ages came quickly under the strange spell of his handsome sinister charm. And Calvert had used that as a weapon for as long as he could remember.

ONLY Wade Calvert and Little Doc Gray knew the cause of the silent, bitter and eternal enmity they held for one another. Calvert, blackleg gambler, held it with a deep and secret black shame; the shame of guilt.

Little Doc kept the secret as a man might carry a deadly weapon that he hopes he will never be forced into using. But it was a double edged deadly weapon. It might swiftly kill Little Doc if ever the time came when Wade Calvert could murder Buffalo Run's beloved cow county doctor without the guilt of murder being proven against him.

Both Calvert and Little Doc Gray kept their bitter hatred well concealed from the rest of the world. No man in Wade Calvert's First and Last Chance guessed anything of that hatred.

"Jake Sherlock," Little Doc was looking straight into the cold pale gray eyes of Wade Calvert now, "will survive."

"The man?" Wade Calvert's strange voice sounded, "Or his legend?"

"Both." Little Doc smiled quietly.

"The odds are six to one, Doc," said the gambler. "Those six are tough."

"Jake," said Little Doc, "will prove to be tougher."

"Supposing they actually are six of the Riggs clan?"

"I'm granting," said Little Doc, "that those six men wear the Riggs name." He was no longer smiling. All the gentleness was drained from his quiet voice, leaving it flat toned. His brown eyes had lost their warmth.

"And you'll still gamble, Doc, that Jake Sherlock the man will come out alive?"

"I don't gamble." Little Doc held his shabby old black bag in both small boned surgeon's hands. "Jake Sherlock will survive. Man and legend."

"And the six Riggs men?"

"I'm not holding myself accountable for the fate of six men who bear the name of Riggs."

"You've got your hospital fund," said Wade Calvert. "Your hospital is being built. I'll double what you have for your present hospital fund. Let's set a time limit. The first day of May, May Day, if Jake Sherlock stands here alive in the First and Last Chance, I'll lay that much money on the bar. A donation to your Buffalo Run Hospital. . . . Drink on that, Doc?"

Wade Calvert filled two clean shot glasses from his private bottle.

Little Doc Gray did not even glance at the two filled glasses. He stood close to the gambler now. Gripping his shabby old black bag. When he spoke his voice was so low pitched that only the gambler could hear.

"Not if you laid all the money in the world on your bar, and the lives of every man, woman and child in this cow country depended on it. I wouldn't touch a dollar of your money."

Chapter II

"REMEMBER THE NAME, TINHORN!"

LITTLE DOC reached out and took the filled whiskey glass. He never took his eyes from the pale eyes of the gambler. As he dropped the filled glass into the big brass cuspidor.

Then he walked past Wade Calvert through the swinging half-doors of the First and Last Chance, out onto the wide plank sidewalk, and on down the street. A small, white haired, almost shabby man. His face a grayish color. The brown bright twinkle of his eyes shadowed. His gait forced from long habit to briskness. Down the wide dusty street he walked, to its far end where the sounds of hammers and saws came through the sunset. On down to where the frame structure of his beloved hospital was nearing its completion. The sight of it cleared the dark shadow from his eyes and he smiled at this visible evidence of a dream coming true.

As he was passing his long cabin office and home the door opened. A slim figure in nurse's white stood framed in the doorway, looking young in the soft light of the sunset. But her curly dark auburn hair was thickly silvered, and around the dark lashed gray-green eyes were the beginnings of tiny lines. But her smile was young. And there was a tone to her voice that sounded young because it was softened by love for this shabby little white haired man called Little Doc.

She stepped out, took his free hand and led him inside like a mother might lead a small boy bent on mischief.

"Your supper's waiting." She removed his hat and took his bag.

She saw the gray pallor of his face and her arms went around him. They were of the same height when she kissed his mouth. Tears glistened in her eyes.

The warmth of her kiss sent the color back into Little Doc's face. His hands felt the soft texture of her graying auburn hair. There was a barely noticeable sprinkling of freckles across her short nose.

"I always expect," smiled Little Doc, "to find that halo hidden there. . . . Saint Nile. . . ."

"A Riggs," her voice had an almost brittle sound, "wearing a halo?"

Little Doc snorted and rumpled her hair. The twinkle in his brown eyes was too bright; there was a spark of anger in it.

"What we both need," he said, "is a drink."

He poured two drinks of whiskey and watered the drinks and they drank a sort of silent toast.

Nobody but Little Doc Gray knew her name was Nile Riggs, the sister of a dead man named Ike Riggs. Nobody in the cow town of Buffalo Run or its surrounding cow country knew who she was or why she had come here. Nobody but Little Doc Gray—and Wade Calvert. . . .

* * *

The stagecoach had pulled in at Buffalo Run nine years ago, just as the funeral of Ike Riggs was getting under way. The horse drawn black hearse, the buggies and wagons, the cowmen and cowpunchers on horseback, Little Doc getting into his buckboard.

Little Doc had caught sight of the girl in gray who stepped down from inside the stagecoach. His quick sharp brown eyes had caught the coppery sheen of her hair. He'd seen the startled lift of her head when some drunken cowpuncher rode past with a bottle, shouting something about leaving it empty at the grave of Ike Riggs. . . .

Doc had walked over to where the girl

stood. The color was drained from her face showing the sprinkling of freckles. And her eyes, were gray green, and hardening greener, the soft grayness melting off. Her mouth had twisted.

"Ike Riggs!" She had spat out the name as if it made a bad taste in her mouth.

Little Doc had felt it like the lash of a buggywhip. Then she had noticed Little Doc standing there, his hat in his hand.

"I suppose," her voice had been brittle as breaking glass, "you must be Wade Calvert. I'm Nile Riggs, Ike Riggs' sister. Where's your honkeytonk? And when do I go to work? And what's this about Ike Riggs' grave?" She might have been cursing, the way the fast, brittle words sounded.

"I'm Doc Gray, Little Doc. I need a nurse worse than that tinhorn gambler needs a lady dealer at his First and Last Chance. Who knows you're coming here?"

"My brother Ike Riggs and Wade Calvert. Now, you. What difference does it make?"

"Just this difference. Nobody's going to know your name is Nile Riggs. I'll see to it that Wade Calvert keeps his mouth shut. That's your brother Ike Riggs' funeral procession heading out of town for the boothill cemetery. You're coming along with me."

"For the buggy ride?" Her brittle voice had made Little Doc flinch.

"For the buggy ride," he told her. "Whatever it is that's poisoning you, get rid of it on the way to the cemetery. I'm a doctor. I know slow poison when I see it. It can be cured."

"Then you'll be a miracle worker, mister? . . . doctor. . . .?"

"Little Doc." He was smiling a little. The twinkle was back in his brown eyes.

"Little Doc." Her hard green eyes began to soften. And she was looking at him strangely, probing deep into his eyes. "Little Doc, you said something about a nurse—"

Nile Riggs had ridden with Little Doc Gray to the burial of her brother Ike Riggs. He told her, when they started, that her name was no longer Nile Riggs. It was Nile Gray.

"You're the sister I've been expecting to come here to work as nurse. That's how it will be from here on, Nile. . . ."

THERE had been a strange sort of showdown nine years ago between Little Doc Gray and the gambling man, Wade Calvert. It took place in Little Doc's office while Ike Riggs' grave mound was still moist earth, and before Jake Sherlock had left town to gather his RS cattle into the Red Hills.

"What was it you had on Ike Riggs?" Little Doc asked the gambler.

"I was on the stagecoach when it was held up near Virginia City by Ike Riggs and Jake Sherlock. They were masked and wore long overcoats, but I recognized Riggs by his voice. He'd sat in poker games I'd banked. A gambler studies men. I knew those two road agents made a big haul, so I played my cards close to my belly. They didn't rob the passengers. Just killed the shotgun guard and took the Wells Fargo strongbox. That's all they wanted because it held enough for their future needs. I don't give a damn how any man makes his living and I wouldn't turn my worst enemy over to the Law. But I made Ike Riggs believe I had that kind of a hold on him—"

"Nile Riggs?"

"Was playing the piano on the theatrical stage. Had her own act, sang her own songs. Vaudeville circuit. She has talent and personality along with a certain amount of beauty. I'm opening a honkeytonk and Nile Riggs would be a natural. She could manage the place and headline the acts I intend bringing here from time to time. When I found out she was Ike Riggs' sister I told him I wanted Nile to run my place. He sent for her, and now she's here. I noticed she shed not a tear at the grave of her brother. . . ."

Wade Calvert's pale eyes suddenly narrowed. His strange voice flattened. His right hand was near one of his guns.

"Who sold you your little two-bit stack of dirty white chips in my game, Doc?"

"I just sat in," said Little Doc, "of my own accord."

Little Doc eyed the gambler's gun hand and shook his head.

"I'm not armed. Killing me would be easy. But Buffalo Run would know who murdered me and Nile Riggs would tell them why. The citizens of Buffalo Run might hang you, but they'd have to move fast. Because Jake Sherlock would kill any man who harmed Little Doc."

Wade Calvert's hand had come away from his gun. "What's your game, Doc?"

"Her name is Nile Gray. She is the sister I sent for. She'll be my nurse and assistant. She's moving into the cabin next to mine. Remember her name: Nile Gray. And stay away from her, in every sense of the word."

"I'm not afraid of Buffalo Run's hangman's rope or Jake Sherlock's gun—"

Wade Calvert was poker faced.

"There is a streak of cowardice," Little Doc had smiled faintly, "in every man. With very few exceptions there is something that every man fears. I discovered the thing that puts fear in you. If I were to tell that story at your First and Last Chance bar where men could hear it, there would be no need of hangman's rope or Jake Sherlock's guns. The brand of shame and disgrace and ugly ridicule would finish you forever."

Wade Calvert's hands had gone to his handsome face. The well kept fingers went along his clean shaved skin. The look in his pale eyes had been stark.

"Smallpox!"

The gambler's voice had been a barely audible whisper. He had voiced the one thing on earth he feared.

"Smallpox." Little Doc had smiled faintly. "You ran from it. You broke quarantine and ran. And I let you go. I never thought I'd see you again. Certainly not out here in the West. But East or West, the public verdict would be the same. You had your hold on Ike Riggs, Tinhorn. I have my hold now on you. The lady's name is Nile Gray. Now get out."

That was the evening of Ike Riggs' burial day. And that same evening, after Buffalo Run had watched Jake Sherlock ride out of town with blood soaked dry on his bandages, Nile Riggs had walked into Little Doc's office. She had brought with her the circuit rider parson who had preached Ike Riggs' funeral sermon.

"I'm a bold hussy, Little Doc." Her eyes had softened to gray-green. "This man is a parson. He'll marry us. For better or worse."

Little Doc knew what she meant. All the things that could not be put into so many words.

"Until Death do us part, Nile." Little Doc had nodded and smiled.

So they were married. And the 'sister' deal was off before it got a start. Nile Riggs Gray became big sister and mother and all that a woman can be in the life of the man she marries. As easily as that she moved into the life of the Little Doc Gray and in her own way she took complete charge of his existence. Neither of them knew when love came. Perhaps it had been there in their hearts all the time. Neither of them ever questioned it.

Before performing the marriage the circuit rider had said they'd need a witness of some kind so Little Doc had called in a boy about sixteen. The boy wore cowpuncher boots and hat and a new store suit.

"This is Pat Fogarty, Nile. Pat looks after my team of horses. Drives me out to wherever I'm called in the country."

Pat Fogarty had wiry black hair and a blunt nose and jaw and a pair of gray-blue eyes. He was short for his age and his legs a little saddle warped. Hard muscled, quick moving, and husky. His wide mouth had a slow way of grinning that seemed to reach up to his eyes. And when his eyes looked at Nile Riggs they softened and lighted up.

One of Pat Fogarty's eyes was discolored and swelling shut. The knuckles of both hands were skinned. And his new suit of store clothes was soiled, his white shirt blood-spattered. Pat Fogarty had been in another fight.

THERE had been a moment of embarassment when a girl about ten years old had slipped into the office behind Pat Fogarty and stood there by the door with a spunky mixture of awe and confusion and defiance.

The girl had thick tawny hair and dark eyes that looked almost black. Her face was dirty with tear stains and dust smudges and her faded gingham dress was torn and soiled.

"The kids got to teasin' me again, Little Doc." Her voice had a spunky sound. "About bein' the town drunk's kid. . . . Pat waded into 'em and I got in a few licks and then Jake Sherlock rode up and the sight of him scared 'em off—" A sob choked her.

Nile had the youngster in her arms and the wedding ceremony got delayed a while.

"Her name is Honey Trimble," said Lit-

tle Doc. "Her father is Bill Trimble, the stagecoach driver who fetched you here. Honey's mother died a few years ago, so Honey keeps house for Bill and looks after him."

"Trimble let me drive his six horse team," said Nile, "part of the way. Showed me how to handle the lines, but he wouldn't let me touch his whip."

So Pat Fogarty and Honey Trimble were the two witnesses at the wedding of Little Doc and Nile.

"You're my maid of honor, Honey. Pat is Little Doc's best man. And now if you're all set, Parson, we'll start. . . ."

Buffalo Run celebrated Little Doc's wedding in true cow country style. And when Wade Calvert announced that the drinks were on the house at his First and Last Chance the cow town of Buffalo Run never suspected that it was a bitter gesture of defeat. Whatever else might be said of the gambler, Wade Calvert knew how to give all outward sign of being a game loser.

* * *

Jake Sherlock had left town without seeing Nile Riggs. It was months before he met her. And she was the wife of Little Doc Gray then. She came into the office with a pot of hot coffee one day while Jake Sherlock was waiting for Little Doc to get into his clothes.

"You wouldn't remember me," she said. "I'm Nile Riggs. I was a kid in pigtails when my mother ran off and took me with her. I'm married to Little Doc now."

Big tough Jack Sherlock had stood there, bulking huge, awkward and bearded. In his brain some forgotten thing stirred and came alive searing his bloodshot eyes. Then he got control of it. But in that brief moment Nile had read it there in his eyes. Jake Sherlock had remembered why he had killed Ike Riggs.

"I remember you, Nile. You was always underfoot around the ranch when a man was handlin' a bronc. I'd have to set you up on the corral and there you'd set, a-tellin' me to Ride 'Im, Cowboy! I reckon your mother was the finest woman on earth. . . . Did you say you was Little Doc's wife?"

"We got married the first night I hit town. The day of Ike's funeral. I married the finest man on earth, Jake."

Nile had walked over to where big tough Jake Sherlock was standing. She had set down the coffepot. She took one of his big rough hands in both of hers and held it.

"You never fought a horse, Jake. You're a good man."

"You look just like your mother, Nile. You'll be like her. I'd tell Little Doc, only I reckon he savvies what he's married. You two deserve one another."

Neither of them knew that Little Doc had been standing there. Until he spoke.

"Up till now," Little Doc's brown eyes had twinkled, "nobody has kissed the bride."

Big tough Jake Sherlock would have backed out. But Nile reached up and took his black bearded face in her hands and kissed him.

Then Jake took Little Doc on into the Red Hills. It was the next night before Little Doc returned. That was the first of those many night trips he made with the cowman through the Notch to patch up some outlaw hidden out at his ranch in the badlands.

Whenever Little Doc was gone, Pat Fogarty slept in the office. And nobody could get into the house where Nile was without being stopped by him. More often than not Honey was there with Nile.

There were times when Nile went along on trips Little Doc made into the country. She drove the team while her husband got the sleep he so badly needed. And she learned the many things a trained nurse must know. Little Doc said she was always far ahead of his teaching and when need be could help him operate. Her hands were sure and quick and never faltered. It was no time before she was taking most of the minor cases and easing his heavy burden as a cow country doctor. Nile brought most of the babies into the world and she was there when death took its grim toll of those whose lives Little Doc could not save. Buffalo Run began calling her Doc Nile and she took her place there. Little Doc was not the only person who always half expected to find a hidden halo in her dark auburn hair that grayed while his whitened. Not from the years but from the endless untiring something they gave from within themselves.

Honey Trimble was Nile's shadow. Honey's father was gone most of the time and even when he was in Buffalo Run over

night he spent his time drinking at the saloons. There were the times when the booze caught up with Bill and they would nurse him through the drunken horrors. But nobody ever thought of trying to sober him up. Whiskey was a part of his life. He had his jug and his six-horse whip. An ageless man with a leathery skin always stubbled with gray whiskers and puckered eyes as blue as the Montana skies.

Jake Sherlock stayed in his Red Hills. The weeds grew rank on the grave of Ike Riggs.

The years were kind to them all. All save Pat Fogarty. And if the gradual change for the worse in that maturing young cowpuncher bothered Little Doc and Nile and Honey, they kept the hurt to themselves. They waited, hoping that Pat Fogarty would finish the sowing of his crop of wild oats and make something of himself.

Little Doc had told Nile long ago about Pat. How his father had been an outlaw and his mother a dance hall girl, and when she died Fogarty had taken the boy along because there was no place to leave him. One night Jake Sherlock had come for Doc saying there was a shot-up outlaw named Fogarty at his place in the Red Hills. But it would have to be a free charity trip. Fogarty was like as not dying and what money he'd saved would be needed for his kid.

Fogarty was dead when he got there so Little Doc had fetched the Fogarty kid back to town with him, and had taken over the job of looking after the orphaned Pat.

Chapter III

A GAMBLER'S HAND

UP UNTIL a couple of years after Nile's marriage to Little Doc, Pat Fogarty seemed to be growing up all right. He had a quick temper that got him into a lot of fights but that was kid stuff. And when he worked at his chosen trade of breaking broncs, he was the best hand in the Montana cow country at it.

Pat had his own little cabin and barn and horse corrals at the edge of town. There he broke out and gentled the horses he bought as green colts and sold at a profit when they were trained cow-horses. There was good money in it for Pat was a shrewd horse trader. He got his colts for almost nothing, and when he had them broken, gentled and trained for cutting and rope horses they brought top prices. A cowhand was never afoot, the cow country said, when he rode a Pat Fogarty horse.

It was gambling, rather than booze, that was getting an ugly grip on Pat. Buffalo Run tinhorn dealers let the young bronc rider win just often enough to fetch him back for the night when he had a bankroll to lose. If they held his I.O.U.'s, Pat could always depend on having Wade Calvert take up those I.O.U.'s.

Pat Fogarty thought that Calvert was a tin god on wheels. He admired the gambler's tailored clothes, the way he packed his guns, and the manner in which he ran his First and Last Chance. It had grown into what was claimed to be the finest equipped saloon and gambling house in the cow country. On that first occasion when Pat had gambled away his last dollar one of the tinhorns down the street had taken his I.O.U.'s for more money than the young bronc rider could hope to make in the next year. Pat Fogarty had been fixing to ride through the Notch to Jake Sherlock's hideout in the Red Hills and, as he jogged past the First and Last Chance, Wade Calvert called to him from the swinging half-doors.

"I'd like to see you for a few minutes before you pull out, Pat."

Inside his private office at the First and Last Chance Calvert had poured out a couple of drinks and when they'd downed their shots the high stake gambler took Pat Fogarty's I. O. U.'s from the pocket of his vest and while the young bronc rider watched, wordlessly, had struck a match, set fire to the debt-papers and dropped their thin ash into the polished brass cuspidor.

"They took you, Pat," said the gambler, "when you had a few too many drinks of their rotgut. Cards and whiskey don't mix. Any time you feel like heading for Jake Sherlock's place in the Red Hills, drop in here and talk it over with me first."

Calvert had seemed to know that Pat Fogarty was ashamed to go to Little Doc for money to pick up his gambling paper. He told Pat that because Little Doc never gambled himself, he therefor had no real un-

derstanding about a gambler's debt of honor. So Little Doc needn't know anything about this.

"Gambling is my profession, Pat. When those dealers cut you down, come to me."

Pat thereafter called Wade Calvert a 'square gambler.' And that was the highest compliment in the young bronc rider's book.

Later, when Calvert began giving him private lessons in the nimble fingered, quick eyed, sharp witted profession of card dealing, Pat Fogarty felt that he had attained the heights.

Then there were the gifts the gambler handed him with such a careless gesture that they seemed far greater than their actual worth: a new Stetson hat, a pair of shopmade boots, an expensive shirt tailored to his measure, a pair of cowpuncher pants foxed around the seat with soft white buckskin, a cartridge belt and holster of carved leather and an ivory handled six-shooter with P.F. carved in the ivory butt, silver mounted spurs, and a saddle made to order. When Pat Fogarty rode down the street of Buffalo Run, he was a handsome, bronc riding range-dude.

He was winning now; more often than he lost to the tinhorn dealers, and he figured it was due to the poker lessons taught him by Wade Calvert. He would have fought any man who hinted that Calvert had passed the quiet word of his dealers along the street to let Pat Fogarty win a certain amount and no more.

Better than anyone, Little Doc knew the folly of trying to check young Pat or hint any word of warning to the young bronc rider about what the high stake gambler was doing to him. Yet even Little Doc was not shrewd enough to figure out what Calvert had back in his gambler's mind.

Buffalo Run put up with Pat Fogarty's spur jingling swagger. They said Pat was just getting the swelled head. The cow town had a name for it: Stetson Fever.

IT WAS a few months before the six cattle rustlers shoved their stolen trail herd through the notch to invade Jake Sherlock's Red Hills domain, when Wade Calvert played what Little Doc figured was the gambler's ace in the hole.

There had been a lot of talk about Buffalo Run needing a real law officer. A town marshal.

Little Doc was too over-worked, too busy, to give the talk much attention. Buffalo Run was a lawless cow town. But it got along. It had its solid citizens. The cowboys who painted the town were a little wild but their boistrous hell-raising hurt nobody but themselves, and they paid for what damage they did. As for the outlaws who came and went, they minded their own business and bothered nobody and wanted only to be let alone. They had passed the word along that Buffalo Run was Little Doc's town. And to treat it that way.

Little Doc and Nile were gone on one of their long buckboard trips into the cow country when it happened. The first they knew of it was the morning after they had gotten back. Honey, now grown into a slim, good-looking young lady, had breakfast ready for them. They were too tired out to notice that her dark eyes were swollen-lidded from crying.

As they were sitting down to breakfast they heard the jingle of silver-mounted spurs and the door opened and Pat Fogarty swaggered in, dressed in new range-dude clothes and a little tipsy. Pinned to the left pocket of a new red-flannel shirt was a five pointed silver star, "Town Marshal of Buffalo Run" engraved on it.

Wade Calvert had played his ace in the hole. Pat Fogarty, twenty five years old, was Town Marshal of Buffalo Run.

Little Doc forced a smile, but his brown eyes shadowed. Nile looked mad enough to rip that new law badge right off Pat's new red flannel shirt, while Honey bit on her lower lip until a drop of blood showed.

Pat Fogarty's grin died slowly on his whiskey flushed face. Anger and resentment glinted in his bloodshot gray blue eyes. His black brows scowled.

"What the hell's the matter with you all? You'd think I'd bin ketched stealin' sheep. Hell, can't you see? I'm Town Marshal of Buffalo Run!"

Little Doc looked sick. Like he'd swallowed a bait of poison. Too sick at heart to say anything.

It was Nile Gray who told Pat what was the matter.

She got slowly to her feet, looking taller than she actually was, still dressed in her

crumpled soiled white uniform that was speckled with blood.

Her graying dark red hair seemed alive, as if it had fire hidden in its rumpled mass. Her eyes were as cold and green as ice. Without looking at the girl she spoke to Honey.

"Somebody has to tell our young spur jingling tinhorn that it's bad manners to cuss in the presence of ladies. He has to be told in his own kind of language, so either stick your fingers in your ears, Honey, or sit and listen to this fourflushing young false alarm get it in the only words he savvies, right out of the spittoon. With apologies to Little Doc for trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear when he changed my name from Riggs to Gray. Take off your purty hat, Mister Town Marshal of Buffalo Run before I knock your head out from under it! You're in the house and under the roof of a gentleman, and in the presence of one woman and one little lady whose heart you're not going to bust. Because, my fine feathered peacock, I'm pulling your fancy tail feathers. And when I'm done with the plucking not even the sorriest painted gal in Wade Calvert's honkeytonk will look at you without laughing. You swelled headed tinhorn clown. That's the preamble— Here comes the works. You can stand and take it, or tuck your coyote bushy tail between your fancy pants legs and run! Town Marshal of Buffalo Run, my brother Ike Riggs could have taken a corncob and run you outa Montana! If Jake Sherlock walked in here now empty handed and gave you one look you'd get down on your purty britches knees and whine for your two-bit life! You don't know what guts is, you half-baked whelp. Real guts. The kind that Little Doc Gray has. You're a dressed up silly looking clown, stinking of last night's honkeytonk perfume and Tinhorn Wade Calvert's booze! Calvert set out to make a monkey out of you and he's done the job. Even his tinhorn dealers laugh at you when your fancy back is turned. They're laughing at you every time they let you rake in a jackpot according to their special orders from their tinhorn boss. You look green around the gills, Mister Town Marshal of Buffalo Run! If you're sick, take it outside. Don't dirty this clean floor. And when you go out that door, leave it open. Because we'll have to open the windows so Little Doc can fumigate the place to get your stink out!"

Nile spoke in a brittle voice. She ripped away the pride of Pat Fogarty, shred by shred, like she was ripping his hide off. And when she was done with him, Pat had nothing left. Nothing. He knew that Nile Riggs Gray spoke the truth; the sort of truth no man on earth wants told about himself. And then as abruptly as she had begun she finished and stood there for a moment, her hands clenched. Then she unclenched her hands and sat down in her chair, her back turned to him.

PAT had taken it standing, with his new 5X Stetson hat in his hand, his silver star shining, dressed in his fancy cowboy clothes. He had stood there like a man might stand to be shot down by a firing squad. The color ebbed from his face so that his tanned skin had a jaundiced color. His eyes, blue gray, had a glazed look. Around the line of his tight lipped mouth his skin was white. He did not move from his tracks until Nile was done talking and had turned her back on him to finish her cold breakfast.

Little Doc had sat in his chair stiffly, a stricken helpless look in his warm brown eyes. He knew that Nile was not taking out any kind of spiteful anger on Pat Fogerty. She had held back all this for the past years while she watched Pat Fogerty gradually get away from them. Nile had heard Honey cry silently in the night. Nile had seen the deep hurt inside Little Doc who had something like a father's love for young Pat. And Nile herself had been hurt. Now she had gotten the poison out of her system. Purged herself of its venom, and it had left her drained of any ill feeling. She had turned her back on young Pat Fogarty before he could see what was left there in her eyes when the green turned to softer gray. With her anger spent she had only pity left; pity and a sort of mother-love for Pat. If Pat had made one move Nile would have taken him in her arms and the rest of it would have melted in tears. But she dared not let Pat Fogarty see that. Instead she had checked the bet to Little Doc.

Pat's silver mounted spurs jingled too loudly in the stillness as he turned towards the door.

Honey, dry eyed, her face chalky white, started from her chair. It was Little Doc's voice that stopped her.

"Let him go, Honey." Little Doc's voice was quiet. "If Pat's a man, he'll come back. He'll be wearing his own clothes."

Pat took a legal looking paper from his pocket. He tore it in half and dropped it on the floor. Then he went out, closing the door behind him. Little Doc picked up the torn document. It was a bench warrant for the arrest, dead or alive, of Jake Sherlock. Little Doc smiled faintly as he burned the torn document in the kitchen range.

* * *

Wade Calvert watched Town Marshal Pat Fogarty ride down the street, out of town and out of sight along the trail that led through the Notch to the Red Hills badlands. When he was no longer in sight, the gambler went back into his First and Last Chance and then to his private office. He poured himself a drink and held it, his pale eyes glittering as if he were offering some sinister and silent toast. Then he drank.

The gambler did not know that the bench warrant he'd made out for the arrest, dead or alive, of Jake Sherlock, was torn in two and burned in Little Doc's kitchen stove. He had watched Pat swagger into Little Doc's house and, after a while, seen him come out again, stiff backed, grim looking, headed for the feed barn where he had left his horse. And when he watched Pat head for the Red Hills, Wade Calvert figured that the hot headed, prideful young rider had been angered there at Little Doc's and instead of taking along a posse, he was tackling Jake Sherlock lone handed. That was even better than the gambler had dared hope for. Because no matter which way the gun fight between the outlawed Jake Sherlock and the new Town Marshal Pat Fogarty turned out, Calvert won his jackpot. Little Doc set a high value on the renegade friendship of Jake Sherlock, and he also loved Fogarty as he might his own son. No matter how that gun duel went, Little Doc lost and, by that same token, Wade Calvert won.

The same held true to Nile Riggs Gray. Nile had hated her brother Ike. When he sent for her to manage Wade Calvert's honkeytonk, she came only to keep Wade Calvert from handing him over to the Vigilante Law. Nile called Jake Sherlock her friend and looked upon her brother's killer as a sort of benefactor. But Nile was also might fond of Pat Fogarty. Along with Little Doc, she would be grievously hurt not matter how the gun fight turned out.

That left Honey Trimble. Honey had grown from a pigtailed big eyed ragged kid into beautiful young ripening womanhood. Calvert had paid his honkeytonk percentage girls to flatter Pat Fogarty with their attentions, thus helping to alienate what love existed between Honey and Pat. With Pat Fogarty shoved aside, Honey Trimble was bound to turn to Wade Calvert. An older man would see in her what a young flattered fool like Pat Fogarty overlooked. Calvert did not consider himself too old for Honey. A man was young at forty five. A girl of eighteen-twenty, was a woman in her own right. She was far more matured for her years than was Pat Fogarty, to the gambler's way of thinking. And he was vain enough to consider himself the lady killer he had always been. He felt certain Honey would jump eagerly at the chance to become the wife of Wade Calvert. Handsome Wade Calvert. His well-kept hand smoothed the clean shaved surface of his skin—an unblemished skin.

CALVERT'S white teeth bared in a flat lipped snarl and his pale eyes glittered. He was thinking back to the night he had run away like a craven coward from a smallpox epidemic. Back East. . . .

Damn Little Doc Gray! It wasn't fear of death that had sent Wade Calvert—Doctor Wade Calvert then, and fresh from the medical school where he and Little Doc had been classmates—at a skulking run in the night to get away from the quarantined town where he and Gray were internes at the same hospital. No fear of death had put Wade Calvert to flight. It was the horror of having that handsome smooth skin of his pitted and scarred for life by the ravages of smallpox.

Calvert winced inside now at the memory of his terrible, craven plea when Gray had caught him running away in the night. When every doctor in the plague stricken town was so badly needed.

"My mother," Calvert had pleaded, "was the most beautiful woman in the South until she was stricken with smallpox. In a

delirious fever she clawed off the bandages and tore with her fingernails at the itching pustules. . . . When she recovered, she never appeared without being heavily veiled to hide the repulsive scarred mask that had once been so beautiful. When she could no longer stand the sight of her own reflection in a mirror, my mother killed herself— Let me go, Gray!" And handsome Doctor Wade Calvert had groveled on his knees. Sobbed and begged until Gray had turned away in disgust to let Calvert break quarantine and his doctor's oath and flee in the night. . . .

The gambler splashed more whiskey in his glass, gulped it down and followed it with another. The bottle was half empty when he heard the rattle of stagecoach wheels and heard the pop of Bill Trimble's six-horse whiplash. The stagecoach was pulling in; halting at the stage depot a ways up the street.

Calvert downed a last quick drink, corked the bottle and went out to join the crowd that always gathered when the stagecoach pulled in.

He saw old Bill Trimble climb down and head straight for Little Doc's place across the street, staggering like he was a little drunker than usual, his stagecoach whip in the crook of his arm. The driver stumbled in through Little Doc's door where Nile showed for a brief moment. She led him inside and closed the door.

"Bill Trimble," Calvert felt the whiskey inside him. He'd drunk more at that one sitting than he'd consumed in six months, "looks drunker than I ever saw him in my life."

The gambler spoke to the crowd gathered at the stage depot; to nobody in particular. Then he stiffened at the sound of the voice behind him. It was Little Doc.

"Bill Trimble isn't drunk," he said. "He's a sick man. From the looks of his skin, I'd say he's coming down with— smallpox."

Little Doc carrying his shabby black bag walked around behind the stagecoach and across the wide dusty main street of Buffalo Run to his office. He went through the door and closed it behind him.

Calvert stood there in the bright morning sunlight but it had suddenly lost its warmth and the whiskey he had drunk soured inside him. Cold sweat broke out on the gambler's face. He started down the street and his pale eyes kept straying back to the house where Bill Trimble had taken his sickness, and where Little Doc had gone across to diagnose its symptoms.

Back in his office, Calvert locked himself in. He uncorked his bottle of private stock whiskey and drank from its neck, but the raw whiskey had no taste at all. He guzzled it down, smashed the empty bottle and pawed in a cupboard for another quart. He stayed locked in. For the first time in all the years he had been at Buffalo Run, Wade Calvert got drunk.

Drunk. So that his brain was milling inside his skull and he didn't know if he actually heard the words or just imagined them.

"Bill Trimble—dead—dyin' when he drove in. Smallpox! No tellin' how long he had it—or how many of us he's given it to. Little Doc's slappin' a tight quarantine on the whole damn town of Buffalo Run. Armed guards—orders to shoot down any man that tries to bust the smallpox quarantine—"

Chapter IV

FOUR WAY SHOOT-OUT

THE NOTCH was a narrow pass through high sheer rock walls. One man could lie in ambush there at either end of it and if he had enough cartridges and was a good shot, let a whole damned army ride through single file, pick them off one at a time as they came, and call it an easy job.

Jack Sherlock was the one man who should know. He had lived there in the Red Hills for many years, waiting for some of the kinfolks of dead Ike Riggs to show up. When six of them did, pointing a trail herd of cattle they had stolen, the 'rustling of leaves' along the Outlaw Trail had fetched Sherlock word of their coming days ahead of their arrival.

He knew even before Nile Riggs rode through the Notch alone to give him the grim warning of the Riggs invasion.

"I'm a-waitin', Nile," Jake Sherlock had told Nile. "I'm plenty ready. I bin ready fer a long, long time. You git back to town now. To Little Doc."

Nile had looked the big, grizzled cow-

man over in the moonlight. He looked like he'd lost a lot of weight, since the last time she'd seen him a couple of months ago. She asked him if he was sick.

"I was sick fer a spell, Nile, plumb down. But looks like Little Doc's right. Jake Sherlock is too tough to die. And that's more'n I kin say fer the three renegades that was holed up here. They musta fetched it with 'em, some kinda plague-fever. We was too sick to look after one another and when they died, one by one, they was stinkin' dead fer a while before I got the strength to bury 'em—I moved out and left 'em there dead on their bunks in the bunkhouse—"

Jake Sherlock wouldn't let Nile get close to him that moonlight night so she made him peel off his shirt and undershirt and strike matches while she looked at his bare hide from a distance. The skin was pitted and red pocked, where the scars had healed.

"You've had smallpox, Jake."

"So I figgered."

"You buried the dead men?"

"In one big trench I dug. Too doggoned weak to fix 'em separate graves—"

"Burn that bunkhouse down, Jake. It'll be a death trap for weeks, months to come. Burn it down."

"I'll do that, Nile. Now you lope on back to town. Give my regards to Little Doc, and I'm obliged, Nile, for the news you fetched me. Six Riggses—Ike's five brothers and Old Man Riggs, the old he-wolf hisself."

"Old Man Riggs," said Nile. "My father—"

"Your mother took you and run off from him. You keep rememberin' that. Nothin' else. Now git along, Nile. You're always getting underfoot—"

"You've got time to make a safe getaway, Jake."

"Run from them Riggses? This is what I bin a-hopin' fer a long time. If there was six hundred instead of six, Jake Sherlock would still have the bulge here at the Notch." He had laughed. It's ugly sound had followed Nile Riggs Gray all the way back to Buffalo Run.

Nile had few secrets from Little Doc but this was one she kept from him. She had a notion what was in the warped mind of big, grizzled Jake Sherlock. She did not want to put those suspicions into words because Little Doc lived up to the last word and letter of all that a doctor's sacred oath of Hippocrites meant.

So Nile had ridden back to Buffalo Run, leaving Sherlock on lone guard at the Notch.

Sherlock had watched the six Riggses drive their stolen cattle through the Notch. And he watched them shove their remuda and pack mules through and saw them when they rode up to his deserted ranch in the Red Hills. He watched them unpack their bed mules and the mules that packed their grub and camp outfit. He chuckled to himself when he saw them move into the big log bunkhouse. The chuckle was as ugly and mirthless as the death rattle in a man's throat.

Old Man Riggs and his five sons never caught sight of Sherlock. They had some sort of notion, perhaps, that they had scared him off. Jake had killed Ike Riggs and when you whipped one Riggs you had the whole damned Riggs tribe to whip. Jake Sherlock would know that. And unless he was plumb locoed, he would scare off, quit the country. They were six tough men and he

was only one tough man. And they were bound by big odds to cut him down. They didn't bother looking for him when they found his ranch deserted.

Old Man Riggs and sons figured they had run Jake Sherlock out of his Red Hills—until one, and then another of the brothers came down with a rash and fever and their tough hides broke out with a pox. Old Man Riggs knew what smallpox was like. He'd seen it before. He saddled a horse and started through the Notch for Buffalo Run to fetch a doctor for his sick sons.

At the far end of the narrow high walled Notch a saddle gun cracked. Its .30-30 bullet ripped the crown of the old man's hat.

"Stand your hand," bellowed the big voice he knew belonged to but one man on earth. Jake Sherlock. "Ride no fu'ther. Or I'll shoot to hit."

Then Jake Sherlock told Old Man Riggs about the three renegades who had died of small pox there in the bunkhouse the Riggses had moved into. How the three dead men had lain there on their bunks, sick, dying, then dead. And how they had been dead in there quite a few days before he, Jake, got the strength to haul out their germ ridden carcasses and bury them.

"Go on back to your whelps, Old Man—and watch 'em die! Then you kin lay down an' die with 'em. . . . ."

OLD MAN Riggs was tough and prideful, but he made a desperate effort to dicker. Not for himself, but for his sons.

"Them cattle is all in the old RS iron, Jake. The Riggs and Sherlock iron. Two thousand head we gathered in Wyoming from the big trail herds that went past where we was. Me'n the boys put 'em in the RS road iron. You fetch that Little Doc feller we done heard about, from Buffalo Run, and we'll deal you in on your share. And we'll fergit you killed Ike Riggs, so help me Gawdamighty!"

"Since when did you commence holdin' with Gawda'mighty, Old Man? Little Doc ain't a comin'. Only Riggs he taken any int'rest in is Nile Riggs. You fergot your daughter Nile?"

"Daughter, hell! Nile ain't no Riggs. I married a second wife. She was a widder. Had a yearlin' baby girl when I married her. Baby's name was Nile. That was a year-two before you showed up at the Riggs outfit in Texas. Hell, you helped her and her kid Nile run off from me. Didn't she tell you Nile ain't my daughter?"

"She told me nothin'. I asked her no questions. When Ike tried to stop me from gittin' that good woman and her Nile kid away from you, I whupped Ike and taken him along so's he couldn't set you on that lady's trail—"

"And that's how-come Ike went with you? Me'n the boys figgered you bought Ike off."

"I bought Ike Riggs off all right, Old Man. Bought him off with a whuppin' like no man ever taken and lived to wear the scars. He still was wearin' them scars when he sold his sister Nile to a gambler named Wade Calvert who was startin' a honkey-tonk at Buffalo Run. Ike had a gun shoved in my belly and we was both drunk when he told me. He shot me a few times before I broke his damn' neck with my two hands. Now git on back to that smallpox pest house where your big tough whelps is a-dyin'. When you die, Old Man, I'll come back into the Red Hills and burn down the pest house with your rotted carcasses in it—"

"A man can't ketch the smallpox twice, Jake. And I've had it oncet. If them sons of mine die, I'm a-comin' to kill you! And you ain't got ca'tridges enough to stop me till I git to you!"

"I'll be here, Old Man Riggs. I'll give you an even break fer your taw!"

Old Man Riggs rode back through the Notch. Back to the bunkhouse where all five of his big sons were down now with the dread and deadly smallpox.

Sherlock waited there at the far end of the Notch. Now and then when he got too sleepy, he would rub more tobacco in his eyes to sting them open. He would stare at the big black lettering the Riggs had painted on the high rock wall: "Keep Out. Or You'll Get Shot Out."

"Suits me," Jake Sherlock would talk himself back to wakefulness. "It's all yourn. This is gonna be a mild winter. Them cattle won't die off. But there won't be a damned Riggs to gather 'em next round up time—"

He had grub, tobacco, cartridges, water. Everything a man needed—everything but sleep. A man couldn't stay awake forever.

Jake Sherlock was more asleep than awake and it was nightfall when he heard a horse's hoofs, and shook himself awake. The horse and rider loomed up, coming from town. Sherlock let the rider get well up and into the line of his gun sights. Then roared his challenge.

"Who are yuh? What yuh want?"

"I'm the Fogarty Kid. Pat Fogarty. . . That you, Jake?"

"Who the hell you figger it could be besides me?"

"One of the Riggs outfit."

"And if I was a Riggs?"

"I'd do my damndest to serve a blanket bench warrant I got for Old Man Riggs and his five sons. I'm Town Marshall at Buffalo Run."

"Your tin badge ain't worth a damn in the country! Who pinned it on you, Kid? Your old man must be turnin' over in his outlaw grave. Little Doc know you got that law badge pinned on?"

"Yeah."

Then they both heard it. A shot. It came from the other end of the Notch and threw its echoes back and forth between the narrow high cliff walls. And the voice of Old Man Riggs came through the echoes.

"My sons is dead. I'm a-comin' through the Notch. Hear me, Jake Sherlock?"

"I ain't deef. Come on!"

Jake told Pat Fogarty to ride up and get in behind the brush and rocks and stay there.

Pat Fogarty obeyed the orders. He dared do nothing else. The sight of the gaunt, bearded cowman was enough to chill a brave man's blood.

Pat Fogarty sat his horse, in behind the brush and boulders. He saw Sherlock mount a horse and ride out into the open moonlight.

Then Old Man Riggs came riding out through the Notch. He looked taller than any human could be. Tall, white maned and white bearded. His eyes glittered green where the moonlight showed them in the white bearded mask. His gun barrel glistened.

JAKE SHERLOCK and Old Man Riggs rode slowly towards one another, their saddle guns ready, holding their fire. Holding it until they were well within saddle carbine range. Then both guns spat flame at the same second. The guns kept spewing streaks of fire and both men were reeling drunkenly in the saddle. Their horses were gun-broken so they met, their stirrups hooked and the two huge gaunt men were locked together like wrestlers on horseback. Then the horses swerved off and the two men crashed to the ground, still gripped in each other's locked arms. They had dropped their saddle guns but neither of them would die until he had killed his enemy and they fought there on the ground in a welter of dirt and blood.

Fogarty stared like a man in the grip of some horrible nightmare. He couldn't twist his eyes from this mortal conflict between two men who were both too tough to kill.

Then a man on horse back was coming, crowding his sweating, leg weary mount to its limit. Pat was jerked back to the reality of his own existence, and he saw Wade Calvert on the big black gelding he claimed was the fastest horse in Montana.

"Hold up, Wade!" The young marshal's voice cracked like a whip.

Pat no longer wore his fancy range dude clothes. He had on old Levi overalls and a faded old blue flannel shirt with the law star pinned to it.

The gambler was half drunk; the rest of him chilled by terror of the smallpox plague. He had broken quarantine, shot his way out of town, and headed for the only hideout he knew: The Red Hills.

In the first few seconds he didn't recognize Pat. Then he did, and saw Pat was wearing his old clothes. Drunk and scared as he was, Calvert knew that he had lost his hold on Pat Fogarty.

The man Pat had hero-worshipped as a square gambler never gave him a figthing chance. There was a gun in Calvert's hand and it spat flame. The .45 slug ripped the boy's left shoulder.

Pat had his old wooden handled six-shooter in his hand; the gun that had belonged to his outlaw father. He thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger as the gambler's bullet struck him. Wade Calvert screamed like a woman as he spurred his big black gelding past where Pat was reeling in his saddle.

Wade Calvert spurred past where the locked bodies of Old Man Riggs and Jake Sherlock lay near the mouth of the Notch. He rode on and past the two horses with

empty saddles, through the Notch and into the Red Hills. He was doubled over his saddle horn and hanging onto his bullet torn belly. He did not slack the headlong pace of the horse until the black gelding stopped at the hitchrack in front of the log bunkhouse. Then he dismounted and he staggered a little, bent over.

The bunkhouse door was flung open. A lantern burned inside. There was a jug of whiskey on the table, and what looked like men asleep on the bunks with the bed tarps pulled up across their faces.

A man could live with a bullet hole in his belly. Wade Calvert had been a doctor. He had been the best surgeon in his class at medical school and at the hospital where he had interned. It was a bullet rip in his belly. Little Doc would be bound by his damned sacred oath to come.

Wade Calvert needed a drink. He lifted the jug in his bloody hands and drank.

Wade Calvert drank, set the jug down and clutched his blood smeared belly. He staggered over to the nearest bunk and threw back the tarp.

"Wake up! Come out of it, you drunken Riggs! Ride to town. Fetch Little Doc. I've got money in my saddle pockets. More money than all the Riggs outfit ever saw. I'll pay you—Damnit—Wake up!"

Then Wade Calvert got a look at the man's face. The man wasn't asleep; he was dead. And under the tarp he lay naked, his whole big body pocked with sores.

Wade Calvert went insane then. The thing he saw was something that cracked his fear ridden, whiskey distorted brain. He went from bunk to bunk, yanking back the bed tarps. staring at the dead men whose skins were a mass of raw smallpox sores. He was insane then. Sobbing and screaming he stumbled and staggered and fell against the table in a blind animal terror.

The table with its jug and lantern crashed over. The lighted lantern exploded and the kerosene and spilled whiskey caught afire. In seconds the cabin was afire and in its flaming pyre sounded the horrible screams of the man who had once been Doctor Wade Calvert.

ARMED riders from Buffalo Run's quarantine guard rode up on it. They heard the last of the dying man's screams. They could see within the burning log bunkhouse the five dead Riggs brothers on their bunks. And they caught one horrible glimpse of Wade Calvert before the flames roared over him. Then they had to ride back.

Little Doc had come along, and Nile was with him. Little Doc was no gambling man but he had played a strong hunch. When he found Pat Fogarty wounded and Jake Sherlock still alive he knew that his hunch had paid off.

Old Man Riggs was dead. But Jake Sherlock, lived long enough to tell Nile that she wasn't a Riggs. Then he said the RS trail herd would winter.

"Pat Fogarty's a good man to take my place—Come closer, Pat—"

Pat's shoulder was bandaged. He squatted on the ground. Sherlock's grizzled beared face spread in a grin.

"Take off that damn fool law badge—afore your outlaw daddy kicks outa his grave and yanks it off yuh—that RS brand—you vent out that R. Then you'll have a straight Sherlock iron. Vent that Riggs R. There ain't no more Riggses—"

That was how big Jake Sherlock died.

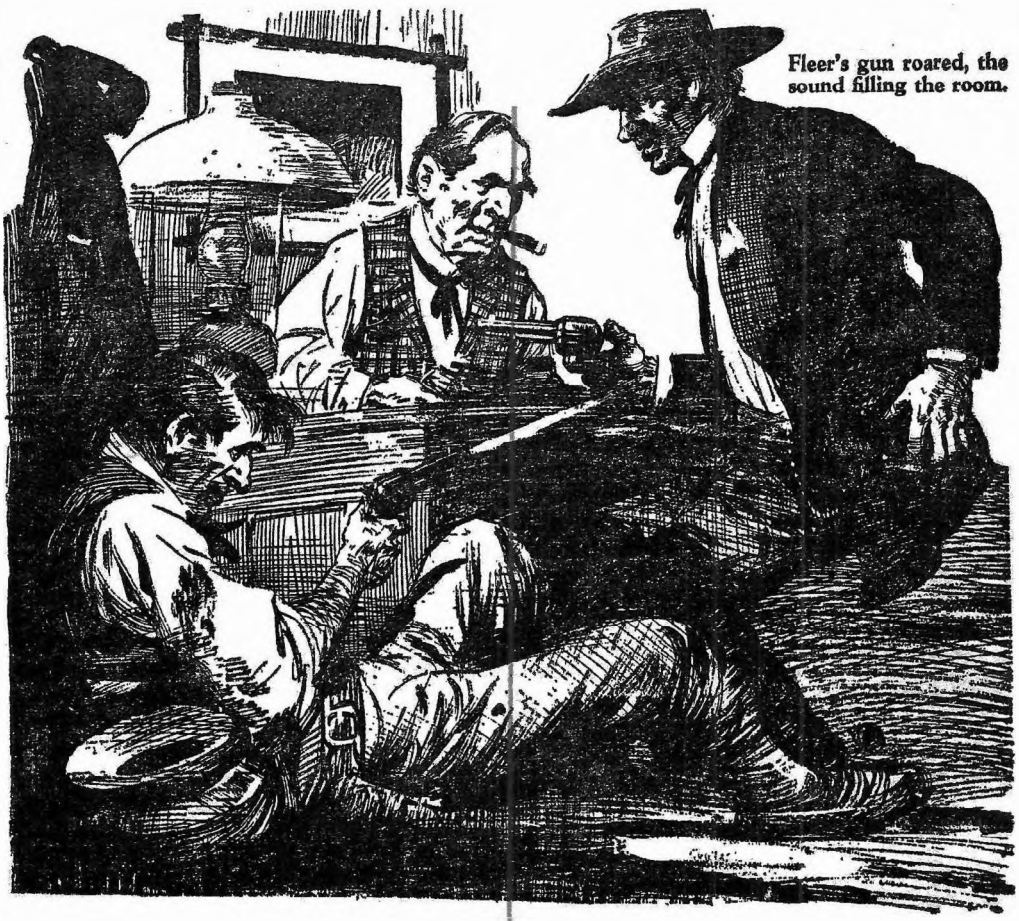
At his grave, chiseled deep in the high rock wall of the Notch was carved: "Jake Sherlock Notch."

Pat Fogarty rode back to town to marry Honey Trimble, and Little Doc and Nile rode with him. They had to get back to their new hospital. There was a smallpox epidemic to battle. They led Wade Calvert's saddled horse. The saddle pockets bulged with all the money the gambler had made and saved and it was big money. Nile said that for once she was going to over-rule a decision Little Doc made. Buffalo Run could use that kind of big money for a school, or a church; what any town needed.

That mild winter was remembered as the winter of the smallpox epidemic. But Buffalo Run, thanks to Little Doc and Nile, and the hospital Jake Sherlock had made possible, suffered a far lighter toll of human life than most cowtowns.

There is a granite boulder in front of the hospital at Buffalo Run, and on it is chiseled something akin to the words deep carved in the Notch: "Jake Sherlock Will Never Die."

THE END



Fleer's gun roared, the sound filling the room.

FILL YOUR HAND, TINHORN!

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

"When you've quit gettin' a kick out of a winning hand, that's the time to stop," they told him. But George Haycraft, gambler, had to shuffle the stacked cards of fate once more, even while knowing his next draw would be those fearsome black aces and eights!

GEORGE HAYCRAFT held a pair of eights when the news came to Bull Brannigan's Deuces Wild gambling house that John Starbright's body had been found in an alley on the north side of Boulder City. He knew that he should have held aces and eights the dead man's hand on such an occasion, but it had been a long time since aces came his way, much too long for a professional gambler.

He leaned back in the chair, placed his cards face down on the table, and then let one small white hand pass across his right

temple. He wore long sideburns, just beginning to gray.

Jeff Hackett, the blacksmith, was saying tersely, "We found him in Dugan's Alley, George. Body was still warm."

Haycraft moistened his lips and looked down at the cards on the table. The three men seated around the table were watching him, their eyes shaded by the brims of their hats.

"He was knifed," Haycraft murmured, "through the back?"

"Dirty piece o' business," Hackett growled. He was a big man, bald-headed, face still grimy from his trade.

Haycraft nodded, his bland face showing no emotion. His eyes were blue, steely blue, a bright color against the pallor of his face. Hackett had come to him with the news because he had been John Starbright's best friend when the faro dealer worked in the Deuces Wild.

A heavy silence had come into the big room on the lower floor when the news seeped through. Upstairs the games were still going on, and Haycraft listened to the sour voice of Ed Brant, the keeno man, repeating his endless numbers. He tried to remember for how many years he had listened to Brant, and for how many years he'd had his first drink of the evening with John Starbright a few minutes before they left the Deuces Wild after a night's work.

George Haycraft picked up his high beaver from the floor behind his chair, dusted it carefully with his left elbow, and placed it on his head, tilted at just the right angle. He said quietly,

"You will excuse me, gentlemen."

They were watching him all over the big room. Men at Brannigan's seventy-five foot mahogany bar had turned around to look at him when they heard the news, morbid curiosity showing in their eyes.

Haycraft pushed back his chair, stood up, and strolled to the bar. It was not yet midnight, and he'd never taken a drink until the games were over and he was about to walk home with Starbright. Every one of the six bartenders in the Deuces Wild knew this, but when he came to the bar this time, Happy Elson, head bartender, took a bottle from the shelf and pushed it toward him. Elson didn't say anything.

Haycraft poured himself a drink and set the bottle down, his hand very steady. The man at his right stepped away from the bar, leaving a space of about six feet between himself and the next man at the bar. The next man was Bull Brannigan himself, new owner of the Deuces Wild, a comparative stranger in Boulder City.

Brannigan's tremendous bulk hung over the bar, both gorilla-like arms on the wood. He had a bullet-shaped head, sparsely covered with reddish-brown hair. His neck was once again the size of the average man's, and a fold of red flesh showed over the collar of his striped shirt.

The gambling house owner's huge hands were folded in front of a tiny liquor glass on the bar, and Haycraft watched the man work his tremendous fingers around like so many small snakes, twisting one around the other. Brannigan's hands, the backs, were covered with the same reddish-brown hair.

A stub of cigar was wrapped in the loose folds of Brannigan's thick-lipped, sensual mouth. Brannigan had been facing the mirror behind the bar, but he turned around now, facing Haycraft, small, red eyes glittering.

"Too bad, Haycraft."

Haycraft lifted the tiny glass of amber-colored liquor. He looked at it, looked over the rim of it into the mirror at Bull Brannigan's coarse bulk, and he hated every one of the man's three hundred odd pounds; he hated Brannigan with the fierce hatred the highly sensitive man feels for the sordid, the unlovely. He said, "Yes."

He knew that Brannigan had been behind Starbright's brutal murder, and he knew the reason why. John Starbright had been an honest gambler for twenty-five years, and most of that time he'd worked in the Deuces Wild for Dan Carney. After Carney had sold out to Brannigan, the new owner had started to introduce crooked games. The roulette wheel had been tampered with already; Brannigan had introduced a half dozen tinhorns who were nightly fleecing the miners.

MOST of the other professional gamblers had left Boulder City and the Deuces Wild when Brannigan took over. Haycraft had stayed, along with Brant and Starbright, because these three had operated in Boulder when half the structures were tents. Boulder City was their city.

The previous week Brannigan had ap-

proached Starbright with the suggestion that his take could be considerably larger if he did not permit his scruples to interfere with his game. Starbright had walked out of the Deuces Wild and gone to work in the rival Great Western gambling house. And because John Starbright had made ill-considered remarks about the Deuces Wild, his body had been found in a dark alley.

Sooner or later, George Haycraft realized, Brannigan would ask him to step inside the office, and put the same subtle suggestion to him. In recent weeks he had not been lucky at cards. Always he'd played a cold, calculating game, wooing Lady Luck with a certain ruthlessness which had gotten results. Now the cards were not coming his way, and he knew the reason why. The gods of the green table had turned away from a man who no longer received a lift when three aces and a pair of kings came his way, or when he filled a straight.

He had not been able to explain this even to himself, but Ed Brant, the sour philosopher of the keeno table, had put it in blunt, concise language.

"You're through, George," Brant had stated flatly. "You're washed up because you don't care whether you win. When a gambler gets that feeling he's finished."

Walking the streets at dawn with John Starbright, Haycraft had thought of that, wondering at it. For twenty-five years he'd worked the gambling tables, and then quite suddenly the zest had gone out of it. The money he'd won had never meant anything to him; he had never known a true professional gambler who had derived any real pleasure out of the proceeds of his game. It was the game itself; waiting for a card to turn up; watching the little ball spin; hearing men breathe painfully; seeing the joy, the despair in their eyes while the rest of their faces revealed nothing.

Bull Brannigan was saying now, "You better take the night off, Haycraft."

Haycraft set his empty glass back on the wood. He said quietly, "Thank you, Brannigan." Then he saw Adam Fleer standing by the side door, watching him, sucking his teeth, a yellow-faced man with the cold, lifeless blue eyes of a killer. Fleer had come to Boulder City with Brannigan. He had a narrow, feline face, a small, sharp nose. The skin was stretched tight across his skull, revealing every bone in the structure. As George Haycraft was a professional gambler, Fleer was a professional killer. Haycraft had sensed that at the first meeting with the thin man. It was in Fleer's eyes—the way he looked at his fellow men.

Haycraft started to walk toward the door, and Brannigan called after him.

"Stop in my office and see me tomorrow, Haycraft."

The gambler stiffened slightly, but there was no other indication that he realized the cards were being spread on the table now. He'd been expecting this talk with Brannigan, and he knew what the outcome would be. In his blunt, brutal way Bull Brannigan would ask him to dirty up his game in order that his take would be bigger. He could do this easily because he knew all the stunts used by the tin horns, and because of his reputation no man in Boulder would ever suspect that he was not on the level. For that reason Brannigan had spoken to Honest John Starbright also.

Haycraft paused, nodded slightly, and went out into the night. Adam Fleer gave him a cold stare as he passed by, and then Fleer looked in Brannigan's direction.

Haycraft paused out on the porch, smelling the cool night air, listening to the sounds. Boulder City's main street was ablaze with light. The half mile thoroughfare, the houses shoulder to shoulder with only an occasional narrow alley between them, contained over twenty saloons and four large gambling houses, the Deuces Wild being the largest. Two days before John Starbright had informed Haycraft privately that he'd learned Brannigan was buying in on the other three establishments, and that in another month or two the Bull would be the czar of gambling in Boulder.

Haycraft considered this fact now as he lighted up a slim, brown cigar. It meant that a professional had to work with Brannigan or he was out in the cold altogether. Brannigan's crooked games controlled the silver lode, and into Brannigan's huge maws would pour enough silver dollars to sink a ship.

Men moving past the Deuces Wild nodded to Haycraft pleasantly, and to several he touched his high beaver in acknowledgement. He'd made many friends in Boulder; he liked the town, and until the arrival of Brannigan he'd never given any thought

to leaving it. He knew now that if that became necessary he would not be happy. A man grew up with a town and it became part of him.

Stepping from the porch, he walked slowly south in the direction of Dugan's Alley and the back room of the Stallion Saloon where the blacksmith had stated Starbright's body had been taken. He picked his way carefully through the crowds, and several men who knew him intimately stared in surprise. It had been a good many years since George Haycraft had been away from his table during the height of business hours.

He entered the Stallion by the front door and he saw Sam O'Keefe, the owner, standing at one end of the bar alone. O'Keefe looked at him, nodded toward a door, and then shook his head in sympathy.

Haycraft went into the small room and closed the door behind him. A lamp stood on a table. There was a body on the floor, covered with a blanket. Haycraft closed his eyes and his jaws sagged. He looked suddenly very old as if the years he'd held back had come upon him in one fast swoop.

HE WAS still in the room five minutes later when a small man came in, hat in his hand, a sour expression on his long, bony face. The man had wispy brown hair and glum brown eyes. He said tersely,

"So it's come to this, George."

Haycraft stared at the flickering light in the lamp on the table. He said without emotion,

"Brannigan killed him, Ed."

Ed Brant nodded. "Will he do less to you, George!" he asked quietly. Haycraft didn't say anything, and Brant went on, "What about the boy?"

"I'll take the boy," Haycraft said. He'd thought about that on the way down. Starbright had a five year old son of whom he had been terribly fond. Haycraft had not seen much of him because the boy slept at night and a professional gambler slept in the day time. The mother, a dancer, had died six months after the child had been born, and Starbright had raised it. There were no other relations as far as Haycraft knew, and he was Starbright's closest friend.

"You'll take the boy," Brant said grimly, "and where will you go with him?"

"This is my town," Haycraft pointed out.

"In three months," Brant said, "it will be Bull Brannigan's town. I hear he wants to have a talk with you, and you know what that means. Eventually, there will be no room in Boulder for a professional gambler who does not work for Brannigan."

"Unless," Haycraft said, "Brannigan is stopped."

Brant stared at the body under the blanket. He said slowly, "Adam Fleer shot a man last night; Fleer shot and killed another man last Friday night. No one can reach Brannigan until he gets around Adam Fleer, and I wouldn't advise you to try matching guns with him. That's not your business, George."

"No," Haycraft admitted.

"You can't operate in this town," Brant said, "unless you work with Brannigan."

"What would you suggest?" Haycraft asked him.

"It's a large world," Brant said.

"I like Boulder City," George Haycraft murmured. He put on his hat and he went out. It was a five minute walk to the boarding house where Starbright had lived with his small son. Haycraft knocked on the door and waited.

A fat-faced woman bustled out, face red, hair straggling. He could see that she'd already heard the news about Starbright and she had been worrying. She said bitterly,

"I have four children of my own, Mr. Haycraft. I can't take on another. You'll have—"

"How much did Mr. Starbright owe you?" Haycraft asked her.

"He was paid up on his rent," the woman admitted.

Haycraft handed her ten dollars. He said, "Get the boy dressed." He left ten minutes later with the sleepy-eyed lad in his arms, wrapped in a blanket. He walked through the streets gravely, and men stopped to look at him. He went into the Sherman Hotel and up the narrow stairs to the second floor. The clerk at the desk watched him without a word.

The boy started to whimper a little, but he went immediately to sleep on Haycraft's bed after the gambler clumsily undressed him. The boy had black hair, almost blue-black, like his father. He had John Starbright's steady blue eyes. His mother had

been a good-looking woman, and the boy had her features also.

Haycraft placed a blanket over the boy and then walked across the room and sat down on a chair. He lighted a cigar and puffed on it thoughtfully, watching the boy's face, listening to his easy breathing. He got up and he walked to the bed, tucked the blanket a little closer, and then came back and sat down again.

Old memories began to penetrate the veneer he'd deliberately placed around his mind. Other nights he'd driven these thoughts away, but looking at the boy his mind drifted back to a small, white, New England schoolhouse, and a poor, young schoolmaster, new at his job, teaching two dozen small boys, taking his task very seriously.

A slim girl with golden hair moved across the picture, and then moved out again, taking with her a large portion of George Haycraft's heart when she married a local rich man's son. Now George Haycraft would have accepted that fact with the briefest of smiles, and a slight nod of the head, the way he acknowledged a better hand than his own in poker. Then it had torn him to pieces, ripped him from his moorings, and sent him reeling dazedly across a continent to hide behind the pale mask of the professional gambler in a boom silver town.

Only John Starbright, of all the friends and acquaintances Haycraft had in Boulder City, knew that at one time he'd been a country schoolmaster, and that he'd liked his work.

Walking over to a dresser against the wall, Haycraft opened one of the drawers and took out a gun. It was a Smith & Wesson .44. He broke the gun and examined the charges. Then he slipped the gun inside his waistband and buttoned his black coat over it. He was not quite sure why he was doing this because he'd never gone armed in Boulder City before. There were never any altercations at his table, every player sitting in with him knowing from the start that the game was fair.

He stood at the foot of the bed looking down at the boy for some time, and then he turned out the lamp, and left. It was past one o'clock when he reached the Deuces Wild again. A dozen kerosene flares lighted up the big front, and the barker, Harry Simms, stood in front of the big bat-wing doors, voice rising and falling monotonously as he proclaimed to the surging crowd on the boardwalk the virtues of the Deuces Wild, its games and its girls.

Simms, a hawk-faced man, stared at Haycraft as he moved by. Haycraft said,

"Good evening, Harry."

ADAM FLEER still lounged in his accustomed position near the side door, but Brannigan was not in sight. Fleer moistened his lips with his tongue when he saw Haycraft walk to his table and sit down. The table had been empty, but immediately several men headed for it and slid into the chairs.

Gravely, Haycraft placed the high beaver on the floor behind his chair, in far enough between the legs that it would not be kicked away. He lighted another cigar and then he picked up a fresh deck of cards one of the waiters placed in front of him. He broke the seal, slipped the deck from the box, and shuffled them idly. He heard a man say across the table,

"I feel lucky tonight, George."

He looked up then, over this man's shoulder, toward the red-carpeted staircase, and he saw Bull Brannigan coming down, bow-legged, huge arms swinging, the stub of cigar in his bull-dog face. Ed Brant stood on the landing up above Brannigan looking down, and Brant had a frown on his face as he looked straight into Haycraft's eyes.

Brannigan's reddish eyes paused for a moment on Haycraft, and then he lumbered past like a great bear. Very deliberately, Haycraft asked himself why he had come back tonight, and then he had his answer. He had to find out something. He had to know tonight.

His long white fingers manipulated the new cards with the usual dexterity. He did not speak much at the table, and that, too, was expected. There were four men sitting with him. He looked at their faces, seeing the greed, the avarice, and also the fear. He'd seen these things before, but never had they affected him. Tonight, it was different: tonight he was seeing all this for the first time, and it filled him with a strange disgust. It was as if he'd been having a bad dream and he'd just awakened.

He played through several hands and didn't win any of them. Luck was not with him tonight any more than it had been the past few weeks, but where before he had looked for good cards, and awaited the turn of fortune, tonight he did not care. And in that moment he knew that he was through as a professional gambler.

He played one more hand, and the dealer dealt him three aces. He stared at the cards for some moments in silence. There was a king of spades, and an eight of hearts. He realized that he was supposed to hold the king and hope to fill the hand with another king. He continued to stare at the cards until one of the men said curiously,

"Mr. Haycraft?"

Quietly, Haycraft folded the five pasteboards together, slid them across the table and said softly, "Gentlemen, I'm out."

They thought he meant that he held no cards in his hand good enough to keep him in this particular game, but when he reached for the high beaver and set it on his head, they were watching him strangely. He bowed to them and got up and walked toward the bar.

Looking into the bar mirror, he saw another strange thing—something which was against all the rules of poker. One of the players at his table reached forward and picked up the cards Haycraft had discarded. He stared at them blankly and then let them slip through his fingers. Haycraft saw him whisper something to the man at his left, and then they both stared toward the bar.

Happy Elson set a bottle and a glass before Haycraft. He went across the bar in front of the gambler with his rag, and said,

"Nice crowd tonight, George."

Haycraft nodded. He had his second drink of the evening alone, and it was still three hours before he ordinarily had his first with John Starbright. He set the glass down on the bar, and then a strangely husky voice, not a coarse one, said at his elbow,

"Have a drink with me in my office, Haycraft."

George Haycraft touched a silk handkerchief to his thin lips, and looked into Bull Brannigan's pig-like eyes. He nodded. He watched Brannigan walk away, his check coat skin-tight across his tremendous shoulders. Brannigan went through the side door where Fleer was standing, and Haycraft followed him. He heard Fleer sucking his teeth as he went past the killer.

Brannigan's office was a large room, tastefully furnished. There was a mahogany desk, leather-covered chairs, a lamp with a beautifully-wrought China base on the table. Brannigan turned up the lamp and sat down behind the desk. He opened a drawer and took out a box of cigars, extracted one, and pushed the box across to Haycraft.

The gambler shook his head. He sat down in one of the soft leather chairs, and then he noticed that Adam Fleer was in the room, standing back against the shadows along the wall near the door. He had not heard Fleer come in.

Brannigan bit off the end of his cigar, lighted it, and said softly,

"Our take has not been so good from you of late, Haycraft."

Haycraft shrugged. "Poker," he observed, "is a game of fortune."

"Need it be?" Brannigan asked him slyly. His belly shook as if this were a huge joke. "Need it be, Haycraft?" he asked again, cigar wobbling in his loose mouth.

"That depends," Haycraft said, "upon the man."

"Of course—of course," Brannigan agreed. He took the cigar from his mouth and studied it thoughtfully. "And what kind of man might you be, Mr. Haycraft?" he asked.

"You knew," Haycraft said, "when you took over the Deuces Wild. I believe Dan Carney told you."

"So now Carney is gone," Brannigan smiled.

"And John Starbright is gone also," Haycraft added. "What could have happened to Mr. Starbright?" He turned his head then and looked straight at Adam Fleer in the shadows.

"BEFORE we consider Mr. Starbright," Brannigan purred, "we'll consider the case of Mr. Haycraft. Your take has been very small in recent weeks, Mr. Haycraft. Is there anything you can do about it?"

"I can do two things," Haycraft said easily. "I can play your dirty game, Brannigan, or I can do what Starbright did."

"And Starbright is dead," Brannigan smiled. "You have thought of that?"

George Haycraft nodded, and in that moment he saw the future of Boulder City. Brannigan was settling himself like a huge frog in this pond. He was already beginning to expand, and in a short while he would control all the gambling of the town. All the riff-raff of the frontier would flow in the direction of Boulder City because Brannigan would see to it that the law did not interfere with him. He would draw around him the murderous element of every tough boom town and Boulder would become bad man's territory. In the course of time the decent people would get out, or be forced out, and then a devil would reign on the earth.

Haycraft said, "I have thought of that, Brannigan."

"You know why Starbright is dead?" Bull Brannigan persisted, eyes narrow, the cigar stiff as a ramrod in his mouth.

"I know why," Haycraft said, "and I know *who* killed him." He was thinking of Boulder City—a town he had liked.

"You know who killed him," Brannigan repeated. He flashed a quick look at Adam Fleer by the door, but the thin man had not moved. "It is too bad," Brannigan said, "that you are the only one who knows this."

"John Starbright had friends in Boulder," Haycraft went on coolly, "many friends, and they did not like finding him stabbed in the back. If it were known who had him killed that man might swing before morning. There are still honest men in this town."

Bull Brannigan leaned back in his chair and flicked gray ash on the blue Brussels carpet. He said softly,

"So you know who killed Starbright."

"I can prove who killed Starbright," Haycraft corrected. He sat there in the leather chair and he watched Bull Brannigan flash another accusing look in Fleer's direction.

Fleer spoke for the first time, a rasping voice with a peculiar New England twang to it.

"Nobody saw me knife that gambler chap, Bull."

"Shut up," Brannigan snapped. He said to Haycraft, "You'll find out, my friend, that I don't take bluffs or threats from any man on earth."

Haycraft smiled at him complacently. "The night before Starbright died," he said, "we had a drink together. You will remember that I was Starbright's best friend. He gave me a letter which I was not to open until after his death."

Bull Brannigan came forward a little, jaw thrust out. He took the cigar from his mouth but he didn't say anything.

"I read that letter tonight," Haycraft went on without emotion. "In it Starbright stated that he expected to be killed. He tells why that would happen and who would be behind it. He mentions your name, Brannigan, and Fleer's."

Bull Brannigan smiled coldly. "Dead man's testimony," he said. "That's proof of nothing."

Haycraft nodded. "I admit," he stated, "that in a court of law the letter would not hold up without further proof. However, Starbright had many friends in this town, Brannigan, and you are a comparative newcomer. What would happen if Starbright's friends were to see that letter tonight? There are fifty men in Boulder who could recognize his handwriting."

Bull Brannigan placed the half-smoked cigar in an ash tray. He said softly, "Haycraft, you're walking on dangerous ground."

"In thirty minutes," the gambler went on, "there would be a lynch crowd pounding at your door, Brannigan, and a lynch crowd does not wait to hear all of the testimony. I believe Starbright's would be sufficient."

He heard Adam Fleer come away from the wall then, and he had been expecting that. He said softly, without looking around,

"I would be a fool to carry that letter around, Brannigan. Call your dog off."

"Adam," Brannigan grated. "Get the hell out of here."

The door closed softly behind the gunman. Brannigan said quietly,

"If you have such a letter, why in hell didn't you show it around before this? You were Starbright's friend."

Haycraft shrugged. "A letter like that might be more valuable," he stated, "concealed." He stood up and reached for the high beaver which he'd placed on the floor beside the chair.

"How much do you want for that letter?" Brannigan snapped.

Haycraft smiled. "It is not for sale," he said.

Exasperated, Brannigan exploded, "Then what in hell do you figure on doing with it?"

Haycraft shoved both hands deep in his pockets. He said coolly, "Walk easy in this town, Brannigan. It's not yours."

He went out the door then, back into the gambling room, leaving Brannigan staring after him grimly. He went past the bar and he saw Ed Brant coming toward him from the stairway. Brant said quickly,

"You're through?"

"That's right," Haycraft nodded.

Brant grimaced. He said quietly, "Damn it, keep your mouth shut, George. You know what Starbright got for talking."

"Starbright," Haycraft said, "is still talking, Ed." He looked around for Adam Fleer, didn't see him, and went out through the front door, knowing that Fleer would be following him shortly. He gave Brannigan five minutes to decide that there was no such letter, and another minute to pass his instructions on to Fleer.

HE WENT down the main street through the crowds, walking in the general direction of his hotel. He did not turn around to look for Fleer because he realized he would not see the man, but Fleer was coming, driven by a stupid, insatiate desire to kill.

Haycraft stopped in at a cigar store to purchase a few cigars. He came out and continued on his way toward the hotel. Crossing the street at the next intersection, he went up the porch steps and into the hotel lobby.

Nodding to the clerk, he went up the flight of stairs and into his room, locking the door behind him. He looked down at the sleeping boy for a moment after lighting the lamp, and then crossing to the window, he opened it and stepped out on a shed roof, carefully closing the window behind him.

The shed roof was at the rear of the hotel, and there was a small, unkempt backyard here. Haycraft could hear the clatter of dishes from the hotel kitchen. At two o'clock in the morning the men of Boulder City were still having meals served to them in the hotel dining room. Oftentimes Haycraft himself, with Starbright, had stopped in for breakfast before going to bed.

Walking to the far end of the roof, he knelt down, eased his body over the tin drain gutter, and lowered himself until he was able to grasp the supporting pillar. He slid to the ground just outside a patch of light from the kitchen window.

He picked his way across the small yard, stumbling a little over the refuse strewn there. He climbed carefully over a low fence and found himself in an alley. At the other end of the alley the crowds were surging by on the main street.

He walked down the back street to the next alley and then turned down toward the main street. Pausing at the corner here, he looked up in the direction of the hotel on the next block. In an alley directly across from the hotel he thought he saw a vague shadow waiting. It was a narrow alley, less than ten feet across, between a warehouse and a dry goods store, both of which were closed.

Haycraft waited his chance, and when the crowds were thickest in the street, stepped out of his own alley and across the street. He walked rapidly down the side street, turned south one block, and came up on the rear of the alley in which he'd seen the shadow.

He hesitated here and then stepped into

the darkness. Leaning against the brick wall of the warehouse, he took the Smith & Wesson from his belt and spun the cylinder once. He had the gun in his right hand as he edged down the alley, hugging the warehouse wall, taking one short step at a time, feeling his way with the tip of his boot before placing his foot down, making sure that he didn't kick over a tin can or stumble.

He saw the shadow leaning against the wall at the other end of the alley, and he wondered what was going on in Adam Fleer's warped mind. Fleer had been sent out to kill a man, and now he was pondering over this question, wondering how he would go about it. Fleer preferred the darkness, hating the light as a rat does. He did not relish entering the hotel now where he would be seen, and he was waiting, wondering whether the gambler would come down again.

Haycraft stopped when he was within fifteen feet of his man. He held the Smith & Wesson tightly in his right hand, and then he took several more cautious steps. He said softly,

"Looking for me, Adam?"

There was a muttered exclamation—more the sound an animal makes than a man. Haycraft steadied his gun hand against his side. Fleer leaped toward the other side of the alley, and while he was jumping, orange flame seemed to spurt from his body.

Haycraft heard the slug from Fleer's gun bounce off the stone wall, and ricochet down the alley. He fired twice, aiming at Fleer's waist, and he heard the man gasp as his body struck the wooden wall of the dry goods store. When Fleer slid to the ground, Haycraft turned and walked quickly toward the other end of the alley. He could hear men shouting behind him, but he kept going, not running, but walking fast, reloading the gun as he did so.

He didn't look back as he emerged from the alley and turned south along the side street. This was a residential district, and along here the sound of several shots in the night caused no disturbance. Not a window opened in the wooden buildings as Haycraft walked down the boardwalk in the direction of the Deuces Wild gambling house.

Swinging down another side street, he walked out onto the main street, merging with the crowd. He saw some men standing on the walk, staring up in the direction of the alley opposite the hotel. A small crowd had gathered there.

Haycraft lighted a cigar and strolled leisurely down the street. He stopped in at the telegraph office, secured an envelope, and picked up several telegraph sheets. Walking toward the door, he folded these sheets up and placed them inside the envelope, putting it in his coat pocket.

He entered the Deuces Wild by the front door, and as he went by the worn barker, Harry Simms, he slipped a cigar into the man's coat pocket.

"Thanks, George," Simms called after him, and then his hoarse voice lifted again,

"Come one—come all! Gents, every sporting game known to civilized man—"

Haycraft looked around the big room for Bull Brannigan and did not see him. Ed Brant was coming down the stairs, the perspiration showing on his pale face. When the keeno man sighted him, he came over hurriedly, shaking his head. He led Haycraft toward the bar and called hurriedly for a bottle.

"I heard those shots up the street," the smaller man was muttering. "I didn't see Fleer in the house."

"You'll never see Fleer again," Haycraft said. He had his third drink of the evening, clapped the astounded Brant on the back, and walked directly toward Brannigan's office.

THE DOOR was open and he stepped inside, closing it quickly behind him. Brannigan was sitting behind his desk. The

lamp was turned down low, illuminating only the desk. Peering into the darkness where Haycraft stood, Brannigan reached a hairy paw toward the lamp and turned up the light.

He said softly, "So you came back."

Standing near the door, Haycraft noticed for the first time a slight draft around his feet, indicating that another door or window in the room was open. He noticed the door then, leading in from the street, a door off to Brannigan's right. It was ajar.

Haycraft took the envelope from his pocket and flipped it forward. It fell on the carpet halfway between himself and Brannigan. The big man's eyes dropped toward it for one second and then lifted to Haycraft's face again.

"You sent your dog after that letter," Haycraft said. "There it is, Brannigan. Crawl for it."

He had his coat open and he came away from the door, giving himself room to work his arms. Brannigan had both hands flat on the top of the desk. He was leaning forward a little, and then Haycraft saw the grin spread across his wide, coarse face. Brannigan said softly,

"There's your man again, Adam."

Haycraft heard the slight noise to his left, from a dark corner of the room. He whirled, ripping the Smith & Wesson from his belt. He saw Fleer huddled there on the floor like a wounded animal, clutching his bleeding stomach with his left hand, a Colt gun in his right, the muzzle just coming up in the direction of the gambler's heart.

Adam Fleer was a dying man, the life blood already drained from his white, pinched face. His eyes were sunken; he looked more like a death's head than ever. Fleer had a matter of minutes to live, and yet in the short space of time allotted to him on this earth, he had staggered, crawled, dragged himself like a stricken wolf, back to Brannigan to die in this dark corner in sight of the man who hired and who despised him.

Fleer's gun roared, the sound filling the room. Haycraft took the slug in the body, and it numbed his left side. It jerked him around, knocking him back along the wall, away from the door.

He fired once at Fleer as he started to go down, and he saw the killer's head jerk back as if it had been knocked loose from its hinges. Fleer rolled over on his face.

Haycraft, dropping to the floor in a sitting position, shifted the gun toward Brannigan just as the big man was bringing a big Navy out of the open desk drawer in front of him.

Haycraft's first slug struck Brannigan in the chest, his second and third hit inches away from the first in that massive frame. Bull Brannigan started to come out of the chair, leaning forward over the desk, his mouth open. He started to point the Navy in Haycraft's direction, but the gun was wobbling.

There were two more bullets in the chambers of the Smith & Wesson. Haycraft put both of them into Brannigan's chest and then stared at the man in amazement, the empty gun drooping in his right hand as he sat on the floor.

Bull Brannigan was still coming out of the chair, coming to his full height with five bullets in him, every one of them, Haycraft knew, a mortal wound.

Very slowly, Brannigan's weight leaned over the desk. He reached to snatch at something in the air, missed it, and fell forward, his tremendous body moving the heavy desk a full foot ahead. He lay there with Haycraft watching him, feeling now the pain in his side where Fleer's bullet had gone home.

He lay on a cot in one of the other rooms of the Deuces Wild fifteen minutes later after Doc Brown had extracted the piece of lead and assured him that he would not die. Ed Brant was saying to him excitedly,

"Both of them had guns in their hands, George. It was self-defense."

George Haycraft looked up at the ceiling. "And what now, Ed?" he asked softly. He was thinking of the three aces and the king he'd thrown away this night.

"That's the question," Brant murmured wisely. "And what now, George?"

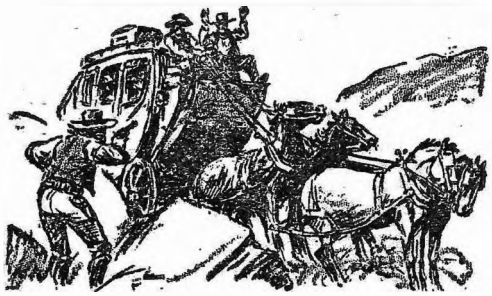
A queer smile stole across Haycraft's thin face. He said, "Ed, this town needs a schoolhouse."

Brant's eyes widened. He nodded. "For the boy," he said, "for John Starbright's boy."

"For Starbright's boy," Haycraft said softly, "and for myself."

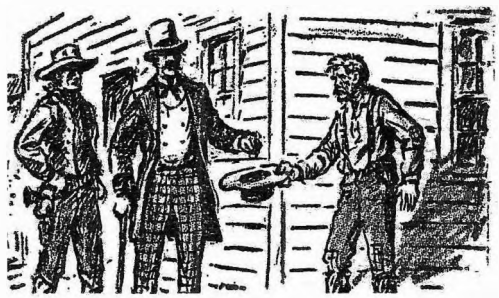
FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



In 1873, Kid Gartner, after blazing a short but brilliant first act in his famous, bloody career, was sent up for a ten year term in a California prison. Determined to reform, the Kid put up with this for two years, hoping by good behavior to shorten his term. Then, impatient, he hacked his way out of jail and took to the hills where he laid plans to rob the golddust-laden stage coaches coming out of Sonora. His first holdup was a model one—he got away without a bullet being fired and filched a strongbox containing $10,000. Idly, after counting his treasure, he went through the mail that had been on the coach—and in one of the sacks, bound for the prison, he found his long-awaited pardon from the governor!

Will Adams, panhandler extraordinary, had been standing, hat outstretched, on the same corner of Burensville, New Mexico, for so long that by 1869 he had become part of the scenery. Came the time, however, when Burensville itself was holding its hat out, seeking funds for a sorely needed schoolhouse, and the pickings were poor. On the morning it was announced that the fund drive had failed, Willie presented himself at City Hall. "How much ye need?" he asked. "Sorry, Pop," the mayor answered wearily, "It's too late for two-bit pieces now. We need about $12,000!" "Is that all?" said the panhandler, and plunging his hand beneath his ragged red undershirt, the town's perennial beggar pulled out twelve thousand dollar bills and handed them across the desk.



One of the few gallant gestures ever made by Montana's bad boy, Pike Landusky, occurred in 1885 when this touchy-tempered giant was traveling by stagecoach toward the town that bore his name. The grizzled driver was getting on in years and the plodding pace he set was much too slow for Pike. Seizing the whip, he brought it down on the horses with a vicious slash. The animals plunged, broke the traces, and took off. Pike's only traveling companion, a prim lady schoolteacher, reproached him bitterly and acidly pointed out the results of his evil temper. Pike, crushed, apologized handsomely, swung down from the coach and, setting the broken shafts across his own ox-like shoulders, hauled the vehicle the rest of the way to town.

The history of Western jurisprudence is full of strange accusations and stranger trials, but it was only at Sutter's Creek, at the height of the goldrush, that a goat was indicted and tried for grand larceny. Two prospectors discovered gold about 35 miles southwest of the Creek diggings. Unfamiliar with the countryside, they drew a careful map of their discovery, then lay down and went to sleep. They awoke to find the map gone and a bearded billy goat looking down at them with an "I've-just-had-dessert" expression. Furious, they dragged the smelly animal to court. But the goat's owner won a "Not guilty!" decision when he solemnly argued, "The stolen goods was never seen or found in the defendant's possession!" And as far as is known, the mine remains a secret, except to the goat, to this day.

GUN-BOSS OF WIPE-OUT RANGE

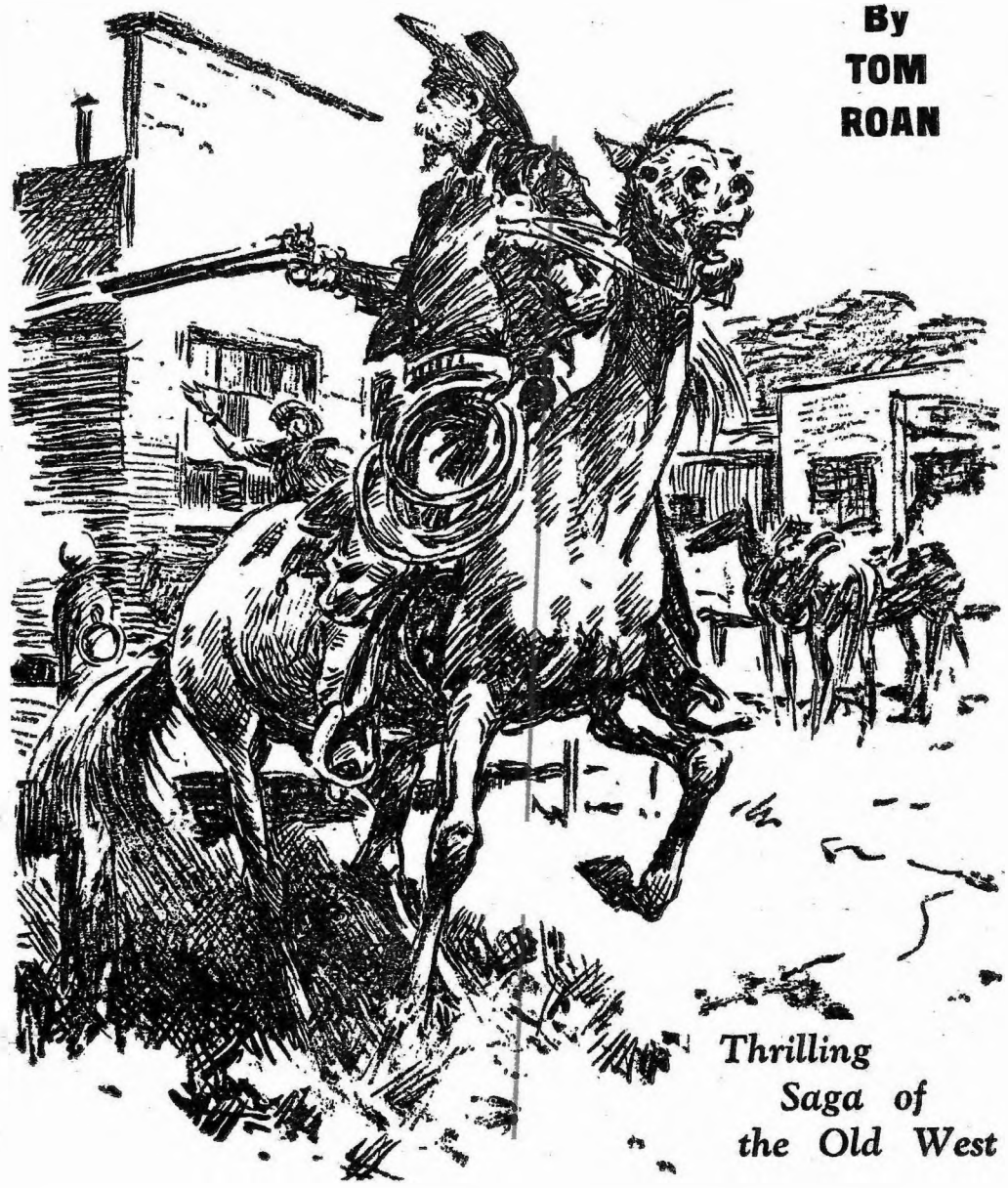
Dying there on the sidewalk, it was all he could do to steady his Colt and thumb the hammer.

Chapter I

DEATH RIDES IN THREES

IT WAS nice in Ramrod; a good, quiet Saturday morning in early fall. Old Sheriff Bat Bailey sat in his rickety chair on the stone jail porch at the head of the street and dozed contentedly in the warm sunlight. In the afternoon it would be something else: Cattlemen and cowpunchers pouring in; the fall round-up just about over and Ramrod full of cattle-buyers with their fat check books.

Bat Bailey was even hoping for a quiet afternoon and night of it



By
TOM
ROAN

Thrilling Saga of the Old West

Waist-down paralysis be damned! If, by tooling his devil's-rig on a hell-for-sure dash through avalanching Suicide Gorge, white-haired Frank Ringo could grind Jesse Grindell into an outlaw's sudden grave—he'd be plumb glad to share it with him!

until he heard the clatter and bang of hoofs sweeping down the pine-laned old trail, past the jail and on up the first abrupt slope to the Silver Bugles north of town. Seconds later a rider was appearing, a little, duck-legged old man in patched and battered gray mounted on a long white horse that looked as high as the moon and as lean as a ghost.

This was trouble. It was always trouble when old Parley Pool, cowboss of the Boxed K, rode into town. Since a fight last fall in the Red Mule Parley Pool had been barred from coming to town at all and ordered to do his drinking and hell-lifting in Timberline, a little two-bit village high in the Devil Weed Range northwest of Ramrod. The cowboss was like most small, duck-legged fellows, inclined to know it all, to talk fast and think about it afterwards. One glance at him now was enough to tell Bat Bailey that he was as mad as a hornet about something.

"Hold 'er, Parley!" Bailey brought his old chair down with a bang and flung up his left hand as he yelled. "What'n hell's the hurry!"

But there was no answer, only a leer on Pool's white face as he shot on down the street, a long Colt at either hip and a shotgun lying across his lap. His eyes were on the few horses at the hitchracks. They showed that there was less than a dozen cowboys in town.

And then, even as Bailey planted his red-booted feet solidly on the floor and stepped to the edge of the porch, he saw the trouble coming.

Young Johnny Ringo of the Boxed Circle R was just coming out of the bank. The first customer of the morning, in town to deposit some big cattle-buyer's check. Ringo still had his father's dog-eared old bank book and a sheaf of papers in his hands. He stopped as if startled, tall, lean and fair-haired like the rest of the Ringos, when he saw the old hellion on the white ghost of a horse sweeping toward him. In a second Pool had snatched to a halt, setting his horse back on his haunches, the dust a dirty-gray cloud swirling around him.

And then—with Johnny Ringo probably never to know why—the heavy shotgun was roaring on Parley's lap. The first charge loud enough to shake every window along the street and the second charge came right behind the first a one-two blast of fire and smoke that rocked young Ringo back on his heels, bank book and papers flying from his hands, his face flashing white as he slumped on the sidewalk. Blood squirted from him in what appeared to be twenty places.

After as good as having shot his man into ribbons with the first double blast, Parley Pool was not yet satisfied. His horse was lunging like a fool, dust and gunsmoke thick around him, he broke the shotgun, throwing out the two empty shells and ramming in another pair of loads.

And then the fight in Johnny Ringo showed its teeth. Dying there on the sidewalk, he had managed somehow to twist half-over to his left side. A long, silver-plated .45 came swinging up. It was all done in a flash, and yet it seemed that young Ringo had all he could do to steady his Colt and thumb the hammer, the weapon roaring back its yard-long ribbon of fire just as Parley Pool double-fired his heavy shotgun again. This time both charges missed his target by all of six feet and shattered a window in the bank, bringing howls of terror and yells from inside.

But Parley Pool was hit. He slumped forward over the saddle horn of his plunging horse, the shotgun slipping from his hands and spattering down in the dust. Bailey, now off the porch and running toward them, was still about eighty yards away when Pool's old horse wheeled, heading back up the street, snorting and pitching wildly. When the horse was less than six yards away, Bailey saw that Pool was coming down, spilling from the saddle, the horse coming on, stirrups flapping and popping.

"Yuh damn ol' fool!" wailed the sheriff as he reached the thing in the dust and saw the blood streaking either side of the small, mean mouth. "That was murder in cold blood!"

"It was worse'n—murder this mornin' just atter sunrise." Pool was able to force a little grin when the sheriff rolled him over on his back. People were pouring from everywhere now, a crowd quickly forming around the already dead young Ringo down there on the sidewalk. "I found Marv Kelly. Up in the foothills of—the Devil Weeds." He rolled his blue and dying eyes toward the northwest. "Wropped in a

yearlin' hide. Been gone—a week. Buzzards showed me where to find 'im, circlin' in the air like they do. Marv had come up on somebody runnin' our Boxed K into a Boxed Circle R. The skint yearlin' was there on the ground, brandin' iron an' where a fire had been close by. He'd caught some Ringo thief stealin' that yearlin'—an'—an' maybe he'd been in that damn hide all—the time he was gone. Dead, life crushed outa 'im."

"An' yuh took it on yoreself to ride on into town," snarled the sheriff, "an' start a Kelly-Ringo war. Damn yuh, Parley Pool, yuh was always one of them fast-talkin', high-headed little know-it-alls! If yuh wasn't dyin' with that ball through your guts I'd stomp that hatchet face of yores into the ground!"

BUT there was no use in talking to a dead man. While the crowd surged up, men pale-faced and muttering, Parley Pool, had made a couple of spasmodic twists and kicks. Like young Ringo he was dead now, and no one could possibly know where it would end. This would be war, all-out war. As the old sheriff straightened, hands on his back, long, gaunt figure stretching, he heard another clatter of fast hoofs. A glance up the street showed him a cloud of riders pouring down the crooked trail that cut in from the hills and passed the west side of the jail.

Ringo riders coming in to learn that Johnny was dead!

"An' yonder's more trouble, Bat!" Lean, thinly bearded old Sam Tarr, a part-time deputy when Bailey was in need of one, was pointing up the trail on the east side of the jail. "Looks to me like ol' Jude Kelly an' six of his long-headed cowpunchers behind 'im. Comin' I reckon to see what this fool Parley Pool's done!"

It was Jude Kelly, all right. A big, square-as-a-house figure on a tall, high-headed roan, his men strung out behind him. But as Kelly was spurring his horse from the rim another rider appeared: an exceptionally tall girl on a short-coupled buckskin, her dark-red hair loose and bannering in the wind, her legs bare and white as they reached from the saddle to the stirrups. She wore a light blue wrapper around her.

"That's Kitty," nodded the sheriff. "Some sense in that bunch, anyhow, with her along. Musta just bounced out of the kitchen an' grabbed her hoss. Look at 'er now! There's a gal for yuh, Sam!"

Whipping with her long reins, the girl had managed to come up alongside of her father's roan and just to his right. Long arm shooting out, her left hand closed on the roan's cheek-strap. Kelly yelled something and lifted his quirt as if about to strike her. Before anything like that could happen the girl swung to the right, the roan following her buckskin. A blot of dust hid them as the trailing riders started ganging up and halting behind.

"Yup, that's that Kitty Kelly!" Something like a smile of relief moved the old sheriff's lips. "Gawd bless 'er! Now if Link Ringo's half as sensible," he glanced at the gang pouring in from off the Devil Weed, a rangy, fair-haired man in shining black riding in the lead on a tall, half-outlaw black horse, "maybe we can all expect to have a little common hoss-sense in this mess."

"Only it ain't gonna keep down that Kelly-Ringo war," intoned the old part-time deputy, giving his gunbelt an upward hitch. "Been too long acomin' an' in the makin', Bat. Better go try to stop Link Ringo quick as yuh can. He's one of them quiet ones, an' the quiet ones are allus plain damn fools once yuh rile 'em just right. He'd better not see his brother Johnny lyin' there like that. Look at Kitty!"

Kitty Kelly had somehow managed to unhorse her bull-chested, hard-swearing father up there on the slope. A silver-plated six-shooter had come into her hand from somewhere. Now the weapon was covering both the red-faced Kelly and the ganged up cowboys beyond him, the girl backing her buckskin down the slope.

The cowboys were keeping their distance, two of them wheeling and taking off after Kelly's wall-eyed roan, a crazy brute at best that had turned, gone back up the slope and headed for the Boxed K a dozen miles away. But Jude Kelly was not stopping for anybody or anything. Limping as if his right ankle had been sprained in his ungainly fall, clothing covered with dust, he was coming on, the girl still backing her buckskin and threatening with the six-shooter.

"An' Jude knows she won't outright

shoot her own daddy," growled the sheriff. "He's just a thick-headed damn Irishman, not to be turned once he sets that one-track mind. But look! Damned if she ain't gonna rope the son-of-a-gun!"

The girl's rope was up, a long loop going forward, Kelly cursing like a man gone mad. His arms and hands tried to fight off the flying circle settling around him, but the girl's loop was too large for that. It completely swallowed the man, struck the ground, then was whipped up. In a flash it had tightened around his knees. In another Jude Kelly was down, his big arms and hands still fighting, getting himself into more and more trouble.

The rope was like a snake; a flying, looping thing, one lightning half-hitch following another. It slapped around Kelly's beating arms and hands, and in a matter of seconds, rope shortening at every slapping hitch, he was like a big bumblebee caught in a strong spider web. He was down now and in a knot completely and absolutely hog-tied without a hand being laid upon him.

"An' there comes in Buck Snoutt to he'p 'im!" grunted old Sam Tarr. "Look at the damn fool! He'd jump off a cliff if Jude said jump!"

A long, lean man with sickly-red hair, bucked teeth and a hatchet face, Snoutt had been one of the two men who had wheeled to catch Kelly's roan. A little, dish-faced cowboy now had the roan's reins, and Snoutt was buck-jumping forward on a mean bay, going straight to the rescue of his boss in spite of the girl waving her six-shooter again.

The shot came then, one flashing report up there from the girl's right hand, and Buck Snoutt's mean bay lunged to a halt, reared wildly and pitched over on his side, pinning the not-too-bright Snoutt's left leg to the ground.

"ONE way to stop a fool!" nodded the sheriff. "An' she took it by shootin' that loco bronc from under 'im! By Gawd, Sam, there's some wimmin yuh just ain't gonna beat. Here comes Link Ringo!"

Ringo pulled up quietly, a dozen feet away, the eleven men behind him halting and staring, peaceful fellows until something roused them into a fighting mood. Link Ringo stared silently for a moment, eyes first on the dead Pool, then at tl crowd moving away with the body of Joh ny from in front of the bank. Only fo years older than his brother, Link was o a man could talk to, and Bat Bailey w soon beside him, reaching up to clamp gnarled hand on his left knee.

"Swing down, Link," he ordered, gentl "There's been a little bit of trouble, but expect yuh to use yore head. If yuh let fly off like a fool, then there's gonna more trouble. Kitty's takin' care of h end of it, like the real gal she is—like t real gal yuh know. Think of her befo yuh make a move."

"Isn't that Johnny they're carryin across the street?" Ringo's voice was quie "Looks like he's hurt."

"Johnny's dead, I reckon, Link."

"Dead!"

"Wait now, Link!" The old hand tigh ened on the knee. "Look up yonder an' s what Kitty's doin'! She's holdin' her hea holdin' her own crowd. Somethin' bad happened, damn bad, an' this fool Parl Pool had to go an' make it worse. H killed Johnny, an', by Gawd, Johnny kill him as he was lyin' there dyin'."

"But—but why!" Link Ringo's face w ghost white now. "Johnny never had a trouble with anybody beyond rustlers!"

"Moses didn't have a hell of a lot eithe they tell me," scowled the sheriff. "He w just tryin' to he'p folks, they say. Come o up to the jail with me. Somethin' tells m Kitty's gonna be here damn quick, an' you've got the sense of the hind-end of polecat yuh know yuh can talk sense to he Look what she's doin' up there!"

The girl on the slope seemed to alread have her situation in hand. Buck Snou was still pinned under his dead horse. Jud Kelly was being reluctantly lifted by thre cowboys and piled across the saddle of h roan, so mad now he was grinding o oaths strong enough to start hair burnin

Six-shooter still busy, Kitty Kelly w taking the belts and guns of the others an hanging them all on her own saddle. Whe she turned back to Buck Snoutt he twiste over on his side and clawed for a six-shoo er at his right hip. Instantly the girl's si gun flashed fire. Bits of leather flew fro Snoutt's long holster and a yell of fear can from him that could be heard all the wa down in town.

"Dammit, she's gonna fool 'round an' kill somebody yit!"

"Then keep yore hand 'way from that gun!" bawled back the dish-faced cowboy who had helped catch the roan. "If yuh shoved a gun on her the rest of us would stomp yore guts out all over the side of this hill!"

"Come on, Link." The tall Ringo had swung down. Gently but firmly, the sheriff had taken him by the arm. "Sam Tarr'll take care of this for just now. Yuh can see for yoreself that Kitty's turned her wolf pack back for home up there. Yep, an' here she comes, aheadin' straight for yuh an' me. We'll meet her at the jail."

"But I want to see Johnny!" Ringo started to pull away, but the old hand tightened. "I want—"

"Whatever yuh want," frowned the sheriff, "can wait, Link. Right now, yuh damn fool, I'm atryin' to save yuh a whole hell of a lot of misery. Kitty, too! An' I'll get help from her, yuh wait an' see."

But even up at the jail, in the dingy old office, it looked hopeless. Link Ringo had spoken only a few words to his riders, and they had moved on, scattering, each cowboy knowing that this was to be an out and out armistice, that they were to do nothing and say no word for the time being unless forced into it.

Kitty Kelly swung up in front of the porch on her buckskin, her saddle loaded with six-shooters, belts and rifles. Dropping quickly, she was on the steps, then the porch, halting for a moment in the doorway, the blue wrapper now clinging tightly and held in place by her own gun-belt.

Link Ringo looked like a man who had been hit over the head with a club and was not yet out of the daze. His lips and face were white, a strange lack of life in his eyes, but there was one spark of brightness in them now. As the pale lips moved, showing some hint of a smile, a touch of color came back to them. But his voice was deep and seemed far away as he removed his big hat; something he had been doing for more than five years each time he came face to face with this tall, strikingly pretty girl with the soft, green-gray eyes.

"Good morning, Kitty."

"Hello, Link,—and Uncle Bat." Since childhood she had called Bailey that. Her voice seemed heavy, as if dragging under some tremendous weight. "It looks like we —have trouble on our hands."

"Set down, Kitty." The sheriff waved his left hand to an old overstuffed leather chair at the end of the desk. "Yuh set there, Link." He nodded to a straight-back across the desk from him. "Parley Pool lived long enough atter Johnny had ripped a ball through his belly, to tell me somethin' about this."

"So Parley's dead." Kitty's was a simple statement, yet one not without a faint hint of relief. She leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes for a moment. "Did he hurt Johnny?"

"Killed 'im," nodded the sheriff, grimly. "Just whooshed into town like the damn fool he allus is. Johnny was acomin' outa the bank. Parley sawed up short, maybe didn't say a word, an' let fly with that hell-fired shotgun he carried so much. Johnny went down. Somehow he got his gun out. Yuh might know the rest These Ringos," he glanced at Link with a frown, "somehow can't seem to miss when they let lead fly. Wanta cup of coffee, both of yuh? I'd made

a pot just 'fore this thing happened. It's still hot back yonder on the stove in the cell where I cook."

Chapter II

BUSHWHACKERS!

THEY both nodded, and it was his chance to leave them alone for a few minutes. That was exactly what he wanted; the one reason he had brought Link Ringo up to the jail, knowing that Kitty would come. Everybody in the country knew that Link Ringo had been in love with Kitty Kelly since childhood. They had gone to school together in the little log school house high up on Devil Weed Range. Both had finally gone away for a little better schooling, Kitty down to Wyoming, Link to an uncle in Texas. People had said that something had brought them back too soon, neither being able to stay far away from the other long at a time. Might have been married three or four years ago if it had not been for Jude Kelly.

Jude was a damn' fool! Everybody knew what to expect of him and his thick, one-track brain! Jude had gone east with trainloads of cattle out of Forty Mile, the railroad town down the valley, and he had seen things back there. After each trip he came back to Ramrod talking about wanting to sell out the Boxed K, lock and stock, and take his wife, his daughter and son east or to California, Arizona or some other fool foreign place. Montana no longer was good enough for him and his big ideas! And Marvin Kelly had backed him, having made a few trips himself. The bright lights had him, too. However Montana was still good enough for Kitty. And a cowboy who would one day be a cowman, not a damn sofa-lizard, was her choice as a real man.

It had been just after Marv Kelly's last fall trip, all the way to Chicago nearly a year ago, that real trouble had started blooming. Cows and horses had started disappearing, the Boxed K complaining as well as a lot of the small-fry cattlemen. Such things were old in any cattle country, and Bat Bailey had put little stock in the tales. Cows and horses had their own little tricks of sneaking away and hiding, getting as far from man as possible. Sometimes a bunch was gone for months before a cowboy stumbled upon them in some well-watered and grassy canyon or gorge. After such happenings talk ceased except for one cowman ribbing another for thinking there were rustlers at work among his herds, and for not knowing his own rangelands.

Marv Kelly had been one of the worst ribbers, often pushing it far enough to start fights, especially when loaded to the gills in the Red Mule. But that had always been like Marv, carrying things too far, riding people until they could stand no more of it. The trips away with his father's cattle trains had not helped him—had made him a danged sight worse, if Bat Bailey knew his own nose from the seat of his pants!

And for a year now or close to it, the Boxed K had done most of the squawking. When men had tried to rib Marv, or even Jude about it, there had been trouble. Jude, like Marv, could hand out a joke, sometimes almost booting it down a throat, but he could not take one. When the Boxed K had said that cattle and the pick of their steel-dust horses were mysteriously disappearing, there was no ribbing, no laughing—not without somebody getting a fist popped to his nose or a six-gun barrel planted across his skull to teach him better manners!

Now Marv was dead, and darned little use there was in a sheriff even thinking about going up on the Devil Weed to try to find out anything. Parley Pool and whoever was with him had already carried the body back to the long old log ranch house. And of course the Boxed K'ers would be too thick-headed to talk—ever' damn' one of 'em except Kitty! Somehow Kitty had always seemed out of place in that onery outfit.

Balancing three cups of coffee, the smoke-blackened pot and a bowl of sugar on a feed-tray used to shove grub into cells for prisoners, was a mean feat for a sheriff. He walked slowly as he headed back for the dingy office, coffee slopping over the rims of the cups. In the doorway of the corridor he halted, scowling. His eyes and his ears told him that Link Ringo and Kitty Kelly were quarreling.

"But he's dead, Link!" cried the girl. "Let the dead rest!"

"Only it's true, Kitty!" Ringo's face was white. "By God, a dead snake's only a

dead snake, a dead rat a dead rat! Damn this idea of people wanting to forget everything just because a man dies! It seems to make no difference what kind of a louse he was when living!"

"That'll do, Link!" It was time for Bailey to poke in his oar. "I didn't bring yuh two here to fan up more flame in this thing. Plum surprisin' to see yuh stand there quarrelin' with Kitty!"

"Sorry, sheriff," Ringo settled back in his chair. "We've always had a little war on our hands when it came to Marv. Forgive me, Kitty!"

"I do." There were big tears in the girl's eyes, and yet she tried to smile. "I've always known how it stood between you two. But—but Marv's dead now!" She looked up at the sheriff as he placed the tray on the desk. "It doesn't help to talk about him."

"Not unless it might get to the bottom of some of this rustler talk, Kitty." Link Ringo's tone was gentle now. "It has been going on. You might as well know it now as later. The outfit that has lost the most stock, and said the least about it, has been the Boxed Circle R."

"Naw!" Bat Bailey straightened, staring at him now. "Why—why, there ain't been one single report of it from the Boxed Circle R!"

"Between us three," scowled Ringo, "there was probably a mighty good reason for it. We made no reports. I want none made now."

"An'," Bailey was still staring at him, "why'n hell not?"

"I don't want to hurt Kitty."

"Hurt me!" The girl was suddenly on her feet, eyes wide. "Let's have that straight, Link." She stamped her foot. "What is it! How would I be hurt?"

"Marv Kelly's dead." He looked up at her grimly now, setting his jaw. "To you the dead are the dead, can't do any wrong, and what they've done before is to be forgotten. But if you must have it, Kitty, than here it comes. Marv Kelly was helping somebody, some gang bring war between the Boxed K and the Boxed Circle R. And most of the rustling, if not all of it, was done or led to be done by Marv himself."

"Link—you're telling a lie on the dead!" It looked as if the girl were going to faint. "It—it couldn't be true! You haven't an ounce of proof!"

"Only my own eyes, Kitty." Ringo's voice had become gentle again. "Johnny was with me three weeks ago, but Johnny, too, is dead, and—"

"Wait there, by Gawd!"

Old Bat Bailey's yell startled them. He came wheeling around the end of the desk, right hand pawing for the big Peacemaker at his hip, long legs springing him on to the door. But he was too late. A wild rush of hoofs, then the snorting of a horse under spur and quirt, and the girl's buckskin was gone, whipping around the corner of the jail and back up the slope.

"IT WAS that damn Buck Snoutt!" Pale-faced, the sheriff wheeled back into the room after one wild glance from the porch. "He slipped down here an' got yore hoss, Kitty, an' that means he's takin' back the fightin' tools to yore daddy an' his men!"

"Go stop them!" The girl was on her feet again, white-faced, terror in her eyes. "If you don't they'll come banging back into town, and that means a fight!"

"Drink some coffee, Kitty." Ringo had calmly picked up a cup. "I haven't been expecting anything else from the Boxed K for a long time."

Jude Kelly always thought more of his son than he did of his daughter. For the last ten years he had a habit of letting Marv lead him into anything; make any kind of a damned fool of him.

"I think," Ringo reached for a cup of coffee for himself now, "that it's going to be a downright pleasure to kill him."

* * *

It was a cold-blooded business, he guessed. He was riding homeward at two o'clock that afternoon. Behind him trailed a buckboard carrying the body of Johnny in a shining black coffin. Even Kitty had always said that he was too easy-going; too inclined to wait and reason things out; never wanting to make the mistake of hurting some one only to learn later that he had been all asea in his thoughts and actions.

Back there in the old jail—waiting in vain for Jude Kelly to come on into town—he had told Kitty a lot of things while Bat Bailey just sat and stared at him. Kitty,

too, was too damned soft! All her life she had been led, steered and whip-sawed by her bull-headed father and the big, bullying Marvin. Marvin had always had the best of it; the first and the last say. At times one had to suspect that there was something deeply Oriental about Jude Kelly—something that made him think a son was a god, a daughter only a misfit, an expense, not really worth her salt.

It had been something like that when Kitty received her legacy left by old Hell-In-The-Wind Bill Kelly, another bull-headed Irisher who had made good in the mining game down in Wyoming. He had not allowed Jude within sight or hearing for twenty years, and when he died the whole of thirty thousand dollars went to Kitty. Uncomplainingly, she had consented to split her inheritance with Marv. In the end her father had allowed her exactly six hundred dollars for her schooling. The rest had supposedly been turned into the Boxed K. Marv turned out in a thousand-dollar saddle on a thousand-dollar horse and all the I-am-it finery to go with such a rig.

Frank Ringo was going to take this to the heart, stuck in a wheel-chair at the Boxed Circle R as he had been for the past six years. Link Ringo had already sent word ahead by little old Davey Clark, cow-boss of the Boxed Circle R for so many years he had become a part of it. Old Davey was one who could let out the news about Johnny gently, and Frank Ringo, a cold, far-reasoning man could take it from him.

Frank Ringo had come to this country with Jude Kelly in the old days when men had to be men, able to fight their way out of a barrel of wildcats. Together they had taken up their claims, gradually extending them. Their brands had been closely alike. A good rustler could change either brand; a Boxed K by simply putting a circle around it and looping the upward part of the K into an R. By broadening the "box" and cutting out the circle and the top of the R, the Boxed Circle R switched, with equal simplicity, into a Boxed K. But neither Frank Ringo nor Jude Kelly had thought of that in the good old days when they had stood back to back, fighting Indians and outlaws alike. Each was to never forget that they had married their childhood sweethearts back in Missouri in a double-wedding—quite the thing at the time—and had come West together in their covered wagons.

Such men had made the West, had made it safe for others to come. Into a land that was as dangerous as cocked guns in the hands of infants, they had pushed their way, fighting through the long winters, most of the time depending on fish, birds, and the wild-game of the hills to stave off starvation. Bit by bit they had scratched out their little places in the sun. Mollie Ringo had died when her Johnny was born. Lucy Kelly was still living, slave of her lord and master who had grown harder and harder as the years passed.

And now Frank Ringo was in a wheel-chair, legs dead from the hips as the result of an outlaw horse turning a complete hula-han' with him—one of those running, head-down falls in which few of the best of riders escaped without some terrible injury.

Frank Ringo would not cry out, would not go into a fit about it when old Davey Clark got there with the news. He might smile in his patient, unfathomable way. Life, he might say, was like this; the gods long before a man's birth having cast his horoscope in his forehead to tell when and how he would live and die. Frank Ringo had a lot of queer notions floating around in his head, but, then, Frank Ringo had read a lot in these past six years.

Back there in the jail Kitty Kelly had cried. And Old Bat Bailey had become fighting-mad several times. Link Ringo had been hard. He knew it, half-hated himself for it, and yet facts had had to be facts. The play was over; the race run; the game done. Kitty had long needed the truth driven into her head. It had been no time for make-believe. She had had to know what a lot of other people knew: that her dear brother was a weakling under the skin despite all his bullying ways, and an out and out liar by deed and face. Somehow there was a certain amount of relief in getting it done. The slate was wiped clean, bare of all the markings. And yet—when he thought of losing her forever—something slammed down on him like an invisible cloud.

He was like a man who seemed to be riding aimlessly, unseeing and unhearing,

until he was about six miles northwest of town. It took little Pinky Butler, a freckle-faced cowboy on a bald-faced sorrel to spur up alongside to his left, grab his arm and point ahead at a sandy, brush-fringed bend in the trail.

"Good Gawd, Link, whut's that!"

"It's a man." Link Ringo nodded, cold-sober yet despite the fierce grip on his arm, eyes still staring ahead. "It looks a little something like Davey Clark lying on the ground beside his clay-bank. Funny he'd get down and go to sleep like that."

"Sleep, hell!" half-wailed the cowboy, turning in his saddle to motion for the others to hurry on. "Damn it, Link, that's blood smeared in the sand all 'round 'im. Davey's been shot! Hell, Davey's been kilt by somebody lyin' in the bushes waitin' here for just that!"

A death-spasm had left Davey Clark's gnarled left hand still gripped to one of the ends of his long reins. The load of buck-shot and five rifle balls that had through him came from the high, brush-covered bank above him to his right. He was given no chance whatever to reach for the butt of the old Bison Colt swinging in its worn holster at his hip.

When every man in the group plunged up to fling from the saddle his hat came off. Everybody everywhere had liked Davey Clark. Every cowboy behind Link Ringo had owed him money at one time or another. Half of them still owed him, and knew they were good yet to borrow his last shirt—the one on his back if he was caught short.

And now, like Johnny back there in the buckboard, the lean old half-breed Tongue River Indian, Davey Clark was dead. Shot by unknown gunmen who had waylaid him on the trail. That "somebody" could be Jude Kelly, Buck Snoutt or any of the others of that lately-wild and near-lawless gang of Boxed K riders, most of them hired by the busy, meddling Marvin. Only a few had wondered why old, mean Parley Pool had been kept on as the cow-boss. Most people knew that Parley Pool had always been Marv Kelly's right hand go-between—the one man who had never found fault with Marv!

Hat in hand, the strange, half-dead ex-

pression back in his eyes, Link Ringo stood like a man at the graveside of his best friend, something inside still trying to hold him. Suddenly he looked up, eyes flashing from man to man, voice crisp:

"We'll load Uncle Davey on the buckboard with Johnny. That's about all we can do for now. His killers are probably laughing at us up there somewhere on the slopes."

"Yuh—ain't yuh gonna try trailin' 'em, Link?" The freckle-faced, pug-nosed little Pinky Butler was staring at him with unbelieving and popping sky-blue eyes. "Yuh—yuh mean yuh aim to just go on like nary a damn thing's been done to yore best friend? Hell, to the best friend any cowpoke ever called a friend!"

"We'll ride on." Link Ringo glanced on up the trail. His eyes now had that queer sheen and quality of hot glass. "I've been a damned fool long enough in this country. When we start to fight—well, damn it, we'll fight! God help the loser!"

Chapter III

"UP AND GO YONDER!"

"JOHNNY'S gettin' kilt has knocked 'im cold."

"His fuss with the gal at the jail has helped some!"

"Damn that! I wish Johnny was here 'stead of him. Johnny had guts! Remember the time the rustlers hit us high on Smoky Buttes?"

The talk was all behind him as he rode on, the voices back there guarded, eyes burning holes in his back. With the body of the old cow-boss loaded on the buckboard, his clay-bank trailing, Link Ringo never once glanced behind him in the next eight miles on to the Boxed Circle R. What had happened had happened. What would come would come. There was plenty of time yet for a man to play this thing out, and come hell or high water it would be played out—unless Frank Ringo, as usual, put both feet down and tried to handle it in his own way.

Now the Boxed Circle R was ahead, a thousand yards away at the upper end of a little valley groved with great trees and walled in by a gigantic horseshoe of towering gray cliffs. Mollie Ringo had had a lot to do with it in her day. From a covered wagon camp guarded night and day by rifles and a gang of dogs, it had grown into a huge log house with a broad, vine-shaded porch all around it. Off to the right and left were the corrals and sheds, the barns and the bunkhouses. The latter held enough blankets and shelter for half the cowpunchers in the country.

To cap it all was the great waterfall behind the house; a veil of silver spilling down the thousand-foot face of the cliffs leaping and parting into a score of little streams enough water here for all the cattle and horses Montana could ever hope to own. It had been the waterfall that decided the once-young Frank Ringo's pale-haired Mollie that this was the place, Indians and outlaw country or not.

One look now was enough to show that it had been useless to send Davey Clark or anybody else ahead with the news of Johnny's sudden passing. The story had already reached Frank Ringo from the few cowboys in town who made it a point to burn wind and strain saddle leather, spreading the tale in all directions.

A dozen saddle horses stood at the long-log hitchrack under the shaggy old willows in front of the east porch. Buckboards would soon be topping the surrounding hills, loaded with women and children. The old ranch had always been a gathering spot for enormous Sunday dinners and rip-roaring times at Christmas and the rest of the holidays, and the Ringo outfit had many friends. Old Indians who had fought the indomitable Frank in the past would be here before long; silent, unreadable characters who would sit cross-legged and flat on the floor of the porch. Their coming alone was enough to let the world know that they were Ringo friends.

Ringo was on the porch now in his wheel-chair, the bushy, silver-haired head shining, red cheeks always glowing from his daily shave. There was no malice at all in his calm, far-seeing eyes. Cowmen and cowboys to his right and left, something of a breathless hush having settled over them waited for Link Ringo to pull up and swing down.

"Yes, I know about it, Link." The elder Ringo held up a big and yet powerful right hand. "Some of the boys told me about our Johnny." There was a hush, then the hint

of a smile came into the strong face and remarkably blue eyes. "Parley Pool was always crazy. I've said it for years; others the same thing. There was once talk of sending him off to the crazy house—that time when he flew into a rage in Ramrod and beat his horse's brains out with a six-shooter. Where's Davey?"

"In the buckboard back there. Beside the coffin. Uncle Davey Clark is dead." The words came like slats dropping from under a bed. In the same hard, flat monotone, Link Ringo told them the rest of it.

"That's too bad, Link." Frank Ringo's answer seemed to take a hellish time to come in the silence following the end of the story. "Why, Davey Clark was one of the best men I ever knew."

That was Frank Ringo; cool and reasonable. No flicker of excitement or anger showed in that big face lined with its pink and blue veins. He was a man who could take it on the chin without a quiver.

* * *

Sunday afternoon brought the real crowds. Men and women came from everywhere. Buckboards, wagons, buggies and saddle horses lined the fences of the corrals and stood far out under the trees. Some of the women and their men had come the night before, taking over the long old kitchen and dining room from wrinkled Wang, the aged Chinese cook. Among the lot now were the expected Indians, squaws and bucks, the latter in the best of ceremonial garb, the feathers of their great old war-bonnets quivering in the wind.

Those who might have been close enough would have seen the queer little flicker of a smile light Frank Ringo's cherry-hued face and eyes when a buckskin topped the rise in the distance. On a side-saddle rode a stately figure in shining black silk. He watched her drop from the saddle at the hitchrack, saw her take an armful of flowers from behind her saddle and come forward, tiny golden spurs making musical whispers at her dainty black heels.

"I had to come." Dropping her flowers she gripped Frank Ringo's outstretched hand in both her own, eyes big and half-afraid of something as she looked straight into his own. "We buried Marvin and Parley this morning. A—a few people came." She added that lamely. "Not like all this."

"Yes, Kitty." Ring pulled her into a chair at his right side. "I was sort of expecting you; in fact looking for you. Nice day, ain't it, though a little warm for fall?"

"I heard about Davey Clark." Her lips quivered, paled, eyes going misty for a moment. "There's something I must tell you."

"Yes, Kitty."

"No one at the Boxed K did it." Her chin hardened. "We had heard about it by sundown. News gets around so fast in this country, especially the bad news. I checked and double-checked. Can you believe me?"

"I always have, Kitty." His answer was as gentle as a whisper. "I'll have to see with my own eyes and ears—well," he smiled, "you know what I mean, Kitty. You stand ace-high with me."

"And can you," her lips were quivering again, going white, the sheen returning to her eyes, "still like me after—after this?"

"No, I guess not, Kitty." He smiled again, this once-strong man who could whip his weight in barrels of bobcats and throw gunfire and hot lead from the saddle of a running-horse like a flying devil. "To tell you the truth, I never did just like you, child. I've loved you since the day you were born. And," he shrugged to hide a deep heave in his broad chest, "I guess all hell will never change that. You see, Kitty," he tried to laugh, "I've always been rated as a bull-headed old scamp, and neither old dogs nor horses are subject to abrupt changes."

"Yes, I know—and how I know!" Her left hand moved swiftly to one side and closed tightly on his big wrist. "You are the most wonderful man I ever want to know. There—are times when you don't seem human! You understand too much to be an ordinary man."

"Kitty," he managed a low laugh this time, "there are times when I think you're a little devil. Maybe one of these confounded fever ticks! The night you were born you got under my hide with one little smile, and you've been under it ever since."

"And I'm glad! And I always want to be under that hide!" She was looking around nervously. "Where is Link? Has he talked to you? About me? Has he said how he feels? Has—"

"Whoa, Kitty, whoa." He reached over and patted the back of the tight hand still on his wrist. "I was never good at answering questions, and no good at all when they came like six-guns. Link's maybe out in the south barn, looking after a sick horse right at the moment. But don't be foolish. A man doesn't truly love a girl and forget her in a day, not if the mountains roll down, the earth spits wide-open, and hell comes boiling up through the cracks. Leave the flowers here and get the heck on out yonder to that barn. I think you'll find him alone. And listen!" he grabbed her hand, "I'm depending a lot on you, honey. The Boxed Circle R needs you much worse than ever now."

Had a thousand people been staring, she could not have helped it any more than one could have helped snatching a hand from a red-hot stove. She was up, grabbing him suddenly, planting a swift kiss over each eye. Tears dropped down her cheeks, splattering his nose. Then she was gone, skirts whisking, the little spurs ringing like tiny bells as she wheeled and hurried off, heading for the barn . . .

MONDAY morning broke fair, the sky as clear as a crystal. Out of bed at the crack of dawn with the rest of them, Frank Ringo had not yet uttered a real word of complaint. Rustlers and Indians had found him like this; a man always willing to shoulder the bitter with the sweet, able to take a terrible trouncing from fist or ball without a whimper, then just as able and willing to get up and fight again.

Johnny Ringo was dead, up there on a flat-topped old Indian mound east of the house, lying beside his mother. Davey Clark was with him, one of the family for all these years. No man could bring them back. To Frank Ringo, much of a fatalist, they had come to the end of their times and places, like billions of men before them. Death, the old Grim Reaper, had swung the sythe, cutting them down.

Death had always been like that in this country. No man had ever loved a woman more than Frank Ringo had loved his Mollie, and yet no man had ever heard him utter one complaint because of her going. Fighting beside him, she had seen many others die; had helped to dress the wounds of the dying and near-dying; had helped to dig holes to bury them. And so many more here were like her, like she had been. They had learned to suffer and take; enjoy life to its fullest when opportunity afforded, and accept the rest as a part of it.

"Johnny's room won't be changed, Wang. Let everything be just as he left it. He might be coming back one of these days or nights for a little look-around. The same goes for Davey's place in the bunkhouse, boys. He never would come to sleep here."

Every man at the long old dining table knew exactly what he meant. Frank Ringo had some ideas that some men called queer —and others swore by. Sometimes the dead came back. Sometimes he sat alone on the Indian mound. No man dared to ask him why. They knew. He went there when in trouble, when in pain, and those who saw the wheel-chair moving in the dark of the moon kept their mouths shut, their thoughts strictly to themselves. If this man *thought* he could go talk to his Mollie, if that *thought* did him good, who could say whether he was having crazy spells or seeing things beyond the pale of other men?

"I guess I'll be out on the range again today, boys."

"On the range?" The question jumped from man to man up and down the table. Link stared at him, letting his fork drop, and it was Link alone who uttered doubt. "But you can't, Dad. Don't try that go-hell rig of yours again. You can't stand it."

"Maybe now I will." That was all of it, no more doubt coming—at least not in words. "One of the boys will hitch up and bring it beside the porch. I may need a little help to get poked in."

"He was on the mound last night." That whisper came afterwards, out in the corrals. "Johnny's goin' musta finished crackin' 'im. I hope he don't go violent. Ever'body in the country, they say, is scared clear hell to death of him, once he's rowled far enough to wanta fight."

They might have laughed behind his back had they known what he was doing at the moment, the silent old Wang helping him. He was in his Mollie's room, ever spotless as she had kept it, never a thing changed. Now he was in her big trunk in the corner, reaching down from his chair and dragging out strange contraptions that

made old Wang's eyes blink but no other emotion dare to show in his face.

"Mollie's corsets, Wang." He half-smiled as he held up one of them. "It came to me last night that they might sort of hold me together. I used to help her lace them up, and at times it was like trying to get saddles on a dozen outlaw broncs. Here, now, I'll take off my top shirt. That's it. Now help get this thing around me, and when you start pulling these strings you pull like hell. May have to slip off your shoe and plant your foot in the middle of my back. I'll holler just before you start killing me . . ."

He looked all right when Wang wheeled him out on the porch, looked as stiff as a ramrod. His go-hell was ready, a two-wheeled racing sulky drawn by two fast black horses. An eighteen-inch, basket-like thing had been added to the seat, straps in front to buckle him in. Once in that queer seat a man was almost in an iron case and unable to get out of it in any kind of a hurry in case of an accident.

Cowboys watched him with a pained expression in their faces and eyes as he was helped aboard and the straps buckled. Old Wang poked in three light feather cushions at his sides and behind him, adding a fat pillow to his stomach, and Frank Ringo reached his yet-strong arms and hands for the lines and the buggy-whip.

"Now stand clear," he ordered, "and I'll try her a barrel. Don't ask who told me that it might work. If you do I'm liable to crack somebody's nogging with the butt of this whip. All right, gentlemen!" He gave the lines a shake. "Take it away."

It was like a man asking to go straight to hell in a hurry. The blacks were dangerous as well as fast, the only kind of horses Frank Ringo had ever driven or ridden, the only kind he had ever seemed to thoroughly understand or be understood by.

"Damn!" hissed a cowboy, staggering back as if some one had slapped him across the mouth. "Watch them fool critters go!"

The horses were off like shots, the go-hell bouncing on a stone in the yard. Buggy-whip snapping, Ringo let them out, looking for the roughest places he could find. He headed for the Indian mound like flying hell on wheels, the pale-faced Link behind him on a snorting black, watching every move, expecting the worst. The others behind him expected the same thing as they raced for their horses. At least they'd be right on hand to help pick up the wreckage when those half-wild blacks were through with it.

"Up and go yonder!" Frank Ringo, his whip still snapping, was beginning to yell like some daring school boy on his first fast slide. "She was right! It does work! It works! *It works!* All I needed was one of her corsets! Why didn't she think of this long ago! Go yonder, horses, up and go yonder!"

"He's tryin' to kill 'imself!" bleated a cowboy trailing in the dust, both spurs rammed to his horse. "This is suicide, Ike. He *is* cracked. Johnny's goin' was all he needed, I tell yuh!"

"An' yo're crazier'n hell yoreself!" grinned back a big, black-haired rider to his right. "Graveyard talk or not, damnit, this here's wings for Frank Ringo. Three cheers, boys!" He reared high in his stirrups and cupped his hands to his mouth. "Up an' go yonder, Mr. Ringo!"

Chapter IV

SUICIDE GORGE

"RINGO'S on the range."

"Seein' half-way home another purty gal in black to keep 'imse'f from pickin' up a bullet in his hide?"

"I ain't meanin' Link Ringo. I mean ol' Frank, 'imself."

"Naw! Can't be, Andy, yuh fool!"

"Look for yorese'f an' see."

Sudden excitement now charged the air. Only a few moments before everything had been still and boring, just another day of watching and waiting ahead. Five men—all unwashed for weeks, long-haired, bearded and wolfish-looking—had been playing race-horse poker with a dirty pack of worn cards on a blanket spread among the tall rocks. A tall, long-jawed sixth man with a deep, dark scar across his nose and cheeks had been studying the country below through a powerful old brass telescope.

"Yep, ol' fightin' Frank in a cart, an' if he can ride an' drive like that down there, then he can ride an' drive through hell. It don't look a damn bit good to me, boys. I'm one of the few who can say I've had to fight 'im in the past, an' somehow managed

to live to tell about it. We'd better get this to the boss fast."

Cards were forgotten, dropped or been flung aside by nervous hands. The five men were up as if made of bouncing rubber. One behind the other they came streaking forward, each hugging the shelter of the large rocks that would hide them from any one below. One after another they snatched for the telescope, each taking a look and holding his breath as he looked.

It was Frank Ringo, all right, down there in that bouncing, swaying go-hell thing. The running blacks appeared to try to lick the earth bare with man and cart, anxious cowboys watching him go.

"That's Link trailin' 'im so hard. Guess he's afraid of what's liable to happen to the ol' devil."

"Of course!" The man with the terrible scar nodded. "Without ol' Frank to watch out for, Jesse Grindell woulda had this whole country under his thumb 'way back yonder at the start of summer, countin' that damn fool Marv Kelly we've had to help us."

"Help us, hell!" A short, heavy-set man turned and looked at him with a leer. "They've said that fool got throwed by a hoss an' had half his brains knocked out agin a rock when he was a boy 'leven or twelve. Me, for one, allus thought, he had ever' one of 'em batted out. All he could do was to strut an' talk."

"An'," put in a big, humped man with a wart as large as a thumb-nail on his red nose, "help steal his daddy's horses an' cows, an' now an' then a few of Ringo's."

"But at that," frowned the man with the scar, "he turned out to be some help to Jesse. He handled ol' Parley Pool like he had a ring in his nose, an' Pool never once suspected."

"The best thing Marv done," the heavy-set man chuckled, "was to get a good bat over the head an' wrapped in that yearlin' hide. Guess he never did really wake up to know what was happenin' to 'im; us rollin' 'im out on a hot rock in the sun until the hide had done its work, then takin' 'im to the place where he could be found beside another skint yearlin'. That was one of the smartest tricks I've ever knowed Jesse Grindell to pull."

"Then yuh dudes had better get this scrap of news to 'im." The man with the scar reached for his telescope as the last man to look through it lowered it. "Jesse ain't no more anxious to fight Frank Ringo than I am agin. Somehow that Ringo seems to have more lives than a cat."

Men were moving back then, hurrying for horses hidden in the timber on the north side of the peak below the bald dome of the timberline itself. The man with the telescope continued to wait and watch, and soon the heavy-set man and the man with the wart came back.

"Hell," growled the man with the wart, "ain't no use in all of us goin'. There might still be another report or two yuh wanta send back to Jesse, Andy."

"I sort of figgered some of yuh would have sense enough to think of that, Dude." The man with the scar was busy with the telescope again. "I didn't aim for the whole damn bunch to go hurtlin' back. Jesse Grindell's gonna cuss 'em out."

All three of them knew that. No man trusted the notorious Jesse Grindell too far. The Southwest had known him for years. Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Idaho had felt his sting. As a rustler and a range-grabber, Jesse Grindell had always stood at the head of the class. He never took a range exactly for himself. There was always somebody somewhere to move in and take over after he had torn a country apart. He pitted old friends against old friends, making out and out fools of them, sending them to war and stealing their stock while they were at it. Grindell was a man who usually played the background, letting the suckers do the real work, then seeing that they died for it.

Marvin Kelly had been such a prize fool. Grindell had met him the first time in Kansas City, knocking an even ten thousand dollars out of him in a poker game. That had been two years ago. A year ago they had ran upon each other again in Chicago, that time when Jude Kelly was with his Marv, both drunker than two boiled owls and taking up all the sidewalks around the stockyards. A glib tongue, a blonde, a redhead and a brunette had helped things go a long way when tied up with several cases of champagne and a two-week run among swanky hotels, cabarets and nice, quiet little gambling places. Jude Kelly had paid all the bills. Marvin had done the most of the buck-dancing, the bragging and the

strutting, once getting himself whammed over the head by the blonde wielding a bottle of liquid lightning as neatly as a Sioux swinging a tomahawk.

Both had been real he-men, hi-yi *hombres* under the spell of the spilling and bubbling pale-amber wine, and each—especially Marvin—had been willing to get rich quick. Jude Kelly had later wanted to back down. His son had held him to it. The blonde, the red-head and the brunette helped him get drunk all over again, and this time so wild and crazy he was willing to believe anything. Marvin Kelly had backed up the others. He swore to anything they wanted to say or do in the future.

Now Marv was out of it. But not before he had ridden his own father so far that Jude Kelly had been on the verge of going to old Bat Bailey to confess everything. Old riders were gone from the Boxed K. Men Jesse Grindell had sent had been hired; trusted men, each with a reward on his head for one thing or another. And now, up there in Timberline, just three miles away by the short cuts, Jesse Grindell was waiting; posing as a cattle-buyer; eager to get the rest of this slow job done and on to another. A big northern Wyoming cattle combine was already to take over here; Grindell had grown to like the fat steers and steel-dust horses that had been coming down across the line to him between suns. And he liked it when the moon was on the other side of the earth at night, the time was ripe for rustlers to make their runs . . .

ANOTHER Sunday was rolling around at last. At two o'clock in the morning, long before dawn, men might have seen a ghostly shape on a tall, dark horse emerge from a little belt of low fog ringing the old Indian mound where Frank Ringo had buried his Mollie, his son and his best friends. Then the ghost rider and horse quickly disappeared in a nearby little cluster of low trees. When movement came again it was the man alone, tall, gaunt and grim, a Peacemaker socked down in a long holster at either hip, a rifle on the crook of his arm.

The ghost-man came on, as silently as the blobs of fog everywhere. At the corner of the porch he halted, head turning on his long lean neck.

Now he was moving on to the door, knowing he would find it unlocked. He opened it without a sound, and oozed into the enormous living room, pale embers of fire catching his eyes in the huge fireplace to his right. He turned to his left, touching no piece of furniture as he made his way to the door of a hall. Down the hall, near the end of it, his left hand found the knob of another door. He turned it, eased it open, and again was like something oozing inside until he spoke, voice a heavy, rasping whisper:

"Put down that gun, Frank. I heard yore hand ease from under that pillow. Maybe yo're gettin' old."

"Bat?"

"Uh-huh, but strike no sign of light." He closed the door without a hint of noise. "I don't aim for some people to know I come here. Yore look-out on the rise is asleep, propped back again the big tombstone yuh put up for yore Mollie. Once more I say yuh must be gettin' old."

"What is it, Bat?" Hands jammed down in the bed, Frank Ringo managed it to shift his body to the left, making room for the sheriff to sit on its edge beside him in the dead-dark room. "You don't come calling like this unless it's something damned important."

"An' is. There's somethin' wrong at the Boxed K. Yore Link's maybe aimin' to meet Kitty in town at Widow Riley's boardin' house this afternoon. I kinda figger Kitty won't be there. If cards fall right—an' I'm hopin', by Gawd, that they won't, Kitty an' Laura, her mammy, is gonna be in Suicide Gorge, alyin' under two or three hundred thousand tons of that damn rock."

"Let's have it straight, Bat." Frank Ringo's voice was not much higher than a whisper, but the hard quality of steel had come into it. "I never need a build-up to know the worst."

"Me an' Sam Tarr's been watchin' the Boxed K, quiet an' unseen, of course." The sheriff removed his battered gray hat and scratched his head. "We've knowed that Kitty an' Laura, an' even Jude, 'imself, have been prisoners at their own house, nobody driftin' in or out without a man trailin' 'em. Work's been goin' right on, stock rounded-up an' all of it pushed into Big Wall Canyon, Jude's winter range, just like yo've been pushin' yore stuff into the

Sink Holes." He jerked his head to southward in the darkness toward a wild, natural stronghold for cattle and horses. "But Jude ain't been doin' none of the ridin'. Last night, two hours 'fore midnight, we was shore we saw Jude bein' taken out an' shot an' shoved into that old mine hole a mile or so east of the house.

"It didn't turn out to be Jude," he sighed. "It was that half-loco Buck Snoutt, him with his bucktoothed mouth an' hatchet face. Wasn't plum dead when I crawled into that mine hole, Sam awatchin' outside, though he had a bullet in the back of his neck that had ranged right on through an' come out his mouth, takin' away some of them horsey teeth. Two more had been aimed for the backbone. I don't know how close them come to it. Didn't dare move 'im."

"Go on fast, Bat! Damn the little details!"

"Don't hurry me. I take my time. That's why I ain't got no high blood depression at my age. Buck was sorter outa his mind, talkin' as crazy as hell for the most of it, but I got enough. Jude, Kitty an' Laura will be poked in the big spring-wagon this mornin'. They'll think they're bein' taken west of us so Jude can hide out for a spell in Wolf Crick, over beyond Timberline. Seems as how—an' no ol' badger game about this part of it—he did shoot a police fella in an alley back in Chicago when he was drunk with Marv an' Jesse Grindell. He—"

"Jesse Grindell? The outlaw?"

"None other!" frowned the sheriff. "Keep yore drawers on, yuh ol' fool an' yore voice low. Jude met him as a Mr. Knight, McKnight or somethin' like that. Didn't know 'im, his real name, until just of late—maybe since Marv was killed.

"But don't be bustin' in on me." He swore in a whisper. "Ain't got no time to set an' fool. I'm just here to tell yuh what to do. I ain't been bustin' blisters on my tail-bones night after night in my saddle just to set an' answer a lot of fool questions. Hell, I'm supposed to be some excuse for the law out here—a tall an' handsome fella with hair on my head an' belly, an' wild blood in my veins! Now lis'en."

And Frank Ringo listened, the rest of it coming in a low monotone, yet as fast as a package of firecrackers exploding. The cattleman tried to break in on him five or six times, but it was useless. Old Bat Bailey was not to be stopped, not until he had finished.

"You mean, Bat," Ringo was finally getting in a few words, the cold perspiration of fear standing out on his forehead, "that we're letting Kitty and Laura ride straight to their deaths if we fail?"

"Just about the size of it, I reckon." Bailey rose and stretched himself in the darkness. "But I don't figger on failin'—not with yuh to sorter set by an' watch the fightin', even in yore go-hell. Looks from the distance like yo've got purty good at ridin' that damn thing."

And then, waiting for no more questions, he was gone, the ghost that had come, the ghost that was going, back toward the mound as if to his grave up there among the other dead.

"HERE THEY come, men." It was shortly after noon, all the belts and little blobs of fog had lifted from the deep holes and canyons six thousand feet below the north rim of Suicide Gorge. He had just lowered a pair of high-priced binoculars, a tall, lean, sallow-faced man with a crooked little wisp that might have been called a graying mustache on his long and wide upper lip. "It won't be long now."

Jesse Grindell had always reminded men of a devil. Everything about him seemed unusually long and lean. His sallow hands might have belonged to a fiddle-player or a piano-whipper, the bones and veins showing through the thin skin. But even in the hills or pounding some old outlaw trail in the dead of night with a posse hot behind him, he was always the neat one, clothes always dark and fitting him like kidskin gloves. Now as he stood among the rocks at the top of a great slide he was like that, cool and self-sure, a good Colt in either side of his waistband but carefully hidden by the long tails of his dark coat—no drooping gun-belts, no show off about Jesse Grindell.

Far below them to the east a long, light wagon had appeared, drawn by two strong, wall-eyed and half-broken grays. Three spring seats had been set on the long bed. Two women sat on the front seat, a lone man that was Jude Kelly on the center seat, a pair of thick-chested, black-hatted men

filling the last one. From the distance it looked as if the woman or the girl was driving, but a man did not have to look long to know that they were too stiff and straight for that.

Kitty Kelly and her mother, like Jude, were chained to their seats. The long driving lines ran back through the seats, one of the black-hatted men on the last one handling them. The other was ready to attend the brake-pole—and also ready to jump and run for it at the proper time, which was drawing closer and closer.

The wagon had just come around a bend in the gorge. Now it seemed to be creeping along the foot of a rock-slide. On this side of it, just below where Jesse Grindell and his hiding men were waiting, was the big one: the terror of the gorge few men dared to ease through afoot or on a gentle horse. Between the slides was a grassy, bowl-like opening two hundred yards long and about one hundred and fifty wide, with tall, bare cliffs at either side of it. Men could drop out of the wagon and stand there to watch the hell pour.

But the first slide was holding, just as Jesse Grindell had expected it to hold with careful men in that back seat handling the long lines and keeping the half-wild horses at a slow walk. The wagon crept on through, out of danger, and was half-way across the grassy bowl when something made Jesse Grindell's strong, cold heart skip a beat.

"Damn!" he winced. "What in hell's that thing!"

"Frank Ringo in his go-hell." The tensed voice of a shaggy-haired one-time bank-robber squatting in the rocks to his left answered him, the words jerking. "Last damn man I'd ever wanta see!"

The strange rig below had whipped into sight from some pine-choked pocket in one of the walls of the gorge. Now it was coming like hell, the driver slinging a long whip out over the backs of a pair of handsome blacks—a riding, driving, half-flying devil in a two-wheeled hell of a thing who seemed to pay no more attention to the dangerous rocks looming at either side of him than a duck would have cared for a drop of water falling on his back.

"Look! The slide's goin' to git 'im!" A man bucked to his feet to Jesse Grindell's right. Grindell's right hand dropped to his waistband as a moving blur. "He's started them rocks to slide! He—"

"Keep down, Monk." Jesse Grindell's hand had moved again, a dark Colt flashing, the side of it catching the man in the face, spatting him backward and down, the quick blood flying. "Never let the little things get you excited, Wince. The rocks are taking care of him. Look at him. One horse down, the other going."

"An' one of our wagon horses, too!" answered the squatting, one-time bank-robber. "I—I thought I heard a shot!"

"Ringo's second hoss is down! Ringo an' his damn cart's gettin' buried now! Look! Black Dave an' Indian Bill are jumpin' outa the damn wagon. Hell A'mighty, where's all the gunfire acomin' from!"

"Get down, damn it!" Jesse Grindell had felt a hot sting of lead rake his left forearm. "There's been a leak somewhere! We're being hit from both sides!"

WITH both wagon horses shot dead in the harness, the two burly gunmen tried to flee toward the north cliffs beyond the grass. It was war now, the terrible showdown. Somehow Jude Kelly had managed to get to his feet in the wagon, the seat still clinging to him. They saw him stagger, saw him go down, bullets from the north rim now trying to kill everybody left on the wagon. On his back on the floor of the wagon Kelly got his feet up. With one heave, the last dying act of a man fighting to save the life of his wife and daughter, he sent the front seat flying from the wagon and down to the left, the girl and the woman still in it.

Now it was kill! kill! kill! Shots and yells raged from both the high rims of the gorge, outlaws in a trap of their own making, shooting desperately to try to get out of it. Laura and Kitty cried in terror on the ground, bullets from above the big slide, still holding, raging down on the wagon again.

"Look down the gorge! Look, Mamma, look! He's *crawling!* He's *crawling* out of the rocks and into the fight! His legs are *moving!*"

Jude Kelly managed to lift his head for one look, blood pouring from either corner of his mouth, rifle balls through his stomach. He saw it for just a second, an old, wild light coming into his eyes.

"The slide done it!" he gasped. "Jarred somethin' back—in place—in that spine. I —I know it'll be all right now. Old Frank with a rifle comin' in. He'd—crawl outa Hell to fight—for my Laura—an' my Kit—"

And there the rushing blood cut him off, a great rumbling, rolling, growling and thundering noise coming with it, yells rushing up along the south rim. A tall, devil-shape of a man had staggered forward up there on the north rim, left hand to his face, the blood spilling through his long fingers. Like a buzzard taking wings, he had stepped out into the empty air to fall forty feet. Down on the rocks and shale that lay layer on layer like loose shingles on a steep roof, he had come crashing, a bounding, skipping, rolling thing. He started the terror of Suicide Gorge to sliding. Tons and tons of rock came spilling, the dirty-red dust a boiling cloud ballooned and mushroomed skyward; the mountains all around appeared to tremble.

Into all this came a wild cheering, with men yelling and screaming. A war that had been fought like hell for only a few minutes was now coming to a sudden, all-finishing end.

* * *

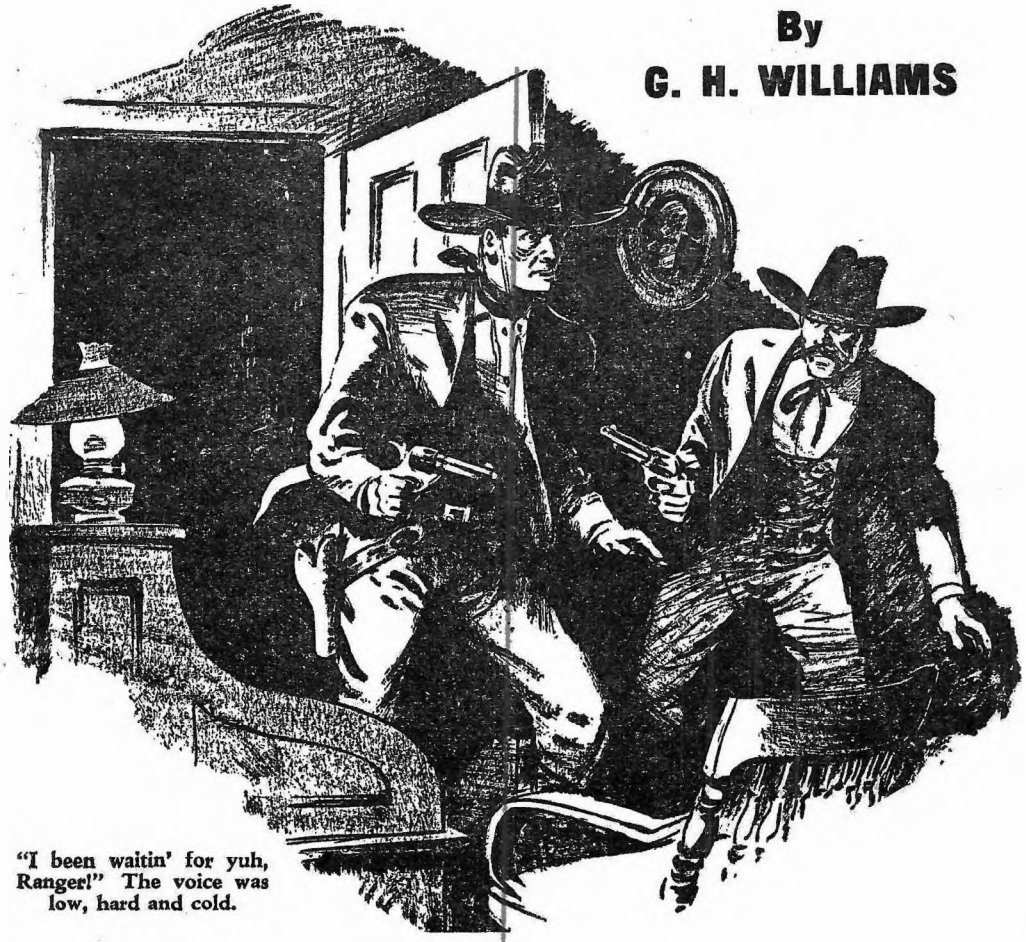
"Yep, that's whut I said, even the rock-slide didn't want 'im." It was another Saturday, two weeks after the death of Johnny Ringo. Old Bat Bailey knew now that he was going to have a quiet day and night of it. He sat with his feet cocked on his desk, talking to a sheriff from Wyoming, one from Utah, another from Idaho, a Texas Ranger and a big, dark-bearded bull of a man from Chicago. "Seems he sorter rode the top of the slide down, an' there he was, on a shale platter yuh might say. I had Doc Tucker debalm 'im an' the six of his squirts yuh see down there with 'im so yuh fellas could see. The rest of the wolf pack's back here in my jug, an' good new rope astretchin' for their necks in the barn.

"Stick 'round until next Friday mornin' for the show." He grinned now, pulling at the fat cigar the detective from Chicago had given him. "I'm sorter glad yuh didn't get Jude, mister. But yo'll wanta see that weddin' tomorrow. Boy, howdy! There'll be more damn Indians an' whites there than yo'll ever see in a lifetime—an' Frank awalkin' agin, not fast, not spry, but he'll be that agin in time. Laura'll be in the kitchen. Her an' Mollie was mighty mighty close. Won't be no surprise—

"Oh, damn it, I talk too much with my face!" He brought his spurred heels down with a bang. "Don't pay no attention to me. Nobody else does 'round here. Hell, they know all about me. Have yuh got another one of them matches, mister? Damned if I ever could keep these big sheeroots lit . . ."

THE END

By
G. H. WILLIAMS



"I been waitin' for yuh, Ranger!" The voice was low, hard and cold.

WHAT THIS TOWN NEEDS IS LYNCH LAW!

Ranger Fred Andrews knew Cutter to be a renegade, a killer, and fair game for any lynch-mob. But, law or no law, it was a damned unnatural thing, sending a man out to bring in his own brother. . . .

THE OIL lantern hanging in front of the hotel stable was smoking, clouding the chimney with a film of soot, and Fred Andrews leaned over and trimmed the wick before stepping down from his big buckskin. He'd pushed the horse hard, impelled by a desire to get to Rock Creek and get it over with, but now that he was here, he moved slowly, almost reluctantly.

The distaste he felt for the job began to seep through him once more, a dark, sour nausea that had ridden with him all the way from Austin. Law or no law, it was a

damned unnatural thing to have to do, and they should have taken that into account. He untied his neckerchief and wiped the dust and sweat from his face and neck.

Fate never seemed to work the way you wanted it to. He'd seen it coming long ago, but he'd hoped that when it did come, he wouldn't be in on it, that someone else would be told, "Go get Cutter Andrews!" It was his luck to be the only one available when the note came.

The note was in his shirt pocket, along with his tobacco and papers. It had been sent to Ranger headquarters in Austin. "Cutter Andrews is raising hell with the Rock Creek country," it read. "Better get a man up here pronto." It was unsigned.

Fred cut through the valley toward the hotel, leaving the buckskin hitched to a tie-rail at the stable. He walked jerkily, his leg muscles stiff from the hours in the saddle and the small of his back tight as sun-dried rawhide. He slipped loose the silver disk that held the bonnet-strings together under his chin and pushed his dusty Stetson to the back of his head. Then his hands fell to the holstered Colts at his side.

He lifted them gently, easing them in their leather sheaths, moving them until he knew from the feel that they lay there ready to jump into his hands the moment he needed them. Fred drew a long breath and exhaled it slowly. Most likely he'd be needing them pretty soon.

Up ahead, where the alley ran past the hotel to the street beyond, he saw the flickering of torches and heard the restless murmur of a crowd. Someone was speaking, he could make that out, but the words were indistinct, blurred by the murmur and by shouted interruptions. It wasn't until he reached a spot in the shadow of the hotel that he could make out what was going on.

What looked like the whole town was gathered in the street in front of the hotel, their attention fixed on the speaker standing on the hotel steps. Torches flooded the scene with their billowing, macabre glare, sending lively patterns of light and shadow dancing over faces and around the edges of the crowd. Fred was deep in one of the fringe shadows, where he could see and hear without being seen himself.

"How much longer are we goin' to stand by and let him get away with this?" the man on the steps demanded. He was tall and very thin, with a black broadcloth coat, black string tie and a coal-black Stetson. "Yesterday, Cutter Andrews shoots up the N.A. stage! Tonight he robs the express office and killed old man Curtis! I say Cutter Andrews has lived out his time!"

The crowd rose with him and shouts of approval cut through the night air.

"That's right, Peterson!"

"That Cutter hombre is ripe for a lynchin' bee!"

Peterson raised his hand and the crowd fell silent, the restless silence of a caged animal, ready to spring forth and tear apart anything that fell in its way. Fred looked at the faces nearest him and saw them distorted with violent rage. This Peterson must be some orator, he thought, to get them worked up like this over the killing of an express agent.

Then he realized that it wasn't only the Curtis killing. It was the holding up of the stage; the note that was in his pocket; the fact that Cutter had terrorized this section until the citizens were ready to rise up in their anger and swing him from the nearest tree.

"My brother's shore made a bad name for hisself," Fred thought grimly, hitching up his gun-belt. "If I don't get to him first, there won't be nothin' left to take back to Austin!"

The man in the black Stetson pulled a small, round object out of his pocket and held it up for all to see. The lights flickered and glinted off it as he twisted it in his fingers. "Any of yuh seen this before?"

"Sure!" someone down front shouted. "I seen it on Cutter the first time he came to town, over in the Blue Lightnin'!"

"Cutter wore it to hold his bonnet-strings," Peterson told the crowd. "And yuh know where I found it tonight? It was in old man Curtis's hand, where he'd snatched it so we'd know who done him in!"

FRED'S hand went to the silver disk under his own chin, the mate to the one Peterson was showing the townsmen. It was his last gift to Cutter before his older brother left home. Now it had become a talisman of death.

Peterson's voice lifted in anger, pulling the emotions of the crowd with him. "If we wait for the law to take care of him," he

thundered, "he'll have a beard long enough to trip over! What we ought to do is form a posse and go lookin' for the murderin' coyote ourselves!"

The mob moved and surged like one person, and scattered shouts voiced the approval of all of them. A man in a torn shirt jumped up on the steps and grabbed Peterson by the arm. He turned and cried over the growing tumult, "A little lynch-law is what this town needs! I'm nominatin' Peterson to form a posse!

Peterson raised his hand and again the crowd quieted.

"All of yuh know me, boys," he said. "I'll be the first to ride but I'm no real gun-toter." He indicated the .44 carelessly slung on his hip. "This here's more for show than anything else. I'm just a peaceful hotel man that wants to see a stop put to all this robbin' and killin'. What we need to lead a lynchin' party is somebody like Ben Gallup."

Fred tried to read the hush that fell over the crowd at the mention of the name. He heard some vague mutterings of disapproval, saw some heads shaken in protest, but also saw as many vigorous nods in favor of the suggestion. His attention was caught by a big, heavy-set man shouldering his way to the hotel steps. The man ignored Peterson and addressed the crowd.

"This is a job for a lawman," Gallup rumbled, his voice deep in his barrel-like chest. "Old man Curtis was shot protectin' the express company's money. Me, I ain't interested in gettin' shot tryin' to get it back! I ain't goin' after no outlaw, not unless he should happen to raid the till of my Blue Lightnin' saloon!" Gallup stepped down and was melting into the crowd when Peterson raised his voice again.

"Guess I sorta selected the wrong man, boys," he said, his tone edged with sarcasm, "when I picked on a fine, upstandin' citizen like Ben Gallup!"

Gallup turned slowly and started back. The crowd was turning to face him, forming a protective line in front of the steps. Gallup ran his eyes along the line and then stopped. He lifted his voice so all could hear.

"Yuh can get Cutter and string him up for buzzard-bait, but that ain't goin' to get yuh the hombre who's been tippin' him off to the gold shipments!" He turned and walked away, passing within a few feet of where Fred was standing in the shadow.

"Maybe not," Peterson said after him, "but it'll be a good beginnin'!" The mob moved restlessly and Fred sensed that they were troubled by the break in their ranks. Peterson swept them back into line.

"All right, boys," he said easily. "All them as wants to ride with me, meet here at sun-up." He went up the steps and into the hotel and the crowd broke in all directions. Fred stayed back in his hiding place, letting them file past. Through a side window of the hotel he saw Peterson walk to a door at the back of the sitting room. He opened it and closed it after him.

When the street was deserted, Fred followed the shadow to the rear of the hotel. There were two things he had to find out. The first was where they thought Cutter had his hide-out and the second was how much chance he had of getting the outlaw out of the hands of the mob if they got to him first. Peterson seemed to be the man to talk to about both of them.

He found the back door he judged led into the office and lifted the latch.

A lamp was burning, casting its soft glow over the room and over its furnishings, a desk, a cot, and a couple of straight-backed chairs. The hotel man had just dropped his gun-belt on the desk and he turned quickly at the sound of the door. Fred pushed it to, quietly.

"Cutter!" Peterson tried to say more but choked on the words. His face was a drained white, crossed by the black line of his moustache. Beads of sweat sprouted on his forehead and glistened in the lamplight. Finally the words came, in a hoarse whisper, thick and fuzzy. "What are yuh doin' here?"

"Didn't mean to scare yuh this way," Fred said, "but I ain't Cutter. I'm his younger brother."

"Yuh couldn't look more like him," Peterson croaked.

"Maybe so," Fred admitted, "But there's one big difference. "I'm on the side of the law." He handed Peterson the rectangle of paper that was his appointment to the Rangers.

PETERSON read it, then took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the perspiration from his face. He replaced the

handkerchief and straightened his black string tie before he spoke.

"Friend," he said slowly, "it's a good thing yuh didn't ride right up into the middle of that mob. Yuh'd of been strung up before yuh could of showed that paper to anybody!"

Fred nodded. "They shore are loaded for bear!" He waited, rolling himself a cigaret, expecting Peterson to say something about the note that had been sent to Ranger headquarters. Wanting to put an end to Cutter's maraudings, he was the type of man who would have sent such a message. But when Peterson spoke again, it was a question.

"Yuh here on anythin' special?" He corrected himself quickly. "I mean, are yuh after Cutter or is this just a coincidence?"

Fred knocked some ashes into a hollow stone on the desk. "I'm after Cutter," he said. "Maybe yuh can tell me where to look for him."

Peterson shrugged his narrow shoulders. "They say he hides out over by Eagle Pass. That's west of here about two hour's ride. The posse'll be headin' that way in the mornin'."

"Suppose I get to him first?" Fred asked. "Yuh think the mob'll let me take him back to Austin?"

The hotel man shook his head. "No chance of that. They're after Cutter's blood. Yuh'd be a fool to try to take him alive anyway. Best thing is to shoot him down where he stands."

The cigaret smoke curled up between them as Fred fixed his eyes intently on Peterson's.

"One more question. What's this about someone tippin' him off to the gold shipments?"

Peterson laughed. "That's an old cry of Gallup's. He figures Cutter works with somebody in Rock Creek. Yuh see, there's no gold around here, but a lot of it is shipped through on the stages. Why, just yesterday this Cutter held up the N. A. stage. There was a gun fight but Cutter got away. Gallup was a passenger on the stage and he says he shot him." He leaned forward, as if struck by a sudden idea. "If anyone's been tippin' him off, it's Gallup himself! He could pick up a lot of information from the drivers and guards in the Blue Lightnin'!"

Fred thought it over. "Sounds reasonable," he said, "but my first job is to get Cutter. After that we can worry about the hombre who's workin' with him."

"You're welcome to sleep on that cot tonight, if yuh want to," Peterson said, getting up. "The boys'll be gettin' lickered up at the Blue Lightnin' and it'd be dangerous for yuh to show yore face, even goin' upstairs to a room."

"What about my hoss? I left him back at yore stable, a big buckskin."

"I'll see that he's taken care of," Peterson assured him. At the door he paused and returned for his gun-belt on the desk. "I want to warn yuh, though. Yuh better be gettin' out of here bright and early, if yuh expect to beat me to your brother Cutter Andrews!"

After the hotel man was gone, Fred put out the light and sat on the edge of the cot. With the town's temper what it was, the best thing would be to grab Cutter fast and head south and east back to Austin. But he didn't like to leave without knowing who had sent the message and who was Cutter's partner in the town. He pondered it while he smoked another cigaret, then he pulled off his boots and stretched before lying down on the cot.

A window looked out on the stable. The lantern was still burning dimly and Fred saw his buckskin still standing at the tie-rail. He reached for his boots, mentally damning Peterson for a forgetful cuss, and squeezed into them.

The door squeaked as he eased it open, so he pulled it suddenly and stopped out into the blackness.

"Watch out! He's comin' out!" a voice yelled, almost in his ear. A sixgun crashed and the bullet smacked into the door jamb beside his head!

Fred's gun leaped into his hands and their twin cracks sent hot lead whistling above the heads of the scurrying shadows that were darting into the alleys beside the hotel. He dropped to the ground as a deep-throated Sharps hurled its heavy pellet through the glass of the window. No time now to figure out what had gone wrong. Someone must have seen him through the window, talking to Peterson, and from the resemblance jumped to the conclusion that he was Cutter!

He inched forward along the ground,

aiming at the brush between him and the stable. Colts barked, their bullets flying over him and thudding into the wall. Fred held his fire, moving slowly.

All the shots were coming from the right and left, from the alleys. No one, apparently had gone into the brush ahead of him. When he was ten feet from the brush he jumped to his feet and turned around.

"Fire at the base of the wall, boys!" he yelled. "The hombre's probably huggin' the dust!" He pointed his Colts at the ground and squeezed the triggers. They roared and were echoed by a fiery symphony from the sides.

But the ruse had worked. Fred heard the lead splintering the wood of the hotel wall. He pointed his gun at the window. Glass crashed and broke on the ground and Fred raised his voice again.

"Somebody's shootin' too high! Pull 'em down! That there polecat must be diggin' hisself a hole!"

He fired once more, then turned and smashed through the brush to the stable. He caught up the buckskin's reins with one hand and sent the lantern spinning to the ground with the other. The flame sputtered and went out, but a shout arose from the hotel. The guns turned and sent their long, red fingers of death probing through the night in search of him.

Under the touch of his spurs, the buckskin whirled and the lead flew harmlessly into the night sky. Fred ducked a low-hanging branch as the big horse lunged into the road. He pulled him to the right, away from the town, and the shouts and the sound of the guns soon merged into the thunder of the hoofs and then faded.

Later, he swung off the trail into the mesquite and the desert cactus, heading west, in the direction of Eagle Pass.

NIGHT HAD again shrouded Rock Creek when Fred Andrews returned. This time he wasn't alone. A rope trailed from his saddlehorn to the bridle of a horse on which sat a man with his hands tied behind him. He was big, dirty, and unshaven, with blood caked on his shirt and a rough bandage plastered over a bullet-hole in his shoulder.

But it wasn't Cutter.

"I ain't goin' to let them see yuh, Murdock," Fred said over his shoulder. "They'd be ready to string up any member of Cutter's gang. A mob done out of a lynchin' ain't never too happy about it."

The posse had passed him about an hour ago, while he hid in a clump of cottonwoods off to the side of the road. He knew they'd be in an ugly mood, riding all day and now riding back empty-handed.

"I'm aimin' to pick up somebody else to take back to Austin with us," he went on to his unresponsive prisoner. "And get a bit of so-called evidence he's got in the shape of a silver disk."

They approached the hotel stable quietly and found it dark and deserted, the lantern crumpling under the buckskin's hoof where Fred had thrown it to the ground the night before. He prodded his prisoner down off the horse with the muzzle of his six-gun and pushed him into the stable. Then he felt around until he located an empty stall and dumped Murdock into it, tying his feet securely so he couldn't move.

The broken window of Peterson's office had been covered with oiled paper. From its dull orange glow, Fred knew the lamp was burning behind it, and he hoped Peterson was in there. There was one way to find out. He opened the door and stepped in, his Colt ready in his hand.

The room was empty. Or seemed empty until a voice spoke behind him.

"I been waitin' for yuh, ranger!" It was Peterson's, low, and hard, and cold. Fred felt the .44 jab into the small of his back. "Drop yore gun!"

Fred opened his fingers and the Colt fell to the floor. Slowly, he raised his arms.

"Don't reach for the other one," Peterson snarled, "or I'll blast yuh!" He shoved Fred over to the desk, lifting the other Colt from the ranger's holster as he did so, and turned him around. The hotel man's thin face was tight and his eyes were mean and wary.

"If yuh hadn't come in with that gun in yore hand, I wouldn't of pulled down on yuh. But that gave yuh away. Yuh know I'm the gent who's been workin' with Cutter!"

"More than that," Fred told him. "I know you're the hombre that shot old man Curtis and robbed the express office."

"That's a damn lie!" Peterson's face worked with fury. "I had nothin' to do with it!"

"That's one murder yuh can't palm off on Cutter. Cutter was dead before Curtis was killed. He was shot while holdin' up the N. A. stage!"

Peterson's eyes searched Fred's face, then he smiled, his lips curving sardonically. "That suits me fine! Cutter dead, and you're the next to bed-down on boot-hill! Give me that ranger appointment and be quick about it!"

Fred reached in his pocket and pulled out the rectangle of paper. Peterson snatched it from his hand and balled it up, then dropped it on the floor. Keeping his eyes on Fred, he put his foot on the paper and worked it back and forth. The paper dirtied and tore as the leather of Peterson's boot ground it into the floor. In a moment it was a shredded, unreadable, and unrecognizable pulp.

"Now yuh don't have nothin' to show yuh ain't Cutter!" He backed away, an evil, triumphant light shining in his eyes. "The posse's on the other side of that door, still thirstin' for Cutter's blood. And I'm the gent that's goin' to give it to them!" He laughed in Fred's face as he levelled the .44. "This'll be the first time a ranger was hung for the crime of a hombre he was tryin' to catch!"

The .44 boomed in the small room and the heavy pellet smacked into Fred's thigh and hurled him back against the desk. He saw Peterson come toward him, upraised, and he lifted his arm to fend off the blow, but the gun smashed down, catching him on the side of the skull. A racking pain tore across the back of his neck. A pit of blackness opened in front of him and he tumbled into it, slumping to the floor. Dimly, he heard Peterson kick over a chair and fire another shot. Then the door burst open and men were pouring into the room.

"What's goin' on?"

"It's Cutter!" Peterson cried. "The hombre jumped me in the office!"

Rough hands grabbed Fred and dragged him along the floor, dumping him in a heap in the other room. A sharp boot caught him under the ribs and he moaned and tried to sit up. He struggled to speak but a wave of nausea overcame him and he fell back, retching.

"Get a rope!" he heard Peterson say. "This here lynchin' party's goin' to come off on schedule!"

FRED FELT the warm blood gush from the wound in his leg and pain exploded in it as someone grabbed the leg and pulled him toward the door. He jerked to a stop with Gallup's deep voice cutting through the uproar.

"This here's goin' to be done fit and proper," the saloon owner said. "The sheriff can clap him in the hoosgow until he can stand trial."

"Trial, hell!" someone shouted. "He's lived long enough!"

Peterson's snarl came through the murmur. "If we don't hang him now, I'll shoot him where he lays!"

"Put yore hand on that sixgun," Gallup's voice came evenly but heavy with threat, "and I'll blast yuh where yuh stand!" The room fell silent for a moment, the Gallup spoke again. "Pick a couple of men, Sheriff, and carry the skunk out. I'll see that nobody jumps down yore back."

Fred felt himself lifted, gently this time. He tried again to speak, but the blackness came up around him, walling him in, until it swept over his head and he lost consciousness.

He was brought to by a bucket of water being sloshed in his face. He was lying on a rough wooden bench in the one-room shack that was the Rock Creek jail and Gallup and the sheriff were standing over him. The sheriff looked from Gallup to his prisoner and shook his head, worriedly.

"This ain't goin' to work, Ben," the sheriff said, jerking his thumb at the door. "Peterson's out there workin' them up to a pitch where they'll rush this place any minute. They're itchin' to hang this gent and I don't figger on stoppin' them."

"Get out there and talk him down," Gallup told him. "Hold them while I see if I can pry a few answers out of this hombre." The sheriff turned and went out the door and Gallup stooped over Fred and shook him.

"Yuh heard what he said, Cutter. I'll try to save yuh from the mob if yuh'll come clean on who's been tippin' yuh off!"

Fred forced the words from his mouth. "I ain't Cutter."

Gallup straightened with surprise at the unexpected answer. "Now I've heard everythin', that comin' from you!" He shrugged. "Yuh want them to drag yuh out of here by yore neck?"

Fred pulled himself to a sitting position, shaking his head to clear the fuzziness from it. "I'm a ranger, his brother come to get him." He made a motion toward his shirt pocket. "Look in there."

Gallup reached over and felt in the pocket. He pulled out Fred's tobacco sack and his papers and along with them, a note. Fred waited while the big man read it. Then he asked, "Ever seen that before?"

"Shore! It's the message I sent to Austin, to Ranger headquarters, askin' them to send a man up here to rid us of that murderin' outlaw!"

"I'm the man they sent. If yuh don't believe me, look in the stable behind Peterson's hotel. I got one of Cutter's gang in there, tied up. He told me Peterson's the one who's been givin' them the dope on the gold shipments."

"Peterson!" Gallup half-started for the door to the jail. Peterson's voice could be heard outside, telling the sheriff to turn the prisoner over to the mob.

"Where's Cutter?" Gallup asked Fred tensely.

"Cutter's dead. Yuh killed him when yuh shot him in that stage hold-up two days ago." Fred paused. "Which means that Cutter ain't the one that killed Curtis."

"Then Peterson must be the one who did." Gallup lifted the Colts from his holsters and walked to the window. "He's out there now, yellin for justice, the dirty polecat!" Suddenly, doubt and indecision swept over his face. "Still, yuh may be lyin' to save yore hide!"

"If yuh think I shot the ranger and stole the note, then check with the hombre in Peterson's stable." Fred raised a hand and rubbed his neck. "But don't waste no time. Remember a ranger's neck can stretch just as far as an outlaw's!"

"I'll check, but in the meantime I'll take a chance on yuh. Here." He offered one of his sixguns to the ranger. "This is to protect yoreself."

Fred shook his head and pushed it away. "In the first place, I don't want to shoot down no innocent men. And in the second, it wouldn't do no good anyway. There's too many of them."

HE BOLTED the back door after the retreating Gallup and then went to the window and looked out. Fully as many men were gathered in front of the jail as he'd seen in the street the night he arrived in Rock Creek. The same emotions played on their faces, rage and blood-lust, and Peterson was working on them, lifting them to the point where they'd knock the sheriff aside and break down the rickety wooden door of the jail.

Fred hobbled to a corner of the window where he could see the flat step in front of the door. The pain in his leg had deepened to a dull throb, but he could stand and move

on it if he gritted his teeth and slid along carefully.

Peterson was bare-headed, his black Stetson gone, and his broadcloth coat wrinkled and dust-covered. He yelled something to the crowd, pointed to the door behind him, and the crowd roared back. The sheriff tried to speak but the roar broadened and swelled and he was shouted down.

"Not quite," Fred said to himself. "He doesn't quite have them where they'll say the hell with the law and come in and take me."

He limped back to the bench and sat down on it, closing his eyes. If Gallup would only hurry! Doubts began to assail him. Suppose somebody'd found Murdock and taken him off somewhere else. Or the outlaw refused to tell Gallup what he'd told him! Gallup might even have a tough time finding enough men to back him up in putting down the mob!

A stone, crashing through the window, jarred him out of his speculations. Another followed it, and another, bouncing crazily across the room. Now the howling of the mob beat in upon him!

"Around to the back!" Peterson shouted. "See that he don't get away that way!"

The door shivered as something whacked against it. It shivered again and then bulged in the middle. The timbers cracked and splintered and the door gave way with a grinding crash.

Peterson was the first one in, waving his .44. He levelled it at the ranger, but someone knocked up his arm, shouting, "Hey, this is a stretchin' not a shootin'!"

A fist swung at his jaw and Fred stood and took it, letting it knock him into the wall. Surprised at his lack of resistance, they pushed and shoved him out the door into the street. Fred saw Peterson hovering close by, his .44 ready to cut him down if he tried to speak to the mob. But speaking would be useless. The noose was already swinging over the empty saddle of a prancing stallion.

Eager hands lashed his wrists together and then threw him roughly into the saddle. They held the stallion quiet while a horseman spurred close to fit the noose over the ranger's head. But when the rider got beside him, the man turned and his six-guns flashed high over the crowd's heads.

"Don't move, none of yuh!"

It was Gallup, his deep voice bellowing out and his guns holding the lynch-crazed mob at bay!

"I'm callin' this place a court and these here guns are makin' me the judge!" He singled out Peterson, standing on the step in front of the jail. "And what this court aims to prove is that the rascal who's been workin' with Cutter is none other then yore old friend Peterson!"

Peterson stepped back into the doorway of the jail, his jaws tight and his eyes hot with rage. "Yore a dam' liar, Gallup!" he snarled.

"I'm goin' to prove it! Bring up the first witness."

Murdock was led forward and the mob broke to let him through. He looked neither to right nor left, his head hanging forward, staring at the ground.

"This here's one of Cutter's gang," Gallup told them. "Now Murdock, yuh said yuh'd point out the hombre who's been tellin' yuh about the gold shipments." He dropped his voice. "Is it that gent standin' in the doorway?"

All eyes turned on Murdock. The renegade lifted his head and looked down the open lane, directly at Peterson.

"Yes," he said, in a loud, clear voice.

"Damn yuh!"

The oath was punctuated by the crack of a .44 and Murdock gasped and sagged into the dust.

Gallup's guns boomed from beside Fred and Peterson fell back into the jail, smoke still wreathing upward from the barrel of his .44. He pulled himself up on an elbow, his face contorted with pain, trying desperately to draw a bead on the big figure of the saloon owner.

Gallup's guns roared again and the body of the hotel man jerked. The gun slid from his hand and his head fell forward until it hit the floor. Then he lay still.

"That finishes Peterson," Gallup said, reaching down and slashing the cords binding Fred's wrists. Fred brought his hands around and began to rub them to bring back the circulation.

"Thanks, pardner," he said. He looked at the long, thin form lying in death on the floor of the jail. "I guess that's as fitten a place as any for him to die."

By GIFF CHESHIRE

If his high-flying partner, young Johnny Tone, was a cow-thieving outlaw, Bing Poindexter wanted to know it. And neither a hireling drygulcher, nor all the spooked cattle stampeding to trample his bones into the alkali dust, could stop him from finding out!

FIGHTING PARTNERS OF THE LONG LOOP

Hard-Hitting Novelette

As Johnny reached to pull his own gun, the third man shot him.

Chapter I

"RUSTLER, MAKE TRACKS!"

WHEN HE came quietly over the rise above the P&T corrals on Poker Creek, Bing Poindexter saw his partner pass the money to Cass Runyan. Runyan was stuffing the folded currency into his pants pocket when both men whirled to stare up at Bing. There was a bold, pasty grin on Runyan's lips. Johnny Tone, looking guilty as hell, turned defiantly.

Bing rode down the hoofed-up trail, a feeling of apprehension rising in him. The stock pens ran in three units along the creek, built so the cattle could water, and there was a slaughter house beyond. Trink Froebel, who did the slaughtering here at Auburn for the P&T Meat Company, was not in evidence. A silence, broken only by the creek's quiet chatter, held as Bing stepped out of the saddle.

He studied Runyan, a shady character from down Steens Mountain way; one of the questionable gentry who ran the wide-open southeastern Oregon deserts. Bing

Poindexter had never cottoned to Runyan nor troubled to conceal the fact. He hated to have Johnny taking up with the man, although he knew Johnny wasn't attracted to Runyan, himself, so much. It was Cass Runyan's wispy, sultry sister Laurie who was leading Johnny around like a bull with a ring in its nose. This gave her brother Cass a lot more influence over him than was healthy for Johnny.

There were better than a hundred new steers in the corrals; steers which Johnny had just brought in from a buying trip down along the Owyhee. They would make prime beef for P&T's butcher shop outlets in the teeming gold camps of Auburn, Griffin, and Elk Creeks.

Bing let his gaze hit Johnny Tone with a slap. "Are we buying beef from Runyan now?"

Johnny colored. "I hired him to help me chouse 'em in. This stuff is plumb wild. Bought it from those outlanders down west of Steens Mountain. Cass caught up with me on the trail, and he was coming in. He helped me and I paid him. So what?"

Anger spilled in Bing, pushing him beyond caution. "So we still don't buy any rustled beef from Cass Runyan!"

He expected the big Runyan to take it up, and he wasn't disappointed. Runyan heeled around, lifting his eyes from the dust to stare at Bing with cold insolence. "Them're words you're going to eat, Poindexter!"

"Try and feed 'em to me, Runyan!"

Johnny Tone broke it up. "Cut it out! You go on, Cass. Tell Laurie I'll see her this evening." They were none of them soft men. The tension held until Johnny repeated, "Cass, go on!" With a cold, threatening smile, Runyan heeled, stepped into saddle and rode over the rise. Johnny Tone brought bleak eyes back to his partner. "That was a hell of a thing to say, Bing."

Bing's voice was still heated. "You don't think I believed that story, do you?"

Johnny shrugged. "No," but offered no further explanation. He swung astride his own sweaty mount and cast a speculative glance at the late afternoon sun. They rode the short distance into the huge mining camp in silence. They left their horses in the stable behind the P&T butcher shop, and Johnny turned without a word and headed for the hotel where they had adjoining rooms.

Uncertainty came to Bing Poindexter as he simmered down. He wanted to believe Johnny had told the truth. Bing went through the back of the building, along the corridor between the screened lockers where dressed beef cooled. He turned into his office behind the front room, with its case of beef cuts, its big meat blocks and the two butchers who ran this shop for P&T. This was only one of a whole string of butcher shops in this camp.

Bing dropped into the chair behind his desk with a sigh. If Johnny hadn't sounded him out so broadly a couple of months back Bing would have believed him without question now. Johnny had cautiously put it in the form of a joke. "Man, we'd have a gold mine of our own if we picked up some of the stuff running loose from the Owyhee brakes to Summer Lake! Usually I find the steer long before I can locate their owner to put good honest money in his hand. Seems plumb foolish to me, I swear.

Bing hadn't even liked it as a joke. Now when Johnny still had a rustling charge hanging over him in the Montana country. Not when Johnny had a sister like Sara Tone, who was meat and drink to Bing Poindexter and who would be his bride come fall. Particularly not when there was a hard, simple honesty in Bing Poindexter that would keep him from so much as taking a pin belonging to anybody else.

He had snapped, "Damn you, Johnny, I'm not saying anything against your girl, but you keep picking up her brother's ideas and I'll skin you alive!"

Johnny had shrugged, dismissing it, and Bing had forgotten it until less than an hour ago when he had seen money pass from Johnny to Cass Runyan. A naturally rambling man, a giant where his sister strangely was tiny, Cass was widely known and even popular. He was a drinking man, a fighting man, and a good hoorawing companion in the fleshpots festering all through eastern Oregon's gold region. Nobody cared, much, that he was widely suspected of swinging a hungry loop on his frequent, unexplained absences. Bing wouldn't have cared except that since Johnny had fallen for Laurie Runyan, he and Cass had grown thicker and thicker. He wouldn't have cared even then, but for Johnny's record.

It was probable that Johnny didn't realize how much Sara Tone had told Bing about her kid brother. Johnny was several years younger than Sara and built to a different pattern. Chunky, dark, tough as whang leather. Truculent, moody at times, but winning withal. Sara was fair and looked fragile—though Bing had learned that this last was deceptive—and five years older than Johnny's twenty-one. She was a year younger than Bing, himself . . .

BING HEARD the shop door bang, out front, and there was an instant commotion. A girl's throaty voice cried, "He's in back, and I'm going to see him if I have to take one of your big meat cleavers to you, mister!"

It was Laurie Runyan. Bing was on his feet when she stomped down the corridor and turned through the door into his office. She halted a few paces from him, legs spread, small brown hands flat on the shapely thighs that showed through her faded jeans. A small gun nestled in a holster there. Her short brown hair was tangled, and the deep brown eyes in her tanned face flashed.

Bing's heart skipped a beat as he stared at her, wondering if she realized how well her boy's shirt hugged her firm young breasts and suspecting that she did.

"You always blow into a place like this?" he asked softly.

"This is one I'm going to blow apart," raged Laurie Runyan, "if you don't mind your own Ps and Qs, Bing Poindexter! I saw Cass down street and he told me you tried to pick a squabble with him! You've tried to sour Johnny Tone on me since the day we met! Now you're trumping up some rotten rustling charge—!"

"Simmer down, sis!" Bing told her, grinning. When she drew back a hand as if to slap him, he grabbed her wrist. When she tried to twist away, he folded her into his arms, aware suddenly that the little hell cat might have decided to blow a hole in him. Holding her till she stopped wiggling, he developed a new appreciation of what Johnny was up against. This girl, who was as wild as all the other things that ran the desert, could have her way with most any man. He pushed her roughly into a chair, finally, still grinning at her. "What do you expect to do about it?"

He knew that she was blinking back tears, her pretty brown face held tight against them. She hurled his question right back at him. "What do *you* expect to do about it?"

"Why," Bing said, "I don't reckon I'll do anything, unless I have to. You're wrong about me not wanting Johnny to marry you. He's of age. Only, I don't want Cass luring him back into things he ought to stay away from."

"Such as what?" Laurie demanded.

"If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you, Laurie. If you'll marry Johnny and help him settle down, I'm all for you."

"I'm going to marry Johnny, and darned if I have to make you any promises! And I can take my own part! You keep slurring me to Johnny, and be darned if I won't put daylight through your onery hide!" She stood up, all five shapely feet of her, her smoky young eyes holding his gaze for a moment, a deadly enmity in them. Then she whirled and disappeared through the door, and he could follow her progress through the butcher shop by the stomp of her small, scuffed boots.

Bing went out front, exchanging a grin with Chunk Smith and Curly Watson, his meat cutters here in Auburn. Both were waiting on customers, and Bing passed on into the street. The town sprawled under weeping willows, a disordered spread of log cabins and tents. It was the heart of the Blue Mountains mining region, with a population estimated at five thousand. It was a rich diggings, and the year before two miners were said to have taken a hundred thousand in gold dust from their claims on French Creek by panning alone. The wide-open camp had attracted all the usual camp followers as well: bunco artists, gamblers, and bad men.

Bing Poindexter was convinced that Cass Runyan was trying to chisel into the P&T Meat Company through Johnny Tone, for dishonest purposes. It was true that enough maverick and semi-maverick beef ran the eastern Oregon ranges to make a man rich if he wanted to get a little careless with his conscience. But Poindexter and Tone had operated three years on honest principles, paying good prices to market-hungry grazers, driving the stuff in to scattered holding pens to be fed, and slaughtered, and supplying butcher shops in a score of

camps. Though Bing had thought up the scheme himself, he had been glad to take Johnny in as a partner. Yet he meant to keep it an honest business.

His introduction to the Tones had been vigorous. One night shortly after his arrival in camp he had entered a deadfall to find Johnny there, two-thirds drunk, gleefully battling three men at once. It was patently hopeless, and though there were half a hundred impartial observers already, Bing had, for some reason, immediately taken sides. Maybe it was Johnny's flashing eyes or the confident, boyish grin on his lips. Johnny had a chair, which he was using to hold a couple of them off while he worked on a third with lashing boots and a jabbing fist.

Bing had no interest in the fight, but he wanted to save the kid from a mauling. When he saw a man behind Johnny lift a gun barrel to belt Johnny one, Bing waded in. Between them, he and Johnny wound it up fast. Outside, Johnny told him this had been a little argument; that he'd been in bigger ones. He had been in a poker game with the trio. It had begun to look fishy to him, and he had said so. That was all.

Now it looked like Johnny Tone was getting sucked into a bigger game than perhaps he realized. And the ruckus that could grow from it could surpass everything in the boy's wild young life.

BING turned into the little lending library Sara Tone had established. She had imported countless books, a large percentage of them paper back novels, and she had a large file of newspapers of various ages from widely separated localities. It wasn't that Johnny didn't make enough money to support them in comfort; Sara shared some of Johnny's restlessness and she wanted something to do.

She was alone in the small room, and when she saw the trouble in Bing's eyes, she looked at him closely. "Bing, what's up? Johnny was in a moment ago and loaded for bear about something. Have you quarreled again?"

Bing looked at her, his pulses stirring. She was in marked contrast to Laurie Runyan but lacking none of Laurie's charms. In the months of their engagement he had learned what lay behind the calm reserve of her fair, classic features, what churned in her tall, slim body. He didn't want to tell her what he suspected about Johnny and Cass Runyan, for she had worried enough about her brother.

He recalled now what she had told him after they had got well acquainted, when they had first been aware that they were falling in love. "I'm a renegade, Bing. No fooling. Johnny's wanted for cattle rustling, and I helped him get away. I'm aiding and abetting a criminal. You'd better know that before this thing goes any further."

Yet, Bing had learned, Sara was not certain whether Johnny had actually been guilty. She had taught school in what was currently the easternmost part of the far-flung Idaho Territory, beyond the Bitterroots. They had lost their parents years before, and Johnny had always been a hard one to hold down. His life had become more and more a mystery to her. Then a man, who had long befriended them, warned her: "They think Johnny's riding with the Calvert boys. They've got a trap set, and they'll hang the bunch of 'em. You've got to get a dally on that kid, somehow." The Calverts were notorious outlaws.

The only thing Sara could think of was to run, and the fact that Johnny had been more than willing to cooperate seemed to indicate that he was guilty. Yet he had denied it, while maintaining that there were incriminating circumstances that would have got him hung, whether or no, if they stayed in those parts. The Calverts were caught, all right, and it had been a close shave.

Bing did not want to revive all her old fears and griefs now. He smiled at her easily and said, "Mebbe Johnny's quarreled with his girl. The Runyans came in with him from the Owyhee. I don't reckon it'd be hard to pick a fight with that little Laurie." He saw the tension leave her. "Honey, I gotta go outta town for a few days. Mean to leave before daylight, so I figured I'd better tell you now."

She didn't inquire into it, since P&T business took him over a wide sweep of country. It was their custom to have supper together when Bing was in camp, which they did this evening. Afterward, securing a horse for Sara from the livery, they rode through lengthening evening shadows to

Baker City, where their home was being built of the vicinity's volcanic stone that cut and shaped so easily but hardened when weathered.

Though greatly influenced by the surrounding mining country, Baker City was far less geared to gold than most the other camps. Facing fertile, beautiful Powder River Valley, it was suited to agriculture and grazing, as well. Though lusty and teeming, it had an air of permanence that appealed to Bing Poindexter, and he had picked it thoughtfully for their permanent residence.

This night they found all the small pleasures of gaging the stonemasons' slow progress since their last visit, while night rolled in from the mixed flats and hills to the east. Thinking of the steel-gray stone that quickly set forever in the shape the stonecutters gave it, Bing kept recalling Johnny Tone. Three-four years more of weathering would give him the shape that he would keep. It had to be right.

While they rode back toward Griffin Creek, night now warm and buoyant about them, it kept turning in Bing's mind, and at length he said, "Sara, a woman feels those things better than a man. Is Laurie Runyan good or bad?"

He heard a small breath that was like a sigh. "So you've been worrying about it, too. Bing, a woman's opinion about another is also apt to be prejudiced. I won't say. But this I can say. Cass Runyan is no good for Johnny. Can't you break it up?"

He grinned wryly, not answering. They left their mounts at the stable, and because it had grown late Sara went at once to her hotel. Bing bought a cigar at the stand in the lobby as he left, lighting it in rumination and pausing on the hotel's broad porch through several long puffs. He dropped down the steps and turned down the sidewalk, knowing where Johnny and Cass would be, if Johnny was not with Laurie.

Chapter II

FISTS AND GUNSMOKE

AS HE entered the Wheel of Fortune saloon, he saw at a glance that Cass was there, already two-thirds drunk, and beyond Cass, at the bar, he saw Johnny. Bing walked up, relaxing his features with an effort of will, dropping the tension out of his tall body. He elbowed the bar beyond Johnny, grinned and said lightly, "I'll buy 'em." He let the cigar fall and ground it out with his boot.

Johnny looked at him, without truculence but also without the old quick friendliness. Cass turned toward Bing, his heavy face flushed and loose from drinking, the nearly black eyes he shared with Laurie cloudy and speculative. He was on the point of refusing, of building the quarrel, when Johnny said, "Why not?", and Bing signalled the bar tender.

Still trying to sound as if he were talking off-hand, Bing said, "Johnny, I'm pulling out ahead of you, in the morning. I figure on a swing through the Upper Powder River country. After that I'll probably check up at Galeno and Susanville, then drop down to Dixie and Marysville. From there maybe I'll come on back, or maybe I'll swing over to Canyon City first." He saw Cass Runyan making careful note of these points. Still in a matter-of-fact way, Bing added, "And, Johnny, I reckon you'd better pick up bills of sale from here on. We've been a little careless about that. We might get into trouble."

Cass Runyan had lifted the shot-glass before him and he put it back quickly. Half turning, he shoved Johnny out of the way, so that he and Bing were staring directly at each other. The tension spread out, and others turned to look. Puzzled, a little resentful at having been shoved by Cass, yet more resentful of what Bing had said, Johnny Tone stood stock still.

"I've had killing talk from you twice today, Poindexter," Cass said. He was tense, emphasizing his enormity. His heavy fingers were spread ever so slightly, the big right arm crooked, hanging above his gun.

Bing had his right elbow hooked on the bar, at every disadvantage, and he knew that if he straightened Cass would go for his gun. He did not want that. Having his girl's brother killed by his so-called best friend would be the worst thing that could happen to Johnny. And Bing figured that he was at least an even match for Cass.

Bing turned it carefully in his mind as he watched Cass. He could only guess at what drew Johnny to the man. It had to

be more than the fact that the man had a sister with the qualities of a she-animal. It could be a kid's hero worship. Sara had thought that this had been what once drew Johnny to the Calvert bunch. Killing Cass would make him a martyr, as far as Johnny was concerned. But whipping him—which would be considerable of an undertaking—might destroy any illusions Johnny had as to the man's glamour.

"It's not a killing matter yet, Cass," said Bing, his voice calm. "But if it sounds like fight talk to you, let's drop our belts and have at it."

Cass grinned then. It seemed like a sure thing to him, for he was twenty pounds heavier than Bing Poindexter, thoroughly seasoned in saloon brawling. "It sounds like fight talk!" Cass said, and reached for the buckle of his gunbelt.

For a moment after they were ready, they measured each other. Cass had placed his big, floppy hat on the bar and now a shock of brick-red hair stood straight up in the saloon's greasy lamplight. Bing, likewise stripped down, had lost his cool grin. They stared at each other. Both had fought victoriously in this camp. The tight-lipped watchers looked at one another with undecided glances.

Cass Runyan bore in. He gathered his broad body and jumped at Bing. Outguessing him, Bing shoved quickly aside, eluding the scooping arms. He jabbed a clenched fist into Cass' face, feeling the bite of short whiskers, then the solid jolt of flesh and bone. He let Cass' weight shove the man on past. Somebody breathed an awed "By God!" and Cass balanced and heeled around.

It was a shade deadlier now, more evenly balanced than the spectators had guessed, than Cass Runyan had expected. Again they poised in vacant-faced survey. Abruptly Cass took a step toward Bing, who refused to budge. With a light crossstep, Cass cut in, elbows letting no lamplight past his thick sides. Again Bing clipped a fast, hard blow to the face, then Cass began pumping his brawny arms. Bent forward, feet solid, slugging it. There was a flurried moment in which Bing's brain reeled as he absorbed the shock of direct, heedless, brutal blows.

He pushed Cass away, aware of the salty blood-taste in his mouth, the trembling excitement taking the starch out of his knees. Cass Runyan stayed upright like a filled barrel. When he was tipped off balance he was as clumsy as one. Bing worked with that piece of hard-won knowledge. He outreached Cass. He drove in long punches and he had Cass tilting. He pulled his chin against his collar bone and pressed harder. Cass dropped his guard to swing into balance with his arms. Bing put everything he had into it, and it wasn't enough. Cass absorbed it, his sweat-glistening face turning bloody, a shade darker than the bristling hair. He got his boots solidly on the puncheon floor.

He opened his arms and clamped them like the jaws of a giant steel trap about Bing's heaving shoulders. He pulled Bing in. He crossed his right foot over his left instep and hooked Bing's legs. A jerk of his powerful leg, and Bing's legs flipped from under him.

Cass dropped him in dead weight. The shock of slamming the hard floor mixed with the surprise in Bing's jolted brain. He expected Cass to go to work with his bootheels, but Cass had another plan. He straddled Bing as Bing tried to rise. His hands clamped on Bing's loins and heaved upward, lifting the lighter man. He raised Bing feet first and began to pound his head against the floor as a man might drive a pointed fence post into the ground to start it for the maul.

Bink knew that he faced brutal death. He used his shoulders, but they gave him scant protection. He jerked an arm free and clamped onto Cass' thick legs. He got his head between Cass' legs and kept it off the floor for a moment. Both were sweating enough that he slipped a little in Cass' clutch. He got his hand braced on the floor, stiffened the arm and lifted the point of his shoulder hard into Cass' groin. He slipped then into a heap on the floor and scrambled to his feet.

Cass was still stooped in pain, but Bing had no mercy after what he himself had taken. He surged in, whipping Cass about the face with the nail sides of half closed fists, tearing the man's face until the red whiskers seemed like reeds standing in a stream of blood. Cass shook the sickness out of his eyes. He bunched himself, and now his eyes were wholly merciless.

Bing had but one idea, to upset the man,

to get him down, to be the one who worked on top. His own features had been beaten beyond recognition by the floor, by Cass' thick fists. He was oblivious to everything except Cass' solid figure before him.

They measured yet again. Wary now, each respecting the other and mixing the respect with hatred. Cass hurtled forward again, and again Bing shoved aside, suddenly afraid of that bear hug, handicapped by the fear. Almost too late, he saw his chance as Cass rushed by him. He snaked out a tripping foot. Cass caught on it and crashed to his knees, head and shouders ploughing against the floor. Lifting both feet, Bing jumped on him, trying to break him flat.

Cass rolled over, taking Bing's weight on his slablike belly muscles, and some rising sense of decency kept Bing from working on his face and head. Then Cass had a foot in his grip and he twisted it, throwing Bing sidewise to crash to the floor. They rolled into a sweaty lock, Cass trying to crush Bing's chest in his massive arms. As he held breath against it, blackness swirled on the perimeter of Bing's dazed mind. He rammed the top of his head hard against Cass' chin. Again and again, each time himself seeing exploding lights of dazzling white. He kept it up in a mechanical frenzy even after his tardy awareness that Cass' great hulk of a body had grown wholly still.

His lungs burned flamingly, and dizziness swept over him as he staggered to his feet. His legs, conversely, were weak and feelingless, and he looked at his sweaty fists to see them ground raw and bloody. He lurched to the bar and got his hat in a purely automatic action. He pulled it onto his aching head, then saw Johnny. He managed a puffed-lip grin.

"Well, see you in about a week, Johnny."

Johnny Tone met his gaze with stolid features, then pulled back broad shoulders and turned away.

THE SWING that Bing Poindexter made through the scattered gold camps where P&T had fresh beef outlets was a routine thing that he had employed now for a special purpose. As general manager, he found only ordinary problems. Business remained good, but the supply of live steers kept in the slaughter pens at each point was rapidly diminishing as the natural consequence. Bing told his local butchers that Johnny Tone, the buyer, was bringing a herd to the camps on and above the John Day next. After that he would drive a bunch into the Upper Powder River country.

He made the many scattered camps east of the Blue Mountains, then crossed them, swinging west to Galena and its sister camp of Susanville. It was the same thing there. P&T was prospering. The local shops needed a continual supply of steers. Bing grinned at their jokes about his battered features and told them that Johnny Tone would be bringing them more beef on the hoof. From Susanville, on the fifth day out, he swung southeast on the road to the Austin stage station and the military road that ran westward across two hundred fifty miles of dry desert to Dalles City.

Dread built in him, for he had laid a trap for Cass Runyan and Johnny Tone. Concurrently with Bing's trip, Johnny was scheduled to swing southwest into the Sylvies River country to replenish the slaughter pens at big, booming Canyon City, Dixie, and the others thereabouts. Bing had purposely elaborated on his own trip in the opposite direction. Now he was swinging south prematurely to see what he could discover for himself.

The soreness and sickness of his fight with Cass Runyan left him after the first day, though his face still bore livid marks. Mentally he felt worse as the days passed. Johnny's first reaction to Cass' defeat had not been good. Yet it was too early to tell, for sure. Cass Runyan was marred, now, a little less the hell-for-leather buckeroo he loved to seem. He might look a little different to Johnny, as time went on. Yet Bing had every thinking man's reactionary question as to what good the violence had achieved. He kept remembering Johnny's cold, accusing eyes that night.

He followed the trail the initial stampeders had broken along Willow Creek and between the forks of the John Day before better vehicular routes had been established throughout the gold region. From time to time he crossed one of the pole bridges they had built over the many creeks. He kept his hat tilted against a hot mid-afternoon sun, riding loose in the saddle. It was rolling country, mostly bare except for the Blue Mountains' timbering.

Bing was riding up out of a wash when it happened. The sun was in his eyes as he came up the rise, and he lowered his head against it. In a matter of seconds he was slammed out of the saddle, a sharp report out of the wild quietness ringing in his ears, a strange feeling of hurt and iciness streaking through his left shoulder. He hit the hot, bare earth on the other shoulder in jarring impact, all thought knocked out of his head except an awareness that his horse had scampered on.

He rolled onto hands and knees, shaking himself in a shuddering reaction. Caution returned, and he pressed flat hastily on the slope. It had sounded like a hand gun, he thought, and the slug had gashed a groove on top his shoulder that now let warm blood trickle down his back and chest. It still was too numb to hurt him. Reconstructing it in his mind, he located the point from which the slug must have sped, but the spot was empty now. His own gun had clattered out of leather, and he got his still sore fingers around it. He started to belly on up the slope.

He came over the top cautiously and saw nothing. The land fell quickly away again, folding upon itself, so that there were twisting ravines in every direction. He found tracks where the bushwhacker had come up the slope, and the place where the man had stretched flat on top the summit, his head undistinguishable in the scattered clumps of sage and rabbit brush. The man had scraped back and left fast. Then Bing heard a beat of hoofs to his left that diminished in loudness. His own mount had vanished entirely. That could be it; or it could be the bushwhacker.

Cursing softly, Bing ripped the left sleeve off his shirt and used it to bind the scuffed-up flesh on his shoulder. It was thawing now, hurting, catching fire. He wiped dirt out of the cylinder of his gun, checked it. He knew his own horse's tracks and he started to follow them. A short way down the trail he found the place where the busher had mounted and scrambled away. His own horse had galloped off in another direction and the ornery creature was apt to keep going.

Bing followed it at a dogged pace for an hour, his shoulder now on fire, the reaction putting both tension and a queasy stomach in him. Then he came upon his horse at a creek crossing, where it had stopped to drink and to graze on the tempting green grass at the ford. Bing caught it easily and swung into saddle.

He decided to leave the Austin trail and cut across country to the mining camp of Dixie, heading southwest. He had lost much time and night was close. It caught him far short of the camp. Not sure of directions, because the immediate country was strange to him, he cut more sharply south, knowing that eventually he would cross the military road. The country rose and fell, then abruptly he picked up the light of a sagebrush fire a quarter of a mile ahead.

He rode in cautiously. It was hard to figure out who had potted him, though the reason why was less remote. Cass Runyan had every reason to want to see him dead, yet the only way he could have accomplished this affair was by tagging him from point to point on the long trip. Bing recalled how well Cass had noted this itinerary when Bing had recounted it, that night in the Wheel of Fortune before the fight. It could have been Cass or some friend or hireling, for he was believed to have several shady characters working for him. Yet whoever it was could have started on this end of the route, keeping an eye open for Bing, laying for him when he had him spotted. Bing became thoroughly convinced of it.

There was no reason why this desert camp should be related to that, yet Bing rode up with his gun in his fist, calling out beforehand. As he expected, he saw nobody there as he approached. Himself halting beyond the perimeter of light, Bing called again, "Hello, there!"

"Come into the light, stranger!" a voice called.

BING batted his eyes, for it was a woman. He rode out, then, and a moment later Laurie Runyan stepped into view, her gun in her small brown fist. She looked at him strangely, then smiled. "So it's you, Bing. Who chewed the sleeve off your shirt?"

He stepped down, tossing the reins over his horse's head to drop to the ground. "You alone?"

"Not now."

Bing turned angry. "What're you doing out here by yourself?"

"I turned off the military road a ways to camp. A little privacy isn't a bad idea for a girl, with some of the people that travel along it. Who shot you, Bing?"

He looked at her levelly. "Did you?"

"Not yet." Her manner was a little different, almost subdued, he thought. "All right, tight mouth, tell me where you're heading."

"Here, for tonight," he said, and looked at her and grinned.

She met his gaze and smiled, finally. She jerked her head. "Grub's over there. I was saving that Johnny cake for breakfast, but help yourself."

He broke off some of the frying pan bread and poured himself coffee. Laurie's bed was already spread. She still wore jeans, but she had pulled on a jacket against the night's increasing chill. The firelight, striking her gaminesque face, set lights dancing in her eyes.

"You're kind of off your graze, aren't you?" asked Bing, between bites.

She regarded him thoughtfully. "How do you mean?"

"Thought you and Cass had a little two-bit outfit down on the Owyhee."

"I didn't go home. I stayed in Auburn. And your lady friend took it on herself to have a heart-to-heart talk with me." Laurie made a wry movement with her mouth. "She also thinks Cass and Johnny've been rustling."

"Don't you, Laurie?"

There was none of the hot anger of a week ago in Laurie Runyan now. She must have heard of the fight in which he had whipped her buckeroo brother, yet there was less resentment in her than he had ever found. She considered his question for a time. "Well, Bing, it wasn't you or your proud lady who made me wonder. I seen some things myself that looked funny. I reckon I'm doing what you're doing. I'm heading down Sylvies River, unexpected, to see what I can see."

Bing found himself wanting to believe that she had known nothing of her brother's activities. Yet, as he stared at her pert, pretty face he knew that she could only be trying to disarm him. He knew that she hadn't bushed him, for he had found man's tracks up there. Yet that could have been her purpose here. Remembering her hot outburst that day in the Auburn butcher-shop, it seemed strange that she showed no bitterness about his victory over Cass. She was so almighty proud where the family honor was concerned.

Abruptly Laurie said, "Is it all right if I trail with you, Bing?"

A minor, not unpleasant shock traveled through him. "Why, it's all right with me, kid. It's a couple of camps away, though. What do you suppose Johnny'd have to say to that?

"Johnny Tone's got some explaining to do to *me*," said Laurie. She strode off toward her blankets and in a moment, fully clad, was curled up and apparently half asleep.

Bing could see the rise and fall of her chest as he smoked, watching her. For the first time it struck him that innocence could be so thoroughgoing that it might look like something entirely different. He knew that she had had a rough life, a life filled entirely with hard-bitten men. She had never had much of a chance to learn the ladylike reticences that Sara Tone practiced. If she had any uneasiness about Bing Poindexter she didn't show it. Or this could come from too advanced a knowledge of life. Maybe it didn't matter much what man she was with, as long as it was a man. He looked at her small, cleancut figure for a long moment, then went to get his own blankets.

Chapter III

DESERT JUSTICE

THEY rode out in the early morning. Laurie had turned silent again, truculent and evasive. In indirect ways he questioned her again about her life. It was the same thing Johnny had already told him. She couldn't remember her parents. Cass had brought her up. Cass ran a few hundred cows down south. He was away a lot, and she was home mostly, except to ride into town with him from time to time. Bing guessed that she very well could know less about Cass than the rest of the country knew. But knowing the cut of her brother, he wasn't trusting her an inch.

In the late afternoon, that day, they rode through sprawling, lusty Canyon City, turning southward along Canyon Creek, passing west of Strawberry Mountain. They reached the eastern fork of the Sylvies and, half

down its length, made camp. Late the following day they rode into Harney Valley, a vast, sunlit reach, with the white crests of Steens Mountain far to the southeast. Bing Poindexter rode guardedly now. At any hour they should pick up the rolling dust cloud that would indicate moving cattle.

Bing expected them to be moving openly by now. If it was stolen beef, as he suspected, he figured that Cass Runyan's contacts would have gathered it far below, down around the Abert Lake country or even below the California line. Night fell upon them with nothing sighted, yet they kept riding. Bing grew a little puzzled. He had figured it over a number of times and expected to pick them up along here.

Once when they halted to blow their horses, Laurie laid a hand on Bing's arm. "Bing, I'm scared of what we might find." Fierceness crept into her voice. "But I'm still hoping you and that stuck-up Sara Tone have to eat your words!"

An hour after that they sighted a fire, far off on the flat desert, and very shortly the warm night air brought sounds of bedded cattle. Some of Laurie's reluctance built in Bing. He was half scared of what they would find, yet he knew, as she did, that for their peace of mind they had to do it.

Half an hour later they halloed the camp and rode in. Three men sat around the sage fire, though bedrolls were spread. In the fire's half light the battered face of Cass Runyan looked cruel and sinister as he flung a startled glance at the riders. Johnny Tone climbed to his feet, nervous fingers shoving up under his hat-band and through his hair. There was a third man who looked at them almost in indifference.

"Howdy, boys," said Bing, as he stepped down.

Cass Runyan stared at his sister. "What in blazes're you doing down here, Laurie?"

"Rode out to meet my feller," said Laurie. She smiled quizzically at Johnny, who broke gaze and looked at the ground.

Without going through the rest of it, Bing knew he had caught them with a stolen herd. No trumped-up excuse would account for Cass being here, though Johnny might somehow account for the other man. He wasn't quite ready for the showdown. He needed Laurie here, but suddenly he wished she was somewhere else.

He said, "Well, where's your manners, boys? We haven't had any supper."

Johnny turned toward the fire, where a kettle simmered. Around them, on the flat sweeps, several hundred cattle were bedded. If things went the way Bing feared, they would be fanning out across the benighted desert before long.

"Where'd you get 'em?" he asked Johnny.

Johnny didn't look up. "South of here."

"Got your bills of sale?"

Johnny heeled around then. "Why, yes. I've got a bill of sale."

"Who from?"

"Cass Runyan." As he spoke, Johnny's mouth hiked in a defiant grin.

From the corner of his eye, Bing saw Cass tense. The third man, a total stranger to Bing, was watching with impartial interest.

It was Laurie who broke the silence. "It's sure a surprise to me, Cass, that we've been running stuff this far from home."

Cass and Bing Poindexter stared at each other, two battered men whose cool eyes showed glints of a mutual, eternal hatred.

"It was a scurvy trick bringing her along, Poindexter," Cass said finally.

"He never brought me, Cass. I started out ahead of him. So they're right. You *are* a rustler." The young face turned bitter. "And you've gone and made a rustler out of Johnny."

"All right," said Cass. "I wish you'd never found it out. But you did. I'm a-going to kill you, Poindexter."

Johnny Tone intruded his voice. "Who shot you, Bing?"

"The man never left his name. He only left tracks with run-over heels on the rim."

Johnny threw a questioning look at Runyan. "That why you sent Turk McAllister off a few days ago, Cass?"

"Could be."

"You told me there wouldn't be any dirty work."

Cass' bruised face was thoughtful in the firelight. "Don't get proddy, Johnny. You ain't thinking. Laurie ain't going to have anything to do with me from here on, or you either. It's his meddlin'. He maybe even thinks he's going to turn us in. You forgot the Calvert bunch, Johnny? They'd hang you higher'n me."

"They won't hang anybody. Bing, you

take Laurie and get the hell outta here."

"They ain't going nowhere!" the third man snapped. Whatever his stake in it, he smelled danger, and he was growing taut.

BING POINDEXTER saw all of them searching for a decision. When he had made it, each would do whatever devolved upon him. No matter what it took. These were reckless, determined men. Yet Bing's own problem rose up now to paralyze him. Seeing the dark things working in Johnny, he realized that he liked the kid for more than the fact that he was Sara's hard-to-handle brother. He had a sense of personal failure. Somewhere he had bungled it badly. He had tried to make it easy and attractive to Johnny to step into an honest, profitable business. Maybe he had robbed it of flavor.

Maybe if he let it go, this second narrow squeak would cure Johnny. As yet Bing had heard no special complaint from stockmen about rustlers. They expected to have their big herds whittled on. When they caught a rustler they strung him up. Whenever he heard of such cases, Bing Poindexter had considered them justified. He had no right to excuse Johnny just because the kid was likeable and his personal friend. No county governments had formed as yet in the southeastern part of the state. It would be a matter of a vigilance committee, or at best the state government. There was that old charge hanging over Johnny . . .

It would be so easy to drop the matter, to warn Johnny, to let it go. Yet he knew that Cass Runyan would never let it drop. Out of his bitter hatred of Bing Poindexter, if nothing more, he would keep at Johnny, particularly if Johnny married his sister.

The third man, having no involvements other than his own safety, reached decision and action ahead of the rest. To make sure he had it his own way, he lifted his gun in a blurred movement. It caught the others flat-footed and covered them, Cass Runyan and Johnny, too.

"It's my turn to talk. Take it easy, Cass. I don't trust you since your sister's been roped in on the other side. It might make you change your mind about running Poindexter outta the meat company so you and Johnny can clean up in the gold camps on rustled beef. From the looks of him, he ain't going to run. We're still all right if you fellers're willing to plant him and the gal right here, good and deep. Who knows they come off down here? Hell, if anybody found out, they'd just think them two was having fun in the pretty moonlight, and had the hard luck to stumble onto some renegees."

The ugly casualness of it sickened Bing, and the feeling was heightened when he saw from Cass Runyan's face that the man was actually entertaining the idea. He had cared enough about his sister to want to keep her from knowing what he was up to, but now his neck and life were involved. As for Johnny—the kid stood in stunned immobility.

"If you're putting in with me, Cass," said the third man, "walk around behind them two and get their shooting irons and let's get rid of 'em."

There was a moment of silence when Cass Runyan stepped forward to comply.

It was Johnny Tone who broke it up. The third man shot him as Johnny reached to pull his own gun. Johnny went down, but it gave Bing Poindexter an iota of time in which to move. He shot the third man a split second before the man whirled toward him, the small advantage compensating for his sore, stiff knuckles.

It set Cass Runyan up with the advantage. Before Bing could spin toward him, Cass' voice rasped, "Drop that gun, Poindexter, or you get it through the head!"

Bing's every impulse was to defy the man, but he knew it would mean sure death. He let his gun drop to the sandy earth. Stepping forward, Cass kicked it away. Cass stepped around in front of Bing, his face deep in fatigue.

Ignoring all else, Laurie had run to where Johnny Tone had fallen. Cass lifted his voice to call to her, for she was partly behind him. "Laurie, you light outta here."

There was a mixture of relief and rage in Laurie's voice. "Johnny isn't dead! That polecat shot a little high. I'm staying with Johnny, Cass. Go ahead and shoot me, but I am."

"Laurie, you get going. I'll take care of Johnny. You won't turn me and Johnny in, but Poindexter would. You light outta here and let me fix Poindexter."

Laurie lifted a gaunt face toward her brother. "No, I wouldn't turn you in, Cass. But I never want to see you again. You let Bing alone and do the lighting out yourself,

Cass. That's the best I can do for you. Get clear out of the country and never come back. I can handle Johnny, now that I know what he's up against. Better than you and that stuck-up sister of his did, Bing Poindexter!"

Bing admitted that she probably could. He and Sara had not had the sympathetic understanding of Johnny that Laurie had, nor did they have her special pull. His heart swelled with liking for the little waif.

"I'm not clearing out, kid," Cass rumbled. "Johnny and me've got too nice a thing figured out for ourselves."

"Then," said Laurie calmly, "I'll kill you, Cass. I'd do it for Johnny. You were smart in never letting me guess what you were up to."

Bing grinned then, though the steady muzzle of Cass' gun kept an iciness in him. "Don't think she wouldn't, Cass."

"I don't think she would. But I shouldn't of changed my mind. I should of let Pinky plug the pair of you. I guess I gotta teach her some things. But I'm going to kill you first, Poindexter." For the first time distrusting his sister, Cass moved lightly around so he could watch both of them closely. "I don't like to do it in front of her, Poindexter. Turn around and start walking."

Bing obeyed. He was dead covered and any movement other than an obedience would bring lethal gunfire from Cass. He had no doubt of that. And stalling and playing along could only buy him minutes, perhaps only seconds. Better than nothing, he thought, and stepped out of the firelight.

HE WAS aware of Cass' steady, heavy tread behind him, aware of the gun trained on his kidneys. He was puzzled Cass knew that Laurie toted a gun, but he had not tried to relieve her of it, choosing instead to walk away with his back turned toward her. Probably he knew how much she hated Bing Poindexter and banked that she would not kill her own brother to save the man's life. In that moment Bing regretted his poor standing with her. But he wasn't going to gratify Cass Runyan by trying to beg off, promising to forget the matter.

He saw, with this thought, that it was Laurie's nerve that Cass was trying to break. If he could break it he had Laurie in his power. It was reckless, but Cass Runyan had been turned into a desperate man. She had a gun and his back was to her and if she let him kill Bing Poindexter she would be an accessory to murder. Powerless. The P&T Meat Company would go on with a fresh partner and a vastly more profitable business.

As they moved far out into the desert darkness, step by step, Bing believed that Cass had won the nervy gamble. He saw suddenly that the bedded cattle were on their feet, roused by the two shots, restless to the point of moving but uncertain because quiet had been restored. A cow did not spook until nervousness had been built in it, from thirst, from fatigue or any other animal irritation. Then maybe no more than the rustle of a windblown paper could do it. The two shots had got them up, and a little more would put run in them.

In the tension of the past moments, Bing had completely forgotten the stolen herd of several hundred. They were poised now, jumpy, ready to follow the first steer with the initiative to break. The shot that Cass would fire would do it, and maybe the man's private preoccupations had made him forget it.

Bing flinched when a gun roared, and it was a second before he realized its distance from him. It was followed by other quick shots. He heard Cass curse, and not knowing whether the man had been targeted, Bing wheeled around. Cass had turned to stare behind him, for the instant ignoring Bing. He heeled back, barking, "Hold it, Poindexter!" then there was a low sound and the herd was moving.

It took the play away from both of them. In the space of ten breaths, Bing saw that the cattle were coming toward them. Not a hundred yards away. Cutting a two hundred yard swath, getting going, churning the raw alkali dust, building a rumble. A running man might make it to the clear, again he might not. Bing was moving in a reflex, to his left, boots hammering the dry flat. Rabbit brush caught at his legs, stones turned under his boots, but he kept on. It must have been more than chance that had aimed them in this direction.

He recalled that Cass Runyan was a heavier man, shorter legged and slower of foot. Bing was pulling clear. He heard more shooting and heeled for an instant. Cass

had halted, unable to make it, emptying his gun at the herd in hopes of swerving it. It was like shooting at a wall of water. He saw Cass go down, then hurtling shapes churned over him, and Bing Poindexter kept going.

He halted presently, sweat streaming from his face, his chest heaving. It hadn't taken the small bunch long to pass, but what there had been of it was as lethal as five thousand head. He went back and saw the torn hulk in the desert dust.

Laurie Runyan sat by Johnny again. Her head was bent forward, her small spine slack. If she heard Bing come up she paid no attention for a moment.

"Now, what're you going to do to Johnny, Bing?"

He ignored that for the moment. "I thought for a while you'd thrown in with Cass, after all."

She lifted a strained face. "Bing, it was too big for me. I hated both of you, all at once. I got around on the other side of the steers and emptied my gun. It made them run your way. I figured somebody bigger than me would have to decide who come out of it. You or Cass or both—or neither. But I still killed him, didn't I?"

Bing smiled, and he had only gentleness for her now. "Reckon not, Laurie. Seems to me it was like you said. He was forcing you to throw your dice. He would have used your loyalty to him to force you to accept shame. He had the same chance to get away I did but he rattled and stopped and tried to turn them off by shooting at them."

"But he's dead, isn't he?"

"No mistake."

"Then I killed him."

"The cattle killed him. It's like you said. Somebody else passed judgment."

She seemed to accept that, after a time, and presently Johnny Tone opened his eyes and she forgot everything else. They had got a compress bandage on his chest, for he was badly shot. By daylight he was able to talk a little, and he was still truculent. The money Bing had seen him pass to Cass Runyan at the B&T corral in Auburn had only been a small loan for Cass to have town fun on. But Cass had tried several times to talk up a rustling deal. When Bing had so quickly accused him, Johnny had decided that a man might as well have the game as the name. But this had been the first stolen beef.

Johnny's part had been only in buying what he knew to be stolen beef. He was making enough money from P&T, and it had only been to help Cass, who was always hard up. But Bing had been right in suspecting Cass and bucking him. After Cass had him sucked in he began to turn the heat on Johnny. They would get rid of too-honest Bing Poindexter and clean up. He was finding that he'd got himself into something when Bing and his sister Laurie showed up.

And there was still a little temper in Laurie's eyes. "And what're you going to do about it, Bing Poindexter?"

"Nothing." He grinned at her, hoping that some day he could win her affection. "I've done too much, already. It looks like you've won your chance at him, kid."

THE END

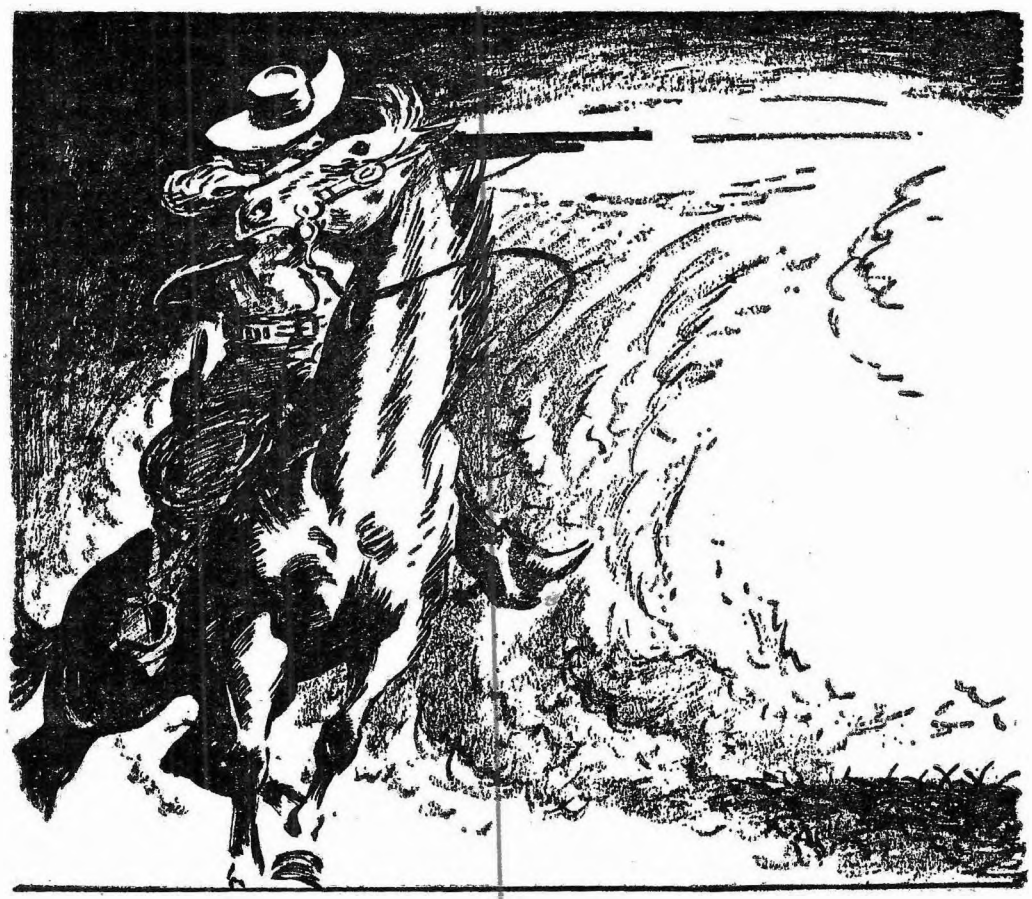
TOBACCO CURRENCY

OF THE many famines recorded in the early settlements of the upper Missouri country, that of tobacco was especially notable. During the 1860s Fort Benton lay at the head of the Missouri river steamboat traffic. As the riverboats did not travel in winter because of ice, Fort Benton citizens used to buy enough smoking and chewing tobacco to last until the first supply boat came up from Saint Louis in the spring.

This particular year the first steamer battered her nose on one of the Missouri's shifting mudbanks, and a late norther froze her fast. Five weeks later a thaw set her free again. In the meantime the citizens of Fort Benton, comprised mostly of the whiskey-drinking, tobacco-chewing buckskin gentry known as "mountain men" began to suffer. When their tobacco played out they tried a mixture of redskin smoking materials which fell far short of satisfying. Tobacco shavings boomed in price, and for a time even took the place of gold on the gambling tables.

One enterprising storekeeper in Fort Benton tore up his rough plank flooring and panned the dirt beneath to separate the tobacco tailings which had fallen between the boards, from the dust. He did not sift too carefully, but his eager customers did not care. This type of "pay dirt" brought a price that made the storekeeper, a non-smoker himself, very happy, until the supply boat finally docked and the tobacco currency gave way to the law of supply again.

—By Barry Cord



HELL FOR A YANKEE

How could pilgrim-rancher Sam McCord hope to fight the greedy injustice of a range-grabbers' tallying law, when every starving, embittered Confederate rancher branded him as carpetbagger, and hoped only to notch him in gunsights—right where Sam's suspenders crossed!

Chapter I

CARPETBAGGER COMBINE

SAM McCORD had come by his Espada Valley ranch honestly enough, having bought it from a Mexican and paid for it with gold specie. But that didn't make him look any different in the embittered eyes of the native Texans. He was still what they called "a damn' carpetbagger." So, when the three horsebackers came riding toward his place, he quit his repair work on the corral fence and stepped over to his 'dobe—where a brand-new Henry rifle leaned against the wall.

The riders came steadily on, the one in the lead raising his right arm to show that this

Graham cursed, fired a wild shot and swerved sharply away.

COWMAN

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Action-Packed Novel

was not a hostile visit. McCord recognized him as Matt Vaughn, a neighbor. With Vaughn were two of his hands, Nat Garman and Pete Doyle. Texans all, and men with good reason to hate a man who was not a Texan. They rode horses that were gaunt from hard work and a lack of grain. The men themselves were gaunt, their clothes shabby, for these were hard times for Texas—for all of the South. This was the period after the War, after defeat, that mealy-mouthed politicians called the Reconstruction.

Vaughn halted his companions short of the corral, came on alone. He reined in twenty feet from where McCord stood, but he remained stiffly erect in the saddle. There was pride in him, and McCord could see it. Matt Vaughn was growing old and turning gray, but trouble, more than his years, marked him. His bony face was seamed and dark, as bleak and humorless as chiseled rock. His chill gaze flicked from McCord to the rifle, and back again.

"I rode out of my way to come here," he said flatly, "but not to hunt trouble. You can forget that rifle, McCord."

"In that case, step down and make a visit of it."

"I've no time to visit with a Yankee," Vaughn stated. "You bought out Juan Ortega's brand, along with his range?"

"That's right. His Ace-of-Spades brand —the Espada, he called it—is mine now."

"Maybe then you'll be interested in this," Vaughn went on. "Some riders for a carpetbagger outfit have made a big round-up, and they're got their gather of brush cattle down by Hub Creek. Some Espada cattle are in that hunch—maybe fifty head of them."

McCord frowned. "So?" he prompted.

"I figured you'd want to claim those fifty head."

"You figured right," McCord said. "I'll ride for Hub Creek, right away. I'm obliged to you, Vaughn. Neighborly of you, to tell me."

The old man spat contemptuously. "Neighborly, nothing," he growled. "I'm just curious to see what'll happen when one carpetbagger finds out that some others of the breed are stealing from him." He took up his reins, making ready to ride away. Then, as an after-thought: "It'll be a change in the way things have been going, if you do something about it. Until now, those thieving sons have been stealing only from us Texans."

He gigged his gaunted horse about and rode out the way he had come, his two companions falling in behind him. McCord silently cursed their mulelike stubbornness. They were men who made things harder for themselves. Not until they were out of sight did McCord turn to the corral to rope a horse. But then he put Matt Vaughn out his thoughts. He would have trouble enough, of his own, at Hub Creek.

DURING the war years, when Texas men were gone from home to fight, the unguarded cattle had turned wild and drifted far from their home ranges. One brand had mixed with another, and, in four years of breeding, there were now countless thousands of mavericks roaming the hills and creek breaks—maverick calves and yearlings and two-and-three-year-olds that any man could claim.

The trouble that was developing between the ranchers and the carpetbaggers did not come of the branding of maverick cattle. It came of one man having in his possession cattle bearing another man's brand—the old cattle which had turned wild and emigrated during the war years.

Sam McCord did not doubt that some of his Espada-marked cattle had been gathered in the hills and now were being driven off without regard for his ownership of the Ace-of-Spade brand. So when he came within sight of the herd, he drew his rifle from its boot and rode with it across his saddle.

As he neared the round-up, where all was dust and noise and confusion, he judged that the gather amounted to seven or eight hundred head. One glimpse did not reveal any of his Espada longhorns, but then brands were difficult to read on cattle that had run wild in the brush.

A dozen riders were with the cattle, trying to string them out in trail-driving order and head the herd east. They were having their hands full, for the brush-cattle were all but unmanageable. McCord saw two men hunkered down in the shade of a willow tree by the edge of the creek. They had a tally book between them, and McCord recognized one as Walt Carmody, a cattle inspector, and the other as Nate

Graham, ramrod for the North Cattle and Land Company—a carpetbagger outfit. McCord swung over to the willow and reined in.

The pair under the tree looked up. Carmondy said, "Howdy, McCord." The burly Nate Graham merely nodded.

"Big gather, you've got."

"A fair one," said Carmody. "Graham here bossed it."

"How many of my cattle did you pick up, Nate?"

Nate Graham rose, a dark-faced man with a broad and thick body. He had a hawk's beak of a nose, beady black eyes, a traplike mouth. A jagged knife-scar across his left cheek made his grin an ugly thing.

"Your cattle?" he said. "That herd's made up of mavericks."

"Mavericks with brands, a lot of them," McCord said. "You've got it down there in your tally book—if you're keeping an honest tally."

Graham's smile faded. "I don't like that, McCord."

"I'm not asking you to like it," McCord said. He shifted his gaze to Walt Carmody, for the cattle inspector now held the tally book. "Read it out, Walt," he ordered. "How many Espada cattle does he have tallied?"

Carmody was a lanky man with a hungry look, yet it was not the same gaunted look that the Texans, such as old Matt Vaughn, now showed. Walt Carmody's warped nature had simply stunted him physically and left him with that pinched look. Walt Carmody was starved in a way another man could not understand. He had watery blue eyes that gazed for a moment at McCord's rifle before making a show of studying the pages of the tally book.

"Twenty head, McCord."

"An easy tally, that."

Carmody slammed the book shut, came to his feet. "You saying I'm a liar?" he demanded. "You think it's not marked down here?"

"Maybe it's marked down," McCord retorted. "But that doesn't say it's the right count. Matt Vaughn told me he saw at least fifty head of Espada cattle in that herd."

Carmody cursed Matt Vaughn for a liar, and his niggardly face worked with forced rage. "I was appointed cattle inspector by the court at Vallado," he stated. "That means that when I say a tally's right, it's right. Dammit, McCord; you're getting as bad as some of these Johnny Rebs!"

"The war's over, Walt. Forget it."

"These Texans sure don't forget it."

"Maybe they don't get a chance to" McCord said. "But I'm not concerned about them. I want my Espada cattle out of that herd. Since you're the cattle inspector, it's your duty to help me get them."

"You know the law, McCord!"

"I know what's right," McCord shot back. "A man's cattle are his own—not somebody else's, just because they were on the open range when a gather was being made. You can't get around that, Walt."

"The law says Nate Graham has a right to gather whatever wild cattle his crew finds," Carmody said, "just so long as he has an inspector tally them. Now he'll go to Vallado and record his tally in the courthouse, then his company will pay you when you show up at their office."

"Supposing I want cattle, not the money?

"It's still the law," said Carmody. "That's the way the Legislature passed the tallying law, and that's the way it stands. I can't change it, and you can't change it, McCord."

Nate Graham broke in, "If you can stop that herd and cut out your cattle, McCord, go to it." He was grinning and the scar made it a sardonic grin. "Otherwise, I'll give you a signed paper for twenty head of cattle and you can ride to Vallado to collect your money."

McCord knew that he was whipped. It was a bitter pill to swallow, yet Graham was right. He couldn't cut his cattle from that moving herd of wild brush steers unless he had help. And he wasn't going to get any help from Graham and his crew, or from Cattle Inspector Walt Carmody. Looking at the two men, McCord was sure of one thing: Walt Carmody was dishonest, and he was working hand-in-glove with Nate Graham and his outfit. McCord at last could understand what the Texan ranchers were up against.

He said, "Keep your paper, Nate. I'll find another way."

And Nate Graham replied, "Suit yourself, friend."

He was grinning again as McCord swung away, and Walt Carmody was chuckling.

McCORD rode to Vallado, cowtown and county seat. It was a drowsy community of frame and adobe buildings with a single dusty, sunscorched street. The hub of the cattle range, it had become the center of Yankee influence over a county larger than some Eastern States. A small detail of U. S. cavalry was stationed on a flat south of the town, and an Army post was being built. Vallado boasted two general stores, and both were now owned by carpetbaggers. There were four saloons and only one of them remained under Texan ownership. The smaller business places too had, for the most part, changed owners. But the most important change was in the courts—and Sam McCord dismounted before the courthouse.

A white two-storied frame, it was the only painted building in Vallado. A soldier stood guard by the door and he growled, as McCord mounted the steps, "You can't go in here wearing a gun."

McCord frowned, but went back to his horse and left his gun rig hanging from his saddle horn. He climbed the steps, passed the sentry, entered the hall. The sheriff's office was to the right, the tax collector's to the left. The courtroom and the judge's chambers were upstairs, and McCord went up. He went back the upper hall and the door to Judge Ben Stiles's chamber stood open. The jurist was a white-haired man of perhaps sixty-five. He had that world-weary look that came to some old men. Both he and McCord came from Kansas, and so were known to each other.

Stiles said, "Come in, Sam. Close the door."

When McCord had obeyed, the judge took a bottle from a bottom drawer of his desk. He brought out two glasses, spilled some whiskey into them. He handed McCord one glass, lifted the other. His haggard face managed a thin smile.

"Drink up, Sam," he said. "It takes away the taste of some of the things a man must do these days."

They drank, and they understood each other. McCord knew that Judge Ben Stiles was a man with a conscience, a man who had been sent to this town to do a job that was not to his liking. When Stiles asked what McCord had on his mind, the rancher told him about the Espada cattle in the herd Nate Graham had gathered for the North Cattle and Land Company.

"I know what the tallying law is," McCord said. "I know I can force North to pay me for my cattle—for the twenty head Graham and Carmody say are in that herd. But I figure they've got more than twenty head, and I want them. It's more than a matter of cattle or money."

"A matter of principle, eh?"

"I guess that's it, Judge."

"You could start a replevin action to recover your cattle," Stiles said, frowning in thought. "It'd mean you would have to hire a lawyer and bring the case to court, and, if you lose, the costs will be thrown on you. The North Cattle and Land Company will make a fight of it, and that outfit will most likely win the action because of the tallying law."

"A fool law, that," McCord growled. "It gives every man with a running-iron and a long-rope the chance to be a law-protected rustler."

Judge Stiles smiled wryly. "The tallying law assumes that every man is a cattleman —and honest," he said. "I advise you not to buck it, Sam. If you try it replevin your cattle, you'll be making powerful enemies. An outfit like North Cattle and Land won't let you establish a precedent that would give every rancher in Texas the same notion. Collect for your twenty head, and forget your matter of principle."

McCord shook his head. "I won't back down, Judge," he said. "I want my rights protected. I'll get a lawyer and I'll start that court action. But in the meantime I want something done so Nate Graham can't get my cattle beyond reach of your court."

Judge Ben Stiles shook his head, too. "You're a stubborn hombre, Sam," he said, almost despairingly. "But I'll string along with you, come what may. I'll see to it that Graham doesn't cut your cattle out of the North outfit's herd. I'll send the sheriff out there with a court order."

"And I'll ride with the sheriff," said Sam McCord.

McCORD saw a lawyer, a man named Bentley, who had an office over Randall & Lea's store. Lawyer Bentley was,

like McCord himself, a Union veteran newly settled in Texas. He was willing to take the case, but he hadn't much hope of winning it. McCord paid him a ten-dollar retaining fee, then recrossed the street to the courthouse.

A deputy sheriff was waiting for him, a tobacco-chewing and lazy-looking ex-Missourian named Cab Nelson. The sheriff had begged off, claiming he was tied up with office work. So McCord took it from what the deputy muttered. It looked as though the sheriff didn't want any part in bucking Nate Graham and the big outfit that hired him, and yet, bound by oath, he could not refuse to serve a court order. The sheriff was passing the buck to Cab Nelson.

The deputy said, "Where's Graham got these steers of yours?"

"He's trailing a big herd east from the Hub."

"That's a long ride."

"A dozen miles. We'll make it by sundown."

"Well, I'll get a horse," said Nelson, and walked without haste toward the livery barn.

* * *

Once on the trail, the deputy still wouldn't hurry. He rode at a walk, never lifting his horse to even an easy lope. McCord tried to hurry him, but Nelson said, "No rush, is there?" and spat a stream of tobacco juice. It was after sundown when they reached shallow Hub Creek, and Nelson insisted on McCord showing him where he had seen the herd.

McCord silently cursed him but led him to the spot. Nelson dismounted and prowled around as though cutting for sign. He said finally, "Graham is driving west, not east like you said."

"You fool, those tracks lead east!"

"You saying I can't read sign?"

"I'm saying you'd better quit stalling," said McCord, and reached for his rifle. "You're one of Nate Graham's friends, but this dodge won't get me off his trail. Get on your horse, Cab, and head east—at a gallop!"

Nelson shifted his cud from one cheek to the other, making ready to stand by his law badge and protest. But then, seeing the black look of anger on McCord's face, he shrugged and moved to his horse. Mounted again, he lifted his horse into a hard lope. And McCord took after him.

A short hour's ride brought them to where the trail herd was being bedded down. Nate Graham and Walt Carmody, with three or four other riders, were hunkered down around a campfire. They were having chuck. Graham frowned on recognizing McCord and the deputy, while Carmody's bony face turned uneasy. McCord dismounted and walked to the fire, faced Graham across it.

"Cab's got a court order to serve on you, Nate," he said flatly. "He didn't want to find out, but I kept him from getting lost. The paper's signed by Judge Ben Stiles, and it orders you to make a new tally of your heard."

"And then?"

"Then I'm going to court and replevin my cattle."

"What's that mean?"

"You'll have to turn over every longhorn bearing my brand," McCord said. "Cab Nelson's here to see that an honest tally is made."

Nate Graham fell silent, his scarred face tightened with anger. But his eyes were shrewd, thoughtful, and after a moment he began to grin. "Fair enough," he said. "We'll make the tally, first thing in the morning."

McCord was surprised. He was also suspicious. He hadn't expected Graham to take it so calmly. But he said, "That'll be fine, Nate. Now how about chow for Cab and me?"

"Grab a plate and tin cup," Graham said, pointing to the grub on the fire, "and help yourself. You too, Cab."

He was still grinning.

Chapter II

BUTCHERED BEEF!

MORE RIDERS came in from the herd and had chuck, and afterwards sat about talking and smoking. Then one by one they spread out their bedrolls, and Nate Graham tossed McCord and Cab Nelson a blanket apiece. McCord had off-saddled and cared for his horse, after eating, and now he bedded down near where the animal was on a picket rope. Like most of the others, he used his saddle for a pillow and removed only his hat and boots. McCord left his gun

belted on, and his rifle, in its saddle boot, was within easy reach of his hand. Unlike the others, he did not mean to sleep.

He lay there and listened to the snores of the nearest sleepers, and for a time there was a rattle of tinware as the Mex cook washed up the supper things. From over by the bedded-down herd came the unmelodious singing of the nighthawks as they rode guard. The fire burned down to a heap of embers, and the hours dragged. Finally two men roused themselves, mounted, rode out to the herd. The two relieved nighthawks came in, off-saddled, sought their bedrolls. It became quiet again, except for the snoring, the drowsy singing and the restless sound of the cattle.

And despite himself, McCord dozed off.

He wakened with a start, coming from his blanket and grabbing for his boots. The others too came awake, and confusion boiled around the camp. For a man had bawled, "Stampede!"

The herd was on the move—and moving fast. McCord could feel the earth quiver under the pounding of thousands of hoofs. He heard the drumming, and the clashing of horns as the wild cattle jammed against each other. He saw the great mass loom through the darkness, sweeping past the camp. The crew was yelling, throwing saddles onto excited horses. Nate Graham was yelling, "Get after them, boys! Get moving!"

Men mounted and streaked away, after the cattle that were already lost to sight. The herd was heading back over the trail they had been driven that day, and McCord knew that there would be no stopping them. The crew could ride their mounts to the ground, and those wild brush cattle wouldn't be halted. The herd was a juggernaut that would smash through any obstacle in its way, and a handful of riders coming up from the rear would be no obstacle at all.

McCord was alone in the camp now except for Cab Nelson and the Mex cook, and he saw no reason why he should remain. He started saddling up, and Nelson said, "You going to help round up those critters?"

"No."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm heading for my ranch."

"You're not wanting to make a tally?"

McCord eyed him in disgust. "You know blamed well there won't be any tally," he said. "By morning those cattle will be spread to hell-and-gone. And when Nate Graham starts rounding them up, he'll make sure no Espada steers are thrown in with the others. That stampede was no accident. I'd gamble on it!"

Cab Nelson looked stupid. "You mean somebody stampeded that herd?" he said. "How?"

"How should I know," McCord growled. "Maybe by popping a blanket. Most any strange noise will start a restless herd running."

He turned back to his horse, finished saddling. When he mounted, he said, "Tell Graham something for me, when he comes in. Tell him he won this hand, but his sneak tricks won't work if he crosses me up again. You tell that crooked cattle inspector, Walt Carmody, the next time he sees some of my Espada cattle in a gather he'd better make an honest tally."

Cab Nelson stopped looking stupid. "I'll tell them, sure. But you're bucking the wrong men, McCord. You keep hunting trouble, you'll find it—quick."

"And I'll handle it," said McCord.

He kept thinking about it, riding toward his ranch. In one way, Nelson was right in warning him not to buck Nate Graham and Walt Carmody. They had a lot at stake—Graham with a good-paying job with the North outfit and Carmody no doubt collecting side money from that carpetbagging outfit and others like it—and therefore they would cause trouble for any man who bucked their game.

And it was a crooked game. Sam McCord considered himself a law-abiding man, but he knew that the tallying law was a wrong sort of law. It legalized rustling. It gave men like Nate Graham and Walt Carmody a free hand and an opportunity to become cattle rich, while hurting the real ranchers. Something's got to be done, McCord told himself. But he didn't know what there was to do.

It was long after midnight when he got home and put up his horse. He slept until dawn, then, after breakfast, he finished his chores in a hurry and saddled a mount. He rode east, toward Matt Vaughn's ranch which was nine miles from Espada Valley. The old rancher and his crew were out on

the range branding a small bunch of mavericks they'd gathered. Vaughn stopped work and waited for McCord to rein in. He nodded a greeting, but did not extend an invitation to dismount.

McCord said, "You were right, Matt. Graham had some Espada cattle in his gather." And he told the old man how things had worked out.

A suspicion of a smile came to Vaughn's lips. "So Nate Graham outsmarted you," he said. "I expected him to pull something."

"Still, he didn't get away with my cattle."

"Maybe not. But he kept you from taking him and the North outfit into court," Matt Vaughn retorted. "Well, don't be too riled up about it. Some of my cattle were in that herd, and I can't do anything about it."

"You could take it to court."

"I wouldn't have a chance in a carpetbagger court, and you know it."

McCord nodded. "I guess you're right," he said. Then added: "I came to ask you to loan me your crew for a couple of days, to round up my cattle down at the Hub. I'll pay you their hire."

Vaughn frowned at that, but after a moment his face cleared. "I'll help you out, McCord, but I won't take your money," he said. "You may not be one of us, but it looks as though you're not a real carpetbagger either. Soon as we're done branding, we'll ride south with you."

THERE was a measure of friendliness in the old rancher's offer to help, the first friendlines McCord had come across since he had settled in Espada Valley two months ago. He was grateful, for he knew that no man could live like a hermit for long. There was a need for occasional companionship in every human breast. Riding south with Matt Vaughn and his four hands, McCord began to wonder if an alliance between men like Matt Vaughn and himself might not be the instrument, the weapon, to strike back with at the injustices of the tallying law.

He felt out Vaughn, as they rode side by side, telling him how Judge Ben Stiles had given him a friendly hearing. The old man was interested but doubted that the jurist would side Texans.

"Nobody'll act for us," Matt Vaughn said. "Now that the vote's been taken from everybody that supported the Confederacy, we can't expect office-holders to represent us." He gave McCord a slanted look. "There's some Texans who figure we might use bullets, since we're denied ballots."

McCord knew that he was being baited, tested. He said, "How would that settle matters for you?"

"Don't know," old Matt Vaughn said. "It's not my idea. I'm against any such high-handed methods. With the war over and done, more shooting will get us nothing. If we start trouble, the sheriff will step in. And he's got that cavalry at Vallado to back him up."

"There's another way," McCord said. "I don't know what it might be, but I'm going to buck the tallying law whenever it's used to rob me of cattle. It can be done."

"Maybe so," Vaughn muttered. "But right now it looks as though you're wrong."

He had seen something that brought a scowl to his leathery face, something that McCord had missed.

When McCord saw it, he cursed Nate Graham. A dead cow lay in the high grass, and beyond it was another. Both had been shot through the head, and both bore McCord's Ace-of-Spades brand. A hundred yards farther south, the riders came upon a recently killed longhorn bull. It too was an Espada animal. Matt Vaughn ordered his four riders to spread out and search for other slaughtered cattle. He rode with McCord, and the two of them came upon six Espada cattle lying dead within a half mile.

The Vaughn hands came in and reported that they had counted thirty-eight dead animals—all shot through the head and marked with McCord's brand. A storm-black look of rage was on McCord's face as he said, "That makes forty-seven head somebody killed. And I'm saying that somebody was Nate Graham."

"What'd you aim to do?" Matt Vaughn asked.

"Have it out with Graham."

"You want me and my crew to side you?"

McCord shook his head. "I don't want you to run into carpetbagger trouble on my account," he said. "I'll handle this."

He turned in the saddle, peered east. A dust cloud marked the trail herd, and it was no more than three miles away. Mc-

Cord knew what had happened after the stampede. Nate Graham and his crew had either gotten the herd under control during the night or had made a quick gather as soon as dawn came. The Espada cattle had been separated from the others, and killed as an act of defiance. Nate Graham hadn't been satisfied to keep himself and his employers out of court; he had had to hit back at the man who dared buck his outfit.

McCord turned his horse, meaning to ride after the trail herd.

Vaughn said, "My crew will take the hides off those dead critters. You may as well salvage that much." He thrust out his hand. "I'm wishing you luck, neighbor."

McCord grasped the proffered hand. "Thanks, Matt," he said.

He rode off, knowing that he had made one friend in Texas.

Neither Nate Graham or Walt Carmody was with the herd. McCord swung in on the rider at point, "Where's Graham?"

The point rider had the uneasy look of a man with something on his conscience. He wouldn't meet McCord's gaze. He said, "He headed for Vallado, soon as we got the herd rounded up and back on the trail. Carmody went with him." He paused, frowned, then added: "Look, McCord; I don't want you to think I had anything to do with the killing of your cattle."

"Who did the shooting?"

"It wasn't any of us cowhands."

"Was Walt Carmody in on it?"

"He watched and he laughed, crazy-like," the rider said. "He's a no-good son, that Carmody. I didn't see him have his gun out."

A sudden mist, red-black, befogged his eyes.

"So Graham did it all," McCord said flatly.

"I didn't say he shot a single cow," the cowhand protested.

"I know you didn't," McCord told him, and swung away from the herd. He headed south, toward Vallado.

THE North Cattle and Land Company had an office building, a box-sized frame structure, at the west end of Vallado's one street. The office door was closed, and McCord, dismounting, found it locked. He backed off, staring at the place. Somehow, it looked deserted. Cab Nelson, the lazy-looking deputy sheriff, came along and stopped.

"The place is closed, McCord."

"Why?"

Nelson shrugged. "Nobody knows. Wyland North loaded his office gear on a wagon, and sent it somewhere. He left by stage this morning, not saying where he was going or if he'd be back. Maybe Nate Graham knows what's up. He's over in the Riata Saloon."

"When did you leave the trail herd, Cab?"

"Last night, right after you did. Why?"

"I just wanted to know if you helped Graham kill my cattle."

Nelson looked blank. "I don't know anything about that, McCord," he said. "And that's the truth."

They walked along the street together, McCord leading his horse and going on to the Riata when Nelson turned into the courthouse. Four horses were racked before the saloon, one of them a big black gelding McCord had seen Nate Graham ride. McCord left his mount ground-hitched and stepped into the Riata's open doorway. Graham was at the bar with half a dozen men, from what McCord could tell, most of them townsmen.

Walt Carmody sat at a table to the right of the entrance, and it was he who first noticed McCord. A spasm of fright crossed his bony face, and he gasped, "Nate—Nate, watch it!"

Graham was slow in heeding the warning. He had a glass in his hand and he was deep in a low-voiced conversation with a man beside him. When he finally turned, it was slowly and off guard. The shock was clear in his eyes. His mouth twitched. The

scar across his left cheek was whitish against the sudden reddening of his face.

He said, almost in a whisper, "I didn't expect you so soon, McCord."

McCord took a step away from the door, then another. There was a furtive movement behind him, and he whirled to see Walt Carmody, half out of his chair, reaching for his gun. McCord slapped Carmody hard across the face, and the blow was like a pistol shot in the sudden hush.

Knocked back in his chair, Carmody let go of his still holstered gun and flung his arm up to shield his face. McCord got his boot under a leg of the chair, gave a violent jerk, and chair and Carmody spilled over backwards. McCord whirled about, facing Nate Graham. The burly North foreman still leaned against the bar, still held his glass. He was grinning now.

"Go on, McCord," he said. "Finish with him. I'll wait."

McCord turned back to Carmody, who was down between table and wall and trying to scramble up. McCord reached down, took his gun, flung it out the doorway. He faced Carmody again.

"Want more, Walt?"

Carmody got up, stood slumped against the wall. "I'll not forget that, McCord," he panted. "So help me, I'll not forget. If it'd been your fist, I'd have figured I took it from a bigger man. But when you slapped me, like I was a kid. . . ."

His voice faded, and only his eyes spoke his hate. He slid along the wall, making for the door. McCord turned again to Nate Graham.

"Forty-seven head of cattle, Nate. You killed them and left them to rot."

"You got proof I did it?"

"Proof enough to suit me."

"So? Well, what'd you aim to do about it?"

McCord couldn't hold back his rage; it made his voice slap out. "Maybe you don't savvy, Nate. I've come for a showdown."

Graham's grin spread, and an eager gleam came into his eyes. He unbuckled his gunbelt with his left hand, let it drop to the floor. "I don't need a gun to handle you, my friend," he said. "I'll beat you down, boot you out of this town and off this range. I've got no time for a man who forgets he wore the Blue and holes up with a bunch of damn' Rebs. Come on, McCord. Let's see if maybe you can slap my face!"

He still had the whiskey glass in his right hand, and now he flung it straight at McCord's face. McCord had to duck, and so was partially off balance when Graham lunged at him. And yet his movement saved him from the man's savage rush. Graham's blow slid over his left shoulder, and McCord heaved up, knocked the same shoulder against the man's chin. Graham's head rocked back, and he stopped dead. McCord straightened, lashing out with his right hand. He slapped Nate Graham hard across the face.

Over by the bar, one man gasped and another swore. Graham's rage flared, and he beat at McCord in blind fury. McCord took half a dozen body blows that rammed him backwards until he came up against a wall. He side-stepped then, so abruptly that Graham's fist crashed against the planks. A grunt of pain, an obscene oath, and Graham grabbed up a chair. It lifted high, struck down. It missed, for McCord had dodged, and Graham was flung off balance. McCord hit him at the base of the skull, and Graham went down.

But he came up, and he rushed. He drove his knee into McCord's belly, battered at his face. McCord had the taste and smell of his own blood, and a sudden mist, a dull red-black, befogged his eyes. He went down, flat on the floor, and then Graham's boot started slamming him.

McCord rolled away from those vicious kicks, and came heaving up. He spilled over a deal table, backing away from Graham's new lunge. He launched a blow that missed, then Graham's arms wrapped about him and Graham's knee drove into his groin. Pain numbed McCord. His breathing was ragged, but he sensed a weakening in his enemy's attack. He broke free. He told himself, *Now!* Knowing it had to be now; and he struck Graham twice between the eyes.

GRAHAM reeled away, hit the bar and hung there, and his eyes looked dull. McCord muttered, "Forty-seven Espada cattle, Nate! Remember that!" He finished it then, with one last blow that had all his weight behind it. Nate Graham fell heavily, sprawled his full length on the floor.

McCord stood swaying, looking down at the man, and he knew that nothing had been

settled. One beating would not break a man like Nate Graham, and it would not pay for the Espada cattle that had been killed. It would not stop Graham, and other men like him, from using the tallying law for his own gain. McCord looked around for his hat, picked it up. He walked from the Riata, then along the street to a watering trough where he washed his bloody face.

McCord went next to John Bentley's law office over Randall & Lea's store. He told the young lawyer about the dead cattle, and Bentley frowned. "Your only recourse would be to sue for damages; bring suit against Nate Graham's employer. You'd have to produce witnesses, and I doubt that Walt Carmody and Graham's crew would testify for you even under oath. Besides, Wyland North has closed his office and left the county. He's no longer under the jurisdiction of Judge Stiles's court."

"Why'd North pull out?" McCord wanted to know.

"Good business for him," Bentley replied. "He's recorded about twenty-five hundred cattle in other men's brands, under the tallying law. Nate Graham recorded nearly four hundred of them when he rode in this morning. And Walt Carmody was there to make it official. Under the law, Wyland North is supposed to pay the owners of those brands for what cattle he's recorded—when he locates them."

"And he left the county so he won't have to locate the owners?"

"It amounts to that."

"He's making sure that the owners won't locate him," McCord said angrily. "Dammit; it's nothing more than a steal!"

"Still, it's within the law."

"Carpetbagger law!"

Bentley nodded. "You're right in calling it that," he said. He took a paper from his desk, read it to himself for a moment. "My check at the courthouse showed that nine others besides Wyland North recorded possession of your Espada cattle. In six months, North's outfit recorded two hundred and thirty. The other nine recorded three hundred and seventy-eight. None of those cattle have been paid for to you or to the Mexican who owned your ranch before you. No doubt the Mexican sold out to you because he couldn't collect."

"And other ranchers are losing cattle like that?"

"Everyone of them," Bentley said. "Old Matt Vaughn is the heaviest loser, since he's the biggest rancher on this range. And the courthouse records tell only a part of the story. With crooked cattle inspectors on the job, the tallies aren't honestly made."

McCord said, "There's one thing a man might do. Nate Graham is turning the cattle onto a range Wyland North owns over at the east end of the county. He's building up a big herd for a drive to Kansas. I'm going to find a way to keep him from starting that drive. So long as my cattle are held in this county, I've got a good claim on them."

"One man can't do it, McCord."

"I'll find a way," McCord said, and turned out of the lawyer's office.

Leaving Vallado, McCord headed north but rode to Matt Vaughn's ranch instead of going straight to his own spread. It was nearly sundown when he reined in before Vaughn's 'dobe ranchhouse. The gaunt old rancher welcomed him with tempered friendliness, asking, "How'd you make out, McCord?" Then, as an after-thought: "Step down. We'll eat shortly."

McCord dismounted and they sat together on a bench that stood against the adobe wall. McCord told him about his trouble with Walt Carmody, his fight with Nate Graham, and his visit with Lawyer Bentley. And added, "The North outfit isn't the only one making off with our cattle, but that's the bunch I want to smash. And I'm going to do it, Matt."

"How?" Vaughn wanted to know. "That's a big, tough outfit."

"There's one way to get at North and Graham," McCord said. "That's by keeping them from moving their cattle—our cattle, dammit!—out of the county. I can't do it alone, though. I need help."

"Maybe you'll get it, at that."

"You'll side me, Matt?"

"I'll think it over, sleep on it, and give you my decision tomorrow," Vaughn said. "I'm beginning to trust you, McCord, else I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you. Tomorrow is Sunday, and some of us ranchers are holding a meeting in the afternoon. It'll be at Widow Hammond's place, back in the hills. You know where that ranch is?"

"Sure; it's north of my place."

"We're holding our get-together there because the Hammond ranch is out of the way, and there's not much risk of the sheriff or the soldiers dropping in on us," Vaughn went on. "We Texans have orders not to congregate, but, with things like they are, we've got to meet and decide how we're going to keep our heads above water with the carpetbaggers squeezing us all the time."

McCord was doubtful. "You sure I'll be welcome, Matt?" he asked. "Most folks figure I'm a carpetbagger." His voice turned bitter. "I need a couple of cowhands, but no Texans'll hire on with me."

"I'm inviting you," Vaughn told him. "And at the meeting, I'll get you a couple of good riders. There's sure plenty needing jobs."

"Well, I'm obliged to you again, Matt," McCord said, rising.

"Now, hold on," the old-timer said. "You're staying to supper. . . ."

Chapter III

A DRYGULCHER'S VENGEANCE

McCORD waited until Sunday noon before saddling up and starting out for the Hammond ranch. There was no road, so he cut back through the low hills that surrounded his valley range. There was timber on the slopes and a tangle of brush everywhere, and McCord had glimpses of wild cattle. He told himself that if Matt Vaughn induced some men to hire on with him, he'd come into the back country and start rounding up some of the brush cattle: his own Espada longhorns and whatever mavericks he came upon. He had only three hundred head grazing in the valley, and it was high time he started building up his herd.

An hour's ride brought him atop a steep wooded hill that looked down upon the Hammond ranch headquarters. It was, like that of most of the nearby ranches, made up of adobe buildings and pole corrals. To the north, in a valley much like the Espada, a few hundred head of cattle grazed. McCord had seen the widowed owner in Vallado when he first arrived in Texas, a handsome dark-haired woman of thirty with grief-filled eyes and lips that never smiled. A townsman had told McCord that Martha

MARTHA HAMMOND

Hammond had been widowed by the war, and left with a four-year-old son. When he had seen her in town, she had been buying a few supplies at Randall & Lea's store—so few supplies that her trip hadn't seemed worthwhile. The townsman had told McCord, "Like all the ranchers, she's got no money. These are hard times for such folks."

Now, as McCord looked down on her ranch, neighbors were gathering there. They were coming in by a hill road, by wagon and by saddle horse, and there were women and children among them. It looked like a picnic gathering. McCord started down the slope, reached the flatland, and rode slowly across the half-mile to the ranch buildings. He was uneasy. Despite Matt Vaughn's invitation, he did not believe he was welcome at this ranch.

Some thirty people were gathered in the ranchyard, mostly in the shade of a giant cottonwood. A side of beef was being barbecued over a fire, and by another Martha Hammond and several visiting women were cooking appetizing dishes. As McCord drew close, the women fell idle. The half dozen children stopped their rowdy place. The men broke off their talk. McCord's uneasiness grew. Matt Vaughn wasn't about.

A big black-bearded man stepped forward, and growled, "Hold on, you. We don't want any outsiders here. Head back the way you came."

Martha Hammond said, "Never mind, Luke. I'll handle this."

She came and faced McCord, a tall and very grave woman whose blue eyes searched for an answer to his being there. She said, "I don't mean to be inhospitable, but it would be better if you do not stop. Of course, if you have something to say to me—"

"I expected to find Matt Vaughn here."

"He'll come, I'm sure. Perhaps you could meet him on the road."

"I'll do that."

"You understand why I must ask you to leave?"

McCord nodded. He understood this hostility. These were people who knew defeat, and the war was still a very real thing to them. He could not blame them. It was likely that Martha Hammond was thinking that her husband had been killed by a man like him. They knew that he had been a Union soldier. He let his gaze linger a moment longer on the woman, finding her pleasant to look upon, and then, as he lifted his reins, someone in the crowd said, "Here comes Matt Vaughn!"

The gaunt old rancher was a leader among these people, and when he said, "It's all right, Martha. I asked McCord to come here," the tension eased. Vaughn motioned that McCord should come with him, and they rode over to the corrals and there dismounted. "It'll come out fine," the older man said. "They'll be friendly, now that I've vouched for you. We'll talk to the other ranchers before grub is ready." He looked about, pleasure in his eyes. "Warms a man, a friendly gathering like this."

But it wasn't friendly all the way through. Vaughn called the men over to the shade of the big 'dobe barn. There were eighteen of them, the owners of nearby ranches and their sons. Vaughn talked to them in a calm voice, explaining that the war had all but ruined them as cattlemen. He mentioned their losses to the carpetbagger outfits that had come into the country since war's end; he stated emphatically that he and every rancher must hold on until such a time when Texas ranchers regained their northern and eastern markets. "We've got to hold onto what cattle we possess and gather all the wild stock we can," he ended up. "But our worst problem is to keep the carpetbaggers from taking the wild cattle bearing our brands. That's why this meeting was called, to solve that problem."

A skinny, bewhiskered man growled, "Fine talk, Matt, considering that you brought a carpetbagger here."

"Meaning McCord?"

"Meaning him."

"I'm coming to McCord," Vaughn said. "You always go off half-cocked, Jess Wyler. McCord may be an outsider, a Yankee, but still he's up against the same trouble. I brought him here today because he wants us to band together and do something about our cattle losses. He's starting with Nate Graham's outfit, and he figures that he can get help from Judge Ben Stiles."

"Another carpetbagger!" Jess Wyler heckled. "Crazy talk!"

MATT VAUGHN scowled at the skinny man, but this time did not rebuke him. He went on, "McCord figures Graham has some more of his cattle on the range owned by the North Cattle and Land Company. I know Graham has plenty of my longhorns there and plenty of them belonging to you men. Now we can sit tight and let Graham drive that herd to Kansas, like he plans, and sell it. Then we can try to collect from his boss, Wyland North—providing we can find him."

A rancher muttered, "We'll never get paid for half our cattle, even if we find North. What's McCord's plan to do?"

"He wants help to keep Graham from starting out of the county with the herd," Vaughn replied. "So long as the cattle are here, under Judge Stiles's jurisdiction, McCord figures we'll have a chance of recovering what's rightfully ours. I'm putting it up to you men, and we'll vote on it. We maybe'll have to use guns to keep Graham from taking the trail."

"And we'll bring the sheriff and the soldiers down on us," Jess Wyler said sourly. "Not me. I won't have anything to do with it."

The meeting became an open discussion, then developed into a heated argument. It seemed to McCord that the sides were equally divided, some wanting to fall in with the scheme and the others wanting no part of it. Finally a calm voice broke in. "One moment, friends. . . ." Martha Hammond had been listening from the edge of

the gathering, and now she faced it. The arguing men gradually became silent.

"I'm a rancher, too," Martha said. "So I have a right to give my opinion. We have a choice to make—slow ruin by sitting back and letting the carpetbaggers take our cattle, or the risk of quick disaster by following this man. If my husband were alive, I think he would want to fight back. So I vote that we side McCord."

"Supposing he's baiting us," Jess Wyler said, "and figures on squealing to the law?"

"Why would he do that, Jess?" Martha asked. She shook her head. "I don't think he'll do that. He has nothing to gain by causing us trouble. But it's up to the rest of you. I have only one vote."

McCord had remained silent all this while. Now he moved away, so they could talk as they wished and vote as they pleased. He walked over to his horse by the corral, and a moment later Martha Hammond came by on her way back to the other women and the kids. She stopped and gazed steadily at McCord, measuring and weighing him.

"Stay for supper," she invited.

"Thanks; but I'd better leave when they've made up their minds. Some of these people don't trust me."

"They've good reason for being suspicious."

"I won't betray them, should they decide to side me."

"I hope you won't," said Martha Hammond, and went on her way.

The voting over, Matt Vaughn walked over to McCord. He said, "It was close. One vote swung it your way, McCord. But they want to do it like this: you win over Judge Stiles, and they'll buck Nate Graham and his crew. They're going to send two men over east to spy on Graham's range, and they'll let us know when he's ready to start his drive."

"Good enough," McCord agreed. "I'll see the judge."

"And you'll have two cowhands showing up tomorrow morning."

"Thanks for that, Matt."

"You don't owe me any thanks," the old rancher said. "All these folks'll be neighborly enough, once they're sure of you."

"I hope you're right," McCord said. "I'm riding out, now."

"The widow still hostile?"

"No. She invited me to supper. But I figure some of the others won't like my staying."

"Well, I'll see you after you've talked with Judge Stiles."

McCord nodded to that. He mounted and rode off. Glancing back, he saw Martha Hammond gazing after him. He knew then that he would have given most anything to have stayed—because of her. McCord had looked upon the Widow Hammond and found her pleasing in his sight. But then he told himself, *she's not for you.* A Union veteran wouldn't have much chance of interesting the wife of a dead Confederate soldier. McCord may have been thinking of Martha Hammond, or perhaps he was intent upon planning his visit to Judge Ben Stiles at Vallado. Whatever the reason, he was not alert when he started across his range.

But there was no warning. A rifle cracked. McCord lurched in the saddle, his face tightened up with sudden pain. He grabbed first for his rifle, then clutched at the saddle horn. He felt as though he were strangling. A red stain spread across the front of his shirt. Spooked, his horse began to buck. McCord's weak hold loosened from the saddle horn. He spilled to the ground.

He tried to rise, but could not. When a drumming of hoofs sounded, he could do no more than lever himself up on his arms. But he saw the ambusher ride from the stand of cottonwoods that bordered the shallow creek. And McCord recognized him. There was no mistaking that rail-thin figure that fled as fast as his horse could run. Walt Carmody hadn't forgotten that his face had been slapped. . . .

THE two cowhands Matt Vaughn had recruited for McCord arrived at sun-up. They were Charlie Harmon and Les Shannon, two Confederate veterans, and they found the saddled horse standing outside the corral and, a moment later, the trail of dried blood in the dust. They could see too where a man had crawled, and, dismounting, they followed the markings to the adobe ranchhouse. They found McCord unconscious on his bunk in the one-room 'dobe, and he was burning up with a fever. He'd stuffed a spare shirt against the wound in his left side, and it had stopped

the flow of blood. Charlie and Les did not hesitate. They built a fire, heated water, cleansed the wound. They worked with some skill, for they were men who had seen a great many bullet wounds.

McCord was conscious only part of that day, but late in the afternoon his fever broke. He fell into a deep sleep that carried him through the night. In the morning, he was clear of mind and so weak he felt empty inside. He'd lost a lot of blood, and it had been a close call. McCord knew that Charlie and Les had saved his life.

They cared for his wound, were pleased when it showed the first signs of healing. They fed McCord easily taken beef stew, and it put the strength back into him. The third day he was sitting up in the bunk, and he would have gotten into his clothes had the two cowhands permitted it. Charlie Harmon and Les Shannon were his men in more ways than one when he told them who had shot him.

Charlie cursed Walt Carmody, called him a crooked cattle inspector with coyote guts. And Les asked, "You settling with him when you're fit again, boss?"

"I'll settle with him," McCord said. "For his own good, he should have made sure he'd killed me."

He meant it. He couldn't let Carmody get away with a sneak shooting, and let him try another. McCord was so full of rage when he talked or thought about Walt Carmody it almost choked him. He had no doubt about it. He would settle with him, as soon as he was able to mount a horse and lift a gun.

But it took longer than he expected. The fourth day he got into his clothes, but he was too weak to leave the cabin. The fifth day he stepped outside, walked a few steps, then was forced to slump down in the doorway. A week was gone before he could make it to the corrals, and even then he wasn't in condition to saddle a horse. He was grateful for Charlie and Les, who not only did the ranch chores and the riding out on the range but doctored and nursed him. And all the while he was tied down by weakness, McCord worried because he wasn't able to ride to Vallado and see Judge Ben Stiles, as he'd promised Matt Vaughn.

Old Matt showed up the day McCord took to the saddle again, riding in with a grim-faced stranger. Vaughn had met and talked with Charlie Harmon out on the range, and so knew about McCord's wound. Too, he saw McCord's pallor and the stiffness of his movements. But the old rancher had something else on his mind. Soon as he reined in, he said, "McCord, this is Jake Langley. He's a friend of mine from over by Tulare. Jake, you tell McCord what happened on your range."

Langley talked in a dead voice. "Same thing as is happening here," he said. "Wyland North operated in my county, along with some other carpetbaggers who went into the cattle business. North put his tough crew to gathering wild cattle as the tallying law allowed him to. He made off with seven or eight thousand head, sent them north to Kansas. Out of all he gathered, he recorded about two thousand head of branded stock in the Tulare courthouse, and we ranchers were supposed to be paid for that many."

When Langley paused, McCord said, "Then North disappeared?"

"He pulled out," Langley growled. "That wasn't all, though. A couple weeks after, while some of us were hunting North and some more hombres like him, the Tulare courthouse caught fire and burned. The tallying records went up in smoke. So now North and the rest won't ever have to pay us off."

McCord muttered an oath.

Langley went on, "I'm not a man to forget easy. I took to trailing Wyland North and his ramrod, Nate Graham. I lost their trail until lately, but I sure learned a lot on my riding. Courthouses have been burning down in most every county in the range country. Those fires sure ain't accidents. They were set. Finally I found that North and Graham were operating in these parts, so I told Matt what I knew."

"So you figure the Vallado courthouse will catch fire?"

"It's sure to, some night. Any night, now that North left the town."

"You got any idea who set that fire in Tulare?"

"There was talk of a cattle inspector."

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing. He was an outsider, a carpetbagger," Langley said. "But he did leave Tulare about a month after the fire. Where he went I don't know. His name was Carmody."

McCord wasn't surprised. He turned to Matt Vaughn, and said, "I'm riding to town, to see Judge Stiles. He's got to be warned, so he can take steps to guard those tallying records. Walt Carmody is in deep with Wyland North and Nate Graham, and he's sure to pull the same stunt in Vallado." He turned to his horse, then faced about. "Any word from the men watching the herd on North's range?"

Vaughn nodded. "Graham's getting ready to trail-drive," he said. "We've got six men near his range, and a dozen of us are riding for there today. We'll do what we can to keep him from leaving the county with the cattle. After that, it's up to you and Judge Stiles."

"All right, Matt," McCord told him. "Maybe this'll be the showdown. We'll win or lose—together."

They shook hands on it, then McCord mounted and headed south. The other two men rode northeast, toward Vaughn's ranch.

Chapter IV

GUNS FOR A RAMROD

McCORD pampered himself by riding slowly, but even so the saddle punished him. Yet after a few miles, the stiffness went out of him and he overcame his weakness. He rode into Vallado as darkness closed down. He stopped at the courthouse, but no one but Cab Nelson, the deputy sheriff, was in the building so late in the day. McCord left his horse at the livery barn, then went to the hotel. Judge Stiles had just finished his dinner. He glanced up and gave McCord a surprised look.

"What're you up to now, Sam?" he demanded.

"I've got to talk to you, Judge—in private."

"Come up to my room."

They went upstairs, and Stiles lighted the lamp in the room. He still eyed McCord in a bewildered way, but remained silent while McCord told him about the courthouse burning at Tulare. The jurist nodded his white-thatched head, and said, "I heard that story before. But I didn't know Carmody was suspected of starting that fire. Why, if it could be proved, we could throw him behind bars. Arson is an ugly crime."

"I'll gamble he'll try the same thing here, Judge."

"You'd win the bet, too," Stiles said, and the tired look that was usually in his old eyes faded. He seemed now like a man eager for a fight. "And if Carmody pulls such a stunt, it's apt to be tonight."

"What makes you think that?"

"Sheriff Dunn is away from town, and the soldiers rode north today."

"North?" said McCord, in sudden alarm. "Where, Judge?"

"You know a man named Jess Wyler?"

McCord nodded. He remembered the wizened little man who had been so violently opposed to him that Sunday at the Widow Hammond's ranch.

Judge Stiles went on, "Wyler is a squealer. He rode into town this morning and talked with Walt Carmody and Sheriff Dunn. He told them that you and a bunch of Texans were riding today to jump Nate Graham's trail herd. He said he pretended to string along with the crowd, but all the time he was planning to tip off the law. Sheriff Dunn went to the Army post, and at noon he and the soldiers rode out. They were going to side Nate Graham."

That was a blow for McCord. He said, "I'll have to ride for that range and warn those Texans. Dammit; if one shot should be fired, it would turn into a battle! And I talked those ranchers into it!"

"Easy, Sam. You'd never make it."

"I can try."

"No use," the judge said. "The trouble'll be settled before you get halfway there. The cavalry must have reached Graham's herd long before sundown. Besides, Sheriff Dunn would be sure to place you under arrest if you showed up. You heed what I'm saying and help me watch out for Carmody. He's sure to pull something tonight, with the sheriff away." He paused, seeing that he had convinced McCord. Then: "You had supper?"

McCord said he hadn't eaten.

"Good. We'll go downstairs, and I'll buy you a meal," said Judge Ben Stiles.

* * *

When they entered the courthouse, a dim light burned in the sheriff's office but the deputy, Cab Nelson, was no longer there. Judge Stiles told McCord that the tallying

law records were kept in a rear room, and they went back the hall. They entered the dark room, the judge saying he was sure that Carmody would go directly to it if he meant to destroy the records. It seemed a long gamble, a waist of time, to McCord, since they had no assurance that Walt Carmody would strike on this particular night. But Stiles had his hunch and stuck to it.

McCord lounged against the wall, just inside the doorway, and the only sound in the darkness was the old man's breathing and the ticking of a wall clock. It seemed that half the night was gone when at last there came the sound of someone moving through the building.

McCord breathed, "Watch it!"

He drew his six-shooter, braced himself. Furtive footsteps came along the hall, and finally the door swung open. A man stepped into the room, then halted as though suspicious. After a moment, he said, with forced unconcern, "Somebody in here?"

It was Carmody's voice, and McCord struck out with his gun. He slammed it down hard enough to drive Carmody to his knees—to keep him there. As the man went down, a metallic clatter sounded and then a liquid gurgling noise. McCord caught the odor of coal oil. He said, "Strike a light, Judge. But be careful. There's oil on the floor."

Stiles struck a match, lighted a lamp, and Carmody, still on his knees and holding his head in his hands, stared up at the two men who had surprised him. His bony face was gray with pain and fright.

McCord collared him, pulled him up, shoved him into a chair. He pointed to the coil-oil can Carmody had dropped; it was still spilling its contents onto the floor. "A match to that would have done for this building," he said. "How much do Wyland North and Nate Graham pay you for setting fire to courthouses?"

Carmody still said nothing.

McCord stepped over, lifted his gun as though to strike down again.

Carmody wailed, "Don't, McCord—don't!"

Judge Stiles said, "Let me talk to him, Sam." He faced Carmody, told him, "You're going to prison, Walt. We've got the evidence against you. You planned to burn this courthouse, as you burnt the one at Tulare. You can save yourself from a stiffer sentence by turning over and being a witness against the men who hired you. You willing to make a deal?"

There was fear as well as pain in Walt Carmody, and he whined, "Keep McCord off me, Judge. He'll kill me, sure!"

"I'll keep him off you. Who paid you, Walt?"

"Wyland North. He gave me two hundred dollars for the job."

"We'll put it in writing," Stiles said, sitting down at a desk and taking up pen and paper. "Then you'll sign the statement."

He wrote the statement, adding that Nate Graham had been paying Carmody for overlooking the fraudulent tallies made at the cattle round-ups. When Stiles handed the pen to Carmody, there was some hesitation. Carmody had gotten a grip on himself, and wanted to bargain. "You swear you'll let me off easy, Judge?" he asked. "With only a short sentence?"

"You get off too easy, I'll come gunning for you," McCord told him. "I'm not forgetting that you bushwhacked me, Walt."

Carmody sagged, and muttered, "All right; I'll sign."

The deputy sheriff entered the building, and McCord called him to the back room. He told Cab Nelson, "Lock him up, and keep him locked up. You're responsible for him."

McCord turned to Judge Stiles. "That paper is enough evidence against Nate Graham and Wyland North?" he asked. When the judge nodded, McCord added, "Then you and I are going on a little trip. The one I wanted to start on earlier. And I'm hoping we're not too late to keep a war from breaking out between the cavalry and those riled-up Texans!"

JUDGE STILES didn't protest. Perhaps he knew, by the stubborn look on McCord's face, that protesting would be useless. He went to the livery barn with McCord, and they roused the liveryman. McCord would have preferred a saddle mount, but, knowing that the old jurist was no horseman, he told the liveryman to hitch up a team to his best rig. The rig turned out to be a fine light carriage that had belonged to Vallado's banker, a man who had been ruined by the war, and the team was a pair of big matched bays. While waiting,

McCord looked for his saddle and took his Henry rifle from its boot.

It was midnight when they drove from town, and McCord headed out the road that ran northeast to Wyland North's range, thirty miles away. The bays were eager to run, and McCord let them out. With a good team in the traces of a light rig, on a fair road, the miles dropped behind. The old man beside McCord dozed off. As for McCord, he never before had been in less need of sleep. He was keyed up by anxiety, by the uncertainty of what had happened on North's range. For he knew that if guns had blazed, the blame would be his.

McCord knew how Texans could fight, and the ranchers Matt Vaughn led were desperate men. Without a doubt, they would have tried to stop Nate Graham and his crew from putting the cattle onto the trail. And if the cavalry had arrived when that attempt was being made, there would surely have been a fight, and a bloody one at that. McCord knew that such a fight could end in only one way, with the soldiers victorious. Defeat for the Texans would be disaster, and McCord, since the scheme had been his, would bear the guilt.

Yet he was not thinking entirely of what it would mean to him, but rather of the men who might have died. He had wanted those Texans for friends, and if his scheme had ended in bloody disaster, there could be no hope of winning that friendship. *I'll be done in Texas,* he told himself. He was afraid of what he would find at the end of this trail. The evidence that would bring about the arrest of Nate Graham and Wyland North would be a mockery if blood had already been shed.

Dawn came as the blowing and lathered bays climbed the road now winding through the rock hills bordering North's range. McCord roused his companion, and said, "Wake up, Judge. Trouble ahead."

The sun began to show as they came through the hills and dropped down onto rolling grass flats that extended as far as the eye could reach. McCord saw the herd —a vast gathering of cattle—several miles to the north. And he said, "Graham didn't start his drive." There was hope in his voice.

As he drove on, McCord could see that his anxiety had been a needless thing. No fight had occurred, no blood had been shed. The sheriff and the soldiers had arrived in time to restrain the Texans and perhaps Nate Graham too.

The cavalry—thirty troopers under a young lieutenant—were bivouacked on a grassy flat beside a creek north of the herd. Opposite, on the other side of the creek, were the Texans. There were more Texans than McCord had expected to find: perhaps twenty-five of them. Nate Graham and his crew had a camp south of the herd. The outfit was ready for the trail. There was a big remuda, a chuck wagon and two big calf wagons. Graham and his hands had their mounts saddled, ready to ride. Even the herd—McCord judged it amounted to nearly three thousand head—seemed ready for the trail. The wild cattle were restless; bawling mournfully and milling slowly in uncertain confusion. They were held together only by the half dozen riders that circled the great herd.

McCord drove in a wide arc around the gather, not wanting his rig to stampede the animals. He ignored Graham's camp, went to the bivouac. The troopers' mounts were on picket line, their carbines were stacked. But this lack of alertness did not dispel the feeling of hostility that was in the air. Sheriff Dunn, Lieutenant Macklin, Matt Vaughn, and a fourth man—a pudgy, red-faced man wearing town clothes—stood in a group. The four were deep in an angry discussion. Judge Stiles said, "That's Wyland North, Sam. This is one time he won't get away with his crooked game."

As McCord halted his team, the four stopped talking and all looked patently relieved. Wyland North said pompously, "Here's the man who'll settle this." He came forward, hand outstretched. "Judge, I'm sure glad to see you."

Judge Stiles got from the carriage. He ignored North's hand, said, "You've no reason to be glad to see me, North. What's going on here?"

North's florid face darkened. He said explosively, "This fool of a Texan," he shot old Matt Vaughn an angry look, "won't let me start this herd onto the trail. He's got that bunch of rabble over on the far side of the creek, and he claims they'll start shooting if I move my cattle. This fool sheriff and this young squirt of an Army officer won't drive them off. But they'll

heed what you say, Judge. You tell them the law."

Sheriff Dunn was a mild-mannered man, and he said quietly, "I'm just urging North to be patient, Judge, and I'm trying to reason with Matt Vaughn. Neither I nor Lieutenant Macklin want bloodshed. Those Texans are heavily armed and they could slaughter the cavalry if we try to cross the creek. It'd take a lot more soldiers than we've got to round up a bunch of fighting men like that one."

McCord looked at Matt Vaughn, gave him a reassuring nod. The old rancher grinned back.

Judge Stiles said, "Sheriff, I want this herd held here. I want guards placed over it until a new tally is made."

North bellowed, "Dammit, Judge, this herd has been tallied! It was passed by Walt Carmody, the cattle inspector appointed by your court!"

"Carmody's no longer a cattle inspector," Stiles said. "He's locked up in the Vallado jail, and he's already signed a statement that he's been in your hire. The tallying of these cattle was crooked, North, and you know it." He turned to Sheriff Dunn. "I want this man placed under arrest, Sheriff. Also, his foreman Nate Graham."

McCORD saw the wild fright on Wyland North's face. He saw both the sheriff and Lieutenant Macklin look jolted—and Matt Vaughn's weather-beaten old face break into a real smile. But McCord, like the others, hadn't noticed Nate Graham come riding up. Not until he spoke were they aware of the burly ramrod. Graham said, "What you want, Judge, won't be what you get. One move from any of you, and I'll gun the judge down!"

He had his gun in his fist, cocked and ready, and it was levelled at the jurist. McCord had the Henry rifle in his hand, but he saw no chance of using it without bringing about Stile's death.

Graham's scarred face was ugly, as he went on, "Wayland, get your derringer out of your pocket and throw down on the judge. Start him walking toward our camp. I'll keep these others off your back. If you hear a shot, gun Stiles down. You savvy?"

North did as he was told, shoving the old jurist ahead of him.

Graham waited until his boss had a good start, then he said savagely, "I'm warning you four, the old man's life is in your hands."

He holstered his gun, grinned contemptuously, and gigged his horse about. He rode off at an easy lope. Sheriff Dunn muttered a mild oath, said, "I'll get that pair if it takes the rest of my life. But what are we going to do about getting Stiles away from them?"

McCord said angrily, "All we can do is hope they'll turn him loose once they figure they're safe." None of the others said anything. They all felt foolish for having let Nate Graham get the best of them. McCord's hand were clamped viselike about his rifle. This was one time when he felt like back-shooting a man. He watched Graham and North take Judge Stiles all the way to their camp. He saw Graham order his cowhands to mount, and then he knew what Nate Graham was going to pull.

McCord yelled, "Watch it! They're going to stampede the herd!"

Even so, the warning came too late. Graham's crew got those restless cattle running before Lieutenant Macklin could get his troopers mounted. Sheriff Dunn and Matt Vaughn ran to their already saddled horses, and McCord leapt for his rig. He shouted at the bays and used the whip, heading them for the creek. He splashed the carriage across, ran it into a stand of scrub cottonwoods, then jumped out and ran toward the Texans' camp. Matt Vaughn was already there, shouting orders, telling a rancher's young son to give McCord his saddled horse.

Mounted, McCord saw the wildly running cattle charging through the cavalry bivouac. Blue-clad troopers were fleeing for their lives, some afoot and some mounted bare-back. The vanguard of the herd hit the shallow stream, charged up the north bank and into the Texans' camp. Those ranchers tried to head off the stampede, shouting wildly and shooting off their guns, but there was no stopping it.

McCord shouted to Matt Vaughn, "Let 'em run! We'll round 'em up when they can't run any more!" He swung his spooked horse away from the monstrous surge of longhorns, headed back along the side of the moving mass.

Graham's crew were still at the rear of

the herd, driving the cattle to wilder fury by shooting off their guns and yelling like Comanches. McCord heard Nate Graham's bellowing voice lift through the din, "Run 'em to hell! Run 'em into those Texans!"

McCord muttered, "You fool!" It seemed to him that Graham was acting like a crazy man by giving up his chance to escape in the confusion. McCord was back across the creek now, plunging through choking dust. He kept listening to Graham's yells, hunting him more with his ears than with his eyes. Then suddenly he came face to face with the man—just as Graham swung away from the herd to make his escape.

McCord pulled his horse to a halt, swung the rifle up. Graham cursed, and fired a wild shot, swerved sharply away. McCord's shot caught him in the left side, and Graham, as though knowing he couldn't get away now, whipped around and rode straight at him. Graham's six-shooter roared again, but only as McCord's second shot tore into his chest. The big black gelding began to buck, and Graham toppled from the saddle. McCord lowered his rifle, took up his reins. He rode past the dead man, headed for the cow camp.

His rifle was ready again when he pulled up, but there was no need for more shooting. Old Judge Ben Stiles stood over Wyland North, who lay in a heap on the ground. The jurist chuckled and said, "Maybe I'm old, but I still remember a few tricks. I booted him in the belly, Sam, and took his derringer away from him. We'll still send him to prison. He's unconscious, not dead—though I should have killed him."

McCord said, "Nate Graham won't be going behind bars."

"No?" said Stiles. "Well, I figured you'd somehow get to take care of him."

IT WAS another day, and the rounded-up cattle now were on old Matt Vaughn's range. Ranchers from all around were there with their crews, cutting out the longhorns bearing their individual brands and making an honest division of the mavericks. They were doing it under the supervision of a new cattle inspector appointed by Judge Stiles, and, though the old jurist wasn't present, those ranchers had his backing.

McCord and his two cowhands were hazing what Espada cattle they found onto a grassy flat to the west of the round-up, and at sundown McCord found that his cattle were mixed up with a gather of stock marked with a Circle-H brand. He was annoyed but not angry, for this was too good a day for the range to give way to anger, and he hunted up some men who were cutting Circle-H stock from the herd.

He said, "Where's your boss, boys?" and one pointed to a chuck wagon and a campfire just north of the mixed-up gather of Espada and Circle-H cattle. McCord rode that way, and a man was busy cooking a meal at the fire. The man's back was to McCord.

McCord reined in, said, "Friend, I just wanted to tell you that your cattle are drifting and mixing in with mine."

The man turned. Only it wasn't a man; it was Martha Hammond clad in mannish range clothes. She smiled and said, "I'm sorry. I'll have my crew cut them out, first thing in the morning." She paused, smiled. "Have supper with me, Sam?"

Her smile went right to Sam McCord's heart. He said, "Thanks; I'd be glad to." And he dismounted so quickly that Martha Hammond must have known that he wanted her company more than a meal.

THE END

LUCKY COWBOY

COWPOKE Ed Brannon was generally known around Little Springs, Utah, as a lucky fellow. He had been thrown from a plunging horse, knocked down by a stampeding herd, and twice struck by lightning and came through unscathed. Until July 6, 1893, however, no one ever really knew how lucky he was. Feeling his drinks in the Paradise Saloon, he took a dislike to the man whose back faced his at the bar and insulted him freely. When the man turned around, he was seen to be stage robber Pete Hughes, a gunman famous for his lightning draw—and Pete was mad. Ed, no gunfighter himself, saw the highwayman's purpling face and prepared to die. He had never been closer to Beulah Land, but it was Hughes, not he, who suddenly pitched forward into the sawdust, dead—of heart failure.

—By Jimmy Nichols

If Mr. Seepee Pennington, La Mesa's thirstiest and least prosperous citizen, couldn't warn Hardrock Carter of approaching disaster without being booted downstairs, then that parched and derbied worthy would have to take care of the safe-blowers in his own hit-or-miss fashion!

Seepee fell all of a heap, but he managed to squeeze the trigger of his gun, ripping the left hand of his assailant.

By FRED WITMAN

THE LITTLE man with a derby hat landed smack on the seat of his pants as he completed his bouncing roll from the head of the stairs to the packed-earth walk at their foot. As he wobbled to his feet he heard a thunderous voice say, "—and don't never come in here ag'in!"

The inelegant appearance of the little man was not heightened by this episode. Although his perpetual derby hat remained intact upon his head, its normal position had been altered in its contact with the steps—it rested slant-wise across his right eye and lent a curious air of cockiness to the otherwise abject demeanor of its wearer.

"And to think I was trying to render

NO ROOM FOR A HERO!

that billy goat a service," he muttered to himself as he daintily dusted the elbows of his black broadcloth coat with a blue bandana handkerchief.

For a moment he stood there, once his dusting efforts had been completed, stroking his parched lips with a dry tongue. He straightened, as best he could under these foresaken circumstances, a heavy Ascot tie, turned a complete circle five feet in diameter as if he had been pivoted to its center, and tangentially walked a bee-line to the corner of the brick building from which he had been so ignominiously expelled just a moment before.

C. P . Palmer or, if you prefer, Mr. Clayton Pennington Palmer, carried locked within his bosom a tremendous secret, the knowledge of which would be of untold value to the person who, so shortly before, had laid a heavy boot to his backside. And now, standing upon the principle corner of the principle street of La Mesa, C. P. Palmer was trying heroically to make up his mind whether or not he would divulge the secret he possessed.

Manfully Seepee—no one, much to his dismay, ever called him "Mister" or by any one or all of his splendid names—manfully, let it be said, Seepee stood at the principle corner of the business section of La Mesa, and surveyed the situation that had been thrust upon him.

This survey consisted, largely, of 1) straightening his derby hat, 2) curling the ends of his walrus mustache by twisting them, 3) wistfully feeling the four-day stubble upon his cheeks, 4) searching such pockets of his habiliments as might possibly have been overlooked in numerous previous searches for stray coins which, also, might possibly have been overlooked and, 5) rolling his eyes with a mixture of affection and longing at La Mesa's two saloons.

Seepee's survey, in all of its aspects, was fruitless. It yielded him nothing, quite as he knew it would. He countered this dismal failure by extending his right arm to the corner of the building by which he was standing, much as if he were lending his feeble assistance to keep it from falling over, and running the index finger of his left hand between his collar, from his right ear to his left one. With these simple acts accomplished, his mind turned again to the secret he held, and seriously contemplated its value. Indeed, whatever its value, it was the only asset he possessed, or had any immediate prospect of possessing. For, to Seepee, the room and board that was assured him by the washings his wife took in from the miners hereabouts was no asset. It wasn't a liability, either. Seepee had no quarrel with bookkeepers, auditors, and others concerned with the distribution and accounting of mundane things. An asset, to Seepee was simply that which, wherever he happened to be, could be converted into something liquid. "Liquid assets" actually meant what it said. All else was dust and ashes carried in sackcloth.

The burden of his secret was too great to be shouldered without help. Seepee concluded that further meditation upon his problem required a sort of shoring-up. He turned and walked in the shady side of the empty street to the middle of the block where reposed, in quiet dignity, the Hangtown Saloon.

He entered its dark and cool sanctuary, took a deep breath and walked through the saw-dust to the mahogany bar. The bartender approached the impending customer. Seepee removed his derby hat, polished the ivory dome of his head with the blue bandana handkerchief.

"Hot out, isn't it?" he remarked sweetly as he gently placed his derby upside down upon the bar.

"I don't know," the bartender replied. "Is it?" His voice was skeptical and showed he had little confidence in the integrity of any information Seepee might pass on to him. Still, thought the bartender to himself, Seepee might have a dime.

"Whiskey—bar whiskey," Seepee ordered.

"Ten cents," the bartender replied firmly.

"On the cuff—Saturday, you know—"

"Not here." And the bartender began polishing his bar, walking away from Seepee as he did so.

There was nothing for Seepee to do except to dust off his derby, shrug his shoulders and walk out. As he came into the bright light and the glare from the white buildings across the street he was blinded. Instinctively, he knew that dead across the street was the Red Dog Saloon, and he made it as surely as if he had followed a guard-rail.

He removed his derby hat, wiped the

perspiration from his ivoried dome with his blue bandana handkerchief, placed his hat upon the bar—upside down.

"Hot out, isn't it?" he addressed the bartender.

The bartender looked at him with a beady eye. Seepee had been up against this before. The silence challenged him.

"Old Taylor," he ordered.

"Cash or credit?" the bartender asked.

"On Saturday—"

"Only bar whiskey on credit," the bartender replied. He poured the drink; he did not set the bottle upon the bar.

Seepee downed the potion and as he did so the secret he held was resurrected.

"Fill it up again," he requested politely.

The bartender obliged. Seepee didn't know it, but his credit, at the Red Dog Saloon was good for a dollar, and this morning he had walked in with the slate clean—a miraculous accomplishment effected two days before that his troubled mind had since forgotten.

ON MANY occasions, and none memorable, Seepee had found the walk from La Mesa's two saloons to his abode beyond his capacity and endurance. Set within the rail-fenced area of a small meadow on the side of the mountain was an abandoned barn, rustic and moss-covered, only a stone's throw from the road upon which Seepee meandered torturously when returning to his wife and abode from the parlors of conviviality he was wont to haunt. Like a wayside inn, this friendly barn served Seepee well, and afforded him splendid rest within its empty vastness on those times when weariness or dread of facing his wife, or both, overtook him. It was his second home—his home away from home.

The night before he had so unceremoniously departed the second floor of the La Mesa State Bank building, Seepee had spent in his wayside hostel. He had had nothing to drink the whole day, and the thought of such prolonged abstinence left him ineffably weary. His mind was as clear as a bell, and his ears were delicately sensitive to the most casual of sounds as he arranged the pallet of straw in the far corner of the barn. Sleep was not to be wooed, and he was restless.

How long he had been lying there he had no way of knowing and, perhaps, the thought of time never entered his head. He was not frightened when he heard footfalls coming toward the barn, but when, at last, the door at the far end quietly opened, he was resentful that his privacy had been invaded. In the glow of the moonlight outside, Seepee could plainly distingush the silhouetted form of a man enter and close the door behind him. He hunched himself a bit closer to the wall of the barn against which he lay, and gently breathed.

He heard the man walk very quietly inside, stumble, cuss a little in a muffled breath and, at last, settle himself upon a timber. Seepee could hear the man breathing, but it was not the heavy respiration of a man who had fallen asleep. It was the pinched breathing of a man full awake and under tension.

Again Seepee heard the footfalls of another person approaching the barn, and again he saw the door swing open and a second man silhouetted against the moonlight. And the door closed.

"Lige?"

"Hi."

The two men had met, quite obviously, by prearrangement. The first man had arisen in greeting, and the two quietly walked to rear of the barn as if their furtiveness would be cloaked and more by increasing the distance between themselves and the door. This display of caution brought them within a few feet of Seepee who cringed upon the floor as they approached.

They spoke in coarse whispers, and not a word fell but what Seepee heard it in all of its force and clarity.

"What's the word up to the mine?"

"They're movin' the bullion this afternoon."

"How much they fetchin'?"

"Twelve hunnert ounces."

"How much's that in dollars?"

" 'Bout twenty-four thousand."

There was a long silence.

"How you think we better tackle it?"

"I'm ag'in waylayin' it on the road, 'cause somebuddy'll reckernize yuh, an' yuh'll get caught."

Again, silence.

"How we goin' to get it, then?"

"They're fixin' to put it in Hardrock's office safe overnight. That-a-way, they kin carry it in daylight to the railroad the next day."

"That don't answer my question."

"Yes it does, too. Crack open the safe about two hour after the saloons close."

"What good's that?"

"Nobuddy'll see yuh, and I kin give yuh a hand."

" 'Feard I won't divvy up with yuh, huh?"

"Naw—but they'll be four men on that trip come down from the mine besides me. All four know yuh."

"I kin wear a mask over my face."

"Yuh kin be a target, too."

Silence again; meditative silence.

"I reckon's how yore right, at that. But how we goin' to bust open that ole safe?"

"Yore handy with dynamite, ain't yuh?"

"None handier."

"Ever bust open a safe?"

"Once."

"Think yuh kin bust open this'n?"

"The one I busted was bigger'n any Ole Hardrock ever see."

"Got any dynamite?"

"Got some cached away up the crick."

"Kin yuh git it without nobuddy knowin'?"

"Easy's pie."

"We're all set then, ain't we?"

"What yuh gonna do to help?"

"Whatever yuh say."

"Load the saddle-bags with plenty of chuck and save some space in 'em for the bullion . . . Say, how much do twelve hunnert ounces weigh?"

" 'Bout a hunnert pounds."

Silence.

SEEPEE HAD the shakes. He was fearful lest his teeth begin to rattle and give him away to the desperadoes who stood so near to him. He knew if he could escape detection, and get the word of this enterprise to Hardrock Carter, his present short supply of alcoholic rations would be over, and life would have a more mellow outlook in the future. Perhaps, indeed, he would be rewarded with cash instead of uncertain credit at the Hangtown and Red Dog Saloons. In which event he promised himself, he would see to it that the Old Lady would get a new easy chair, a wash-tub and wringer, an ironing board and maybe a new stove. The spirit of private enterprise and its rewards began to flame in his breast, and new visions for the future took hold of Seepee. His reverie was momentarily interrupted by a final exchange between the two conspirators.

"We'll meet here ag'in come midnight."

"At midnight it is."

The two men walked the length of the old barn and entered into the moonlight. Seepee was alone with his thought and apprehensions and, above all, with his schemes.

There was a slight flaw, however, in all the plans he could work out. The flaw was none other than Hardrock Carter himself. Old Hardrock had finally reached the point where he would no longer subsidize Seepee's thirst. When Hardrock first reached this sweeping conclusion Seepee had regarded it merely as a passing whim. But Hardrock had not come by his name for any other reason than it typified his character.

Hardrock Carter was the principle owner of the Lost Lode Mine. As such, he divided his affairs between the mine and the City of La Mesa where, over the First State Bank he kept two offices: one where he could play poker in unmolested seclusion with a few well-chosen friends, and the other where the bookkeeper for the mine pursued his toils. It was in the bookkeeper's office where Hardrock's safe was kept and where the bullion would be stored.

When Seepee stuck his head into Hardrock's office that morning he said something which had to do with the importance of Seepee's presence. The words made no impression upon Hardrock Carter who simply eased himself from his chair, walked to the door with the gentle fury of an unleashed bull, reached around Seepee's neck for an adequate grip upon Seepee's collar, twirled him around and took hold of the seat of his pants, forcing Seepee reluctantly along the hall to the stairway. Before he placed a well-aimed boot upon Seepee's fundament, he bellowed, "I thought I told you never to come in here no more—"

Seepee, by this time, was in free flight, except as he paradoxically touched an occasional riser on his way down. When he landed he heard the rest of the sentence: "—and don't never come in here ag'in!"

Thus, when he lit, he held his secret intact and Hardrock Carter, confusing Seepee's noble purpose with a dime for a drink, stood to lose twelve hundred ounces of pure gold at the market rate of $20.67 per fine ounce.

It took the two drinks he finally obtained at the Red Dog Saloon on his own credit to restore charity to Seepee's heart which, along with other portions of his anatomy, had become bruised at the foot of the man whom he had hoped to serve.

Seepee's was too big and too generous a character to permit his mind to dwell upon the revenge that would be his if he kept his silence. As a citizen of La Mesa and as a patron of its finer arts he cherished suddenly the desire to render a service befitting his station in the community as a well-known personage.

He left the Red Dog Saloon with alacrity. He walked to the office of the sheriff. That gentleman, seated in his chair, was leaning against the white-washed wall of his office and jail, his golden badge glittering splendidly in the morning sunlight. He looked at Seepee with one eye. There was nothing in Seepee's present demeanor or past reputation which required the Shriff to pay him two-eyed attention.

"Now git away from here, or I'll lock yuh up." The sheriff shut his eye.

Seepee was a man of few words and knew when not to use them. In this situation his few words were spoken to himself, but directed in spirit to the sheriff: "You'll be sorry, come tomorrow morning." He walked away aimlessly—but away, just the same. The jail was comfortable, he knew, but it restricted his freedom and that was an oppression alien to his sense of liberty.

Seepee knew that the information he possessed should go only to the prospective victim of this wicked scheme or to the Sheriff. He could not entrust it to emissaries, for it was patent that the bold plans of the bandits would be all over La Mesa before it reached the persons most concerned, if it reached them at all.

Seepee was left to his own resources.

Late that afternoon, he sadly watched five heavily armed men dismount their saddled horses and walk up the steps of the First State Bank building to turn over their valuable cargo to Hardrock Carter.

VOICES trailing off into the thin night air, the easy beat of horses' hoofs and the heavy footfalls of citizens walking in directions from the Hangtown and Red Dog saloons were the curfew which tolled the closing of the day for La Mesa. Midnight had come and gone, at last, to bring a silence marked only by the natural sounds of slumbering night.

A rhythmic creaking of heavy timbers spoke eloquently of the attack about to be made upon the safe in the offices of the Lost Lode Mining Company. The sounds moved slowly from the stairway to the hall, and along the hall to the door behind which was located the safe with its contents of fabulous wealth. Then there was silence, broken by the dull and heavy noise of a door being forced by the weight and power of two strong bodies against it.

Seepee was awakened by this sound which opened the room next door to the invasion of the intruders. He sat bolt-upright in Hardrock Carter's very own chair, and shook in his boots as he did so. He hadn't bargained for the reality of this thing and now that he was face-to-face with it he wished mightily he had never been brought in contact with it. But the poverty of his purse and the power of his thirst bucked him up. If this were the last thing he ever did, he'd go through with it.

He waited. The sounds and coarse whispers in the next room assured him the safe was being assaulted. He could hear a chisel being deftly pounded against the iron door. He heard sounds that told him the men were satisfied with their progress. The job was moving satisfactorily even though it seemed to Seepee that it moved on the dragging feet of time.

At last, through the glass transom between the two rooms, he noted a dull glow, as if from a match, and he heard the two men go quickly into the hall. Seepee scuttled under the table and held his head in his arms, wishing above all things he had not been driven into this madness.

There came a heavy, dull thud that rocked the building. Glass from the window panes in the room containing the safe shattered and clinked to the street. The men in the hall rushed to their target, compelled to move quickly lest the blast should betray them and defeat their purpose.

This was the climax of Seepee's plans. He came from under the table, went to the door seperating the two rooms and quietly —ever so quietly—turned the knob and pulled it toward him. He peeked into the smoke-filled office and saw the forms of two men bent over the blasted safe. A small

miner's lamp provided the illumination and he could see clearly that the excitement of clawing through the rubbish laid down by the explosion had the complete and undivided attention of the thieves.

"Hands up!" Seepee screamed as he stood full in the doorway. The burglars rose slowly to their feet, hands upraised. They began to turn slowly toward the voice behind them.

"Don't turn," Seepee commanded, "just sidle over to the wall with your backs toward *us.*"

The men obeyed.

Seepee fully entered the room. The light from the full moon outside plus the glow from the miner's lamp permitted him to see that the men now standing with their faces to the wall were well armed: their revolvers in holsters at their hips.

Boldly Seepee walked over to them and removed their guns. When he removed the first gun from its holster he cast aside the stick he had blackened that afternoon with a mixture of lamp-black and coal oil. As he withdrew the second gun from its holster he heaved a great sigh of relief.

"All right, gentlemen," he said with pompous authority, "keep your hands up and march single file out of here and down the steps."

When the two culprits reached the earthen walk at the foot of the steps they stopped. So did Seepee. His plans had not been developed further than this and, like a true artist, he would rely on improvisation from now on out.

He conceived the importance of having plenty of room in which to maneuver. More, he was averse to allowing his captives to take advantage of any shadows that might be cast by the sides of buildings or the few trees which lined the street.

"Into the middle of the street, you robbers!"

With their hands still reaching for the sky, the two men followed the command.

"To the right! And march!"

There was no hint now of indecision in Seepee's voice. He was clearly the master of the situation and he reveled in it. He frankly wished it were broad daylight, and the streets of La Mesa lined with its citizens so he could display his heroic exploit in all its magnificence and grandeur.

The march continued past Main street. By that time, the desperadoes sensed they were heading for the jail-house, only a sparse block away. The possibility of escape from their humiliating plight at the hands of this little runt in the derby hat was growing smaller and smaller . . .

With the unexpected suddenness of a spring by a crouching panther the younger of the two men whirled and lunged at Seepee, striking him down. Seepee fell all of a heap, but as he did so he managed to squeeze the trigger of the gun he held in his right hand, ripping the left hand of his assailant. With his good hand, the wounded man succeeded in grabbing one of the guns from Seepee and fled in the direction from whence he came.

The second man quickly ducked into the shadows of the trees and ran in pursuit of his companion.

Seepee struggled to a sitting position, but it was too late for any effective shooting. He sat there, in the middle of the street, his derby hat still intact upon his head, firing the remaining five shots in the revolver in the general direction of the fleeing bandits.

THE EPISODE took place scarcely a hundred feet from the jail next door to which was the sheriff's home. The shooting so near at hand had roused him and, brandishing his six-guns, he rushed forth into the moonlit night, clad in his woollen nightshirt and barefooted.

The spectacle with the derby hat sitting bewilderedly in the middle of the street was no less ludicrous than the blinking sheriff himself.

"What in the—" the sheriff expostulated, looking down upon the dusty little man before him.

"They got away!" Seepee wailed, restraining the tears which began to well up in his eyes.

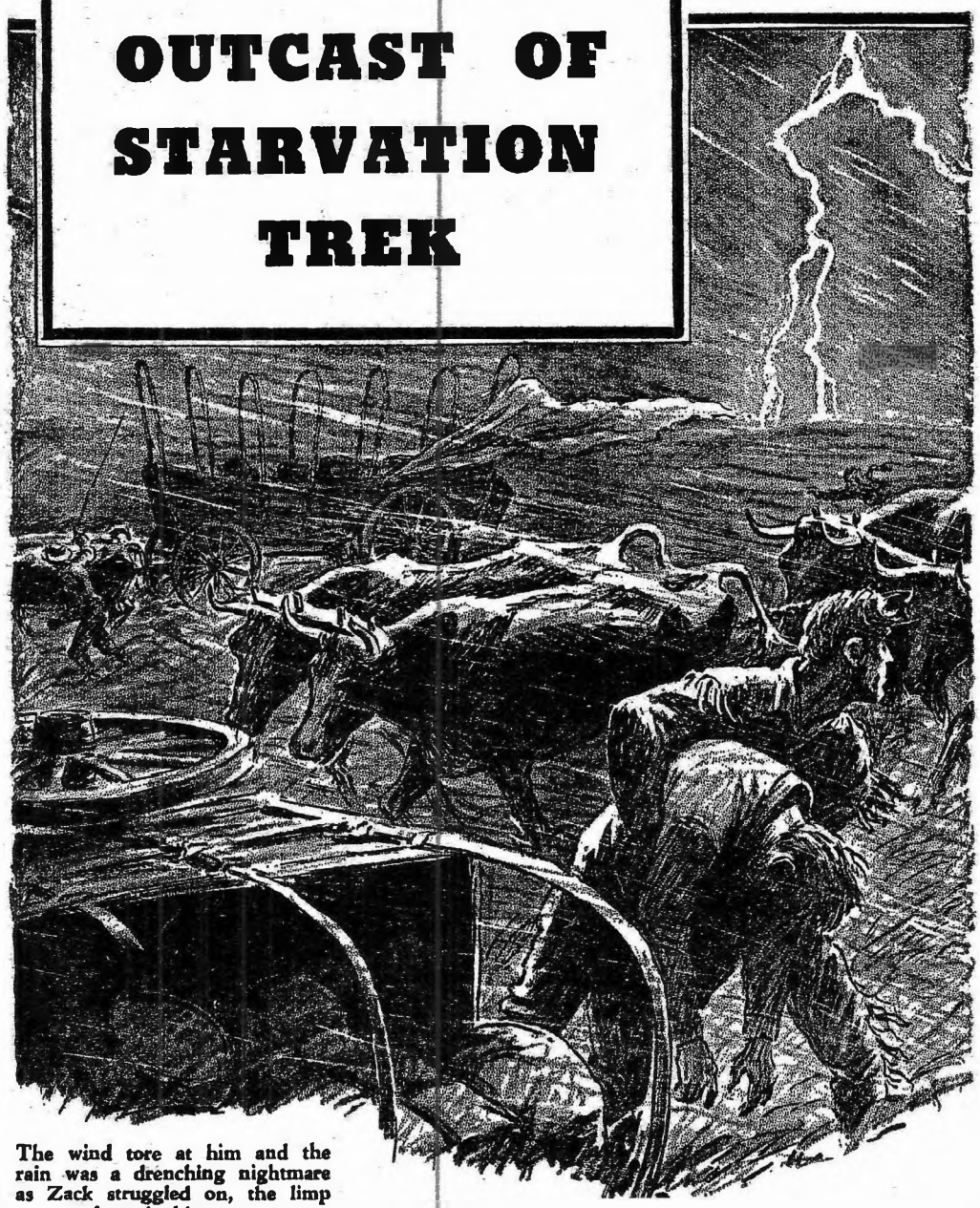
"Who got away?" the sheriff demanded.

"Safe-crackers," Seepee snuffled, as he rose to his feet. In the silence that pursued his doubts, the sheriff and Seepee heard the spirited beat of hoofs thumped upon the road by the horses of the fleeing safe-crackers.

This sound, to the experienced ear of the sheriff lent credence to the words just uttered by Seepee. But the sounds did nothing to relieve the sheriff of the confusion in

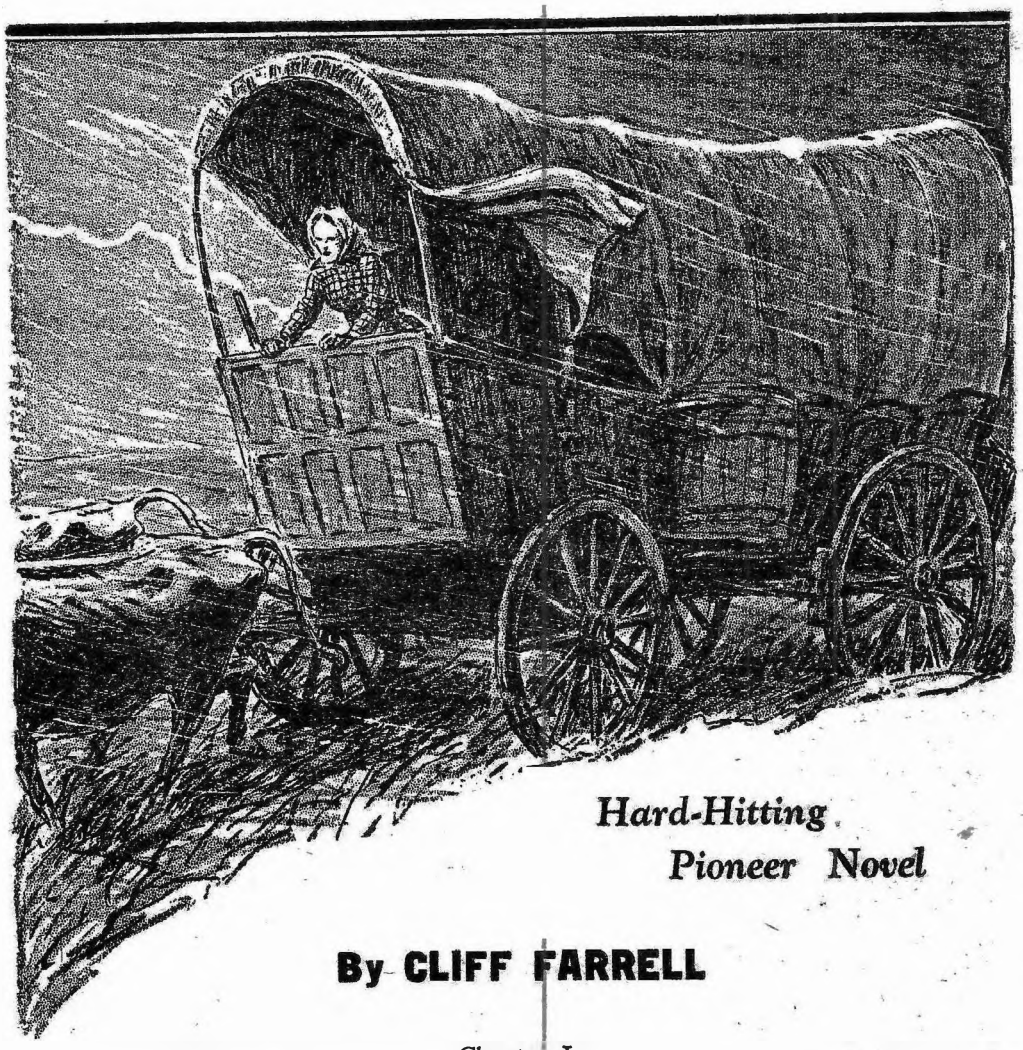
(Continued on page 128)

OUTCAST OF STARVATION TREK



The wind tore at him and the rain was a drenching nightmare as Zack struggled on, the limp form in his arms.

In that freezing, lonely hell between the Sierras and Montana, it took more than his trapper's know-how to win for bullwhacking Zack Irons the grudging respect of song-bird Lily Maroon and her four tough boomer guardians. More, even, than his last-stand duel on the snow-swept desert, to save her golden scalp. . . . .



Hard-Hitting Pioneer Novel

By CLIFF FARRELL

Chapter I

JAILBREAK

EARLY darkness had come, tempering the unseasonable heat of the late September day at Julesburg on the South Platte, but the interior of the squatty, log-built shack that served as the town lockup was still a sweltering sweatbox.

The buffalo hunter, who was the lone occupant of the lockup, lay sprawled on the dusty, puncheon floor, sleeping off his wild, two-day spree. He had come in from the plains only the previous morning. Since that time the profits of a season's trapping and hunting at the risk of his scalp in a land that few white men had ever seen, had vanished over the bars and gambling tables and into the garters of painted women.

It had taken the full strength of four husky men to subdue him and toss him in the lockup after he had left a trail of wrecked dance halls and uproar throughout the settlement. Now he lay there alone and almost forgotten, an empty rum jug still clasped in his sinewy, tanned fingers.

"Don't be too harsh on him," an old mountain man who knew him, had advised. "He was only tryin' to forget. Tryin' to

drown his memories. That's young Zack Irons. He left Julesburg last fall with six good men to trap the country beyond the big bend of the Missouri River. Zack Irons is the only one thet come back alive. He's seen hard doin's, you hear me. A man comin' in from the Injun country has got a right to have his fling."

They didn't listen to that defense. Zack Irons had offended the newly-acquired dignity of Julesburg with his war-whooping, night-and-day celebration. He had taken special delight in stepping on the polished boots of important persons with his moccasins, and had wound up by smashing every fine silk hat or natty cloth topper that came within range of his long arms.

His animosity toward such headgear seemed to be founded on the belief of all mountain men that the invention of silk hats had ruined beaver trapping as a profitable profession. Well-dressed gentlemen nowadays never wore beaver hats.

Zack Irons' eyes rolled sluggishly open at last—and stayed open. He finally sat up. His head throbbed. His tongue was sun-dried leather in a wad of cotton.

He heaved to his feet, steadying himself with a hand against a wall until the world quit spinning. His vision painfully came into focus. A stubble of sandy beard bristled on his long jaws and aggressive chin, and his thick hair was in a tangle. His doeskin hunting shirt hung in tatters and one sleeve was entirely gone. His buckskin breeches, shrunken by weather, ended six inches short of his moccasins, revealing a length of sinewy shank.

Those moccasins were of a pattern unknown in the Great Plains. An Ojibway woman had made them in a lodge of birch bark up in the northern wilderness beyond the Canadian boundary.

Irons could not remember where he was, at first. He moved to the single, small window which was guarded by stout iron bars set in holes bored in the log wall. Clinging to the bars he peered out, blinking, while recollection returned.

JULESBURG lay before him under the white glare of a newly-risen full moon. When he had left this place the previous fall on his trapping trip, it consisted only of a loopholed stage station and a trader's store cowering in perpetual fear of Indian attack here at the junction of the trails to California, Denver City, and the Sioux country.

During his absence civilization had arrived. End of steel had reached Julesburg and was now pushing onward toward the Mormon country. The place had become a sea of newly-built shacks and shanties and tents, with the gambling traps and plank and barrel rum holdups lined up for blocks.

There were soldiers, and Irish terriers from the railroad gangs, and painted women, and others in calico, and immigrant boomers as thick as the hair on your head, but plainsmen like himself were a rarity in this teeming horde of humans.

Ballyhoo men were shouting before the music halls and gambling traps, seeking to lure trade. Hurdy gurdies tinkled, and coin clinked. The slap of cards rose over the drone of monte dealers. Torchlight flickered and Irons sniffed with aversion the smell of dust and sweating humanity.

Beyond the fringe of the town wagon, fires twinkled everywhere. The moon glinted on the tilts of a swarm of prairie schooners that were outfitting for Oregon or the Pikes Peak country or California.

A farewell dance was being held at one wagon camp which was due to hit the trail in the morning. Fiddles wailed there and shadows danced in the firelight as the bobbing and scraping went on.

The dance ended and a woman began to sing. A general drift of interest started in that direction.

Irons could see the singer. She was using a flatbed wagon as a rostrum. She stood, surrounded by an increasing crowd, her head thrown back, singing like a thrush. She was a young woman, with golden yellow hair done in a high shining pile, and she wore a lace-trimmed, shimmering gown that had a long, sweeping trains, but which revealed her smooth, bare shoulders.

Irons was shocked. "Brazen hussie!" he muttered. "Standin' half-naked an' shameless in public."

Her contralto voice was powerful, compellingly sweet and womanly. Passersby were hurrying toward the singing and Irons heard one of them say, "That's Lily Maroon, giving us a free concert. And can't she pour it out? They say she's on her way to 'Frisco to sing at the opera house for the Comstock millionaires."

Irons became aware of the rigid metal bars he was grasping. He peered around and made out a solid, log-built door. He moved to the door, but it would not open. It was barred on the outside.

He comprehended now that he was caged. He uttered a sudden roar of indignation. It was the first time in his life he had ever known restraint. He backed away and hurled his rawboned length of whipcord strength against the door with the fury of a charging elk. It did not yield.

The warty face of the jailer appeared at the barred window. "Keep quiet, you!" the man warned.

Irons glared. "Why you little toad!" he roared. "Open that door 'afore I tear this shebang down an' maul you with the pieces."

"My advice to you," the jailer warned, "is not to cause any more trouble. You're already under sentence of thirty lashes at the post. If you raise a ruckus you'll likely get a bigger dose."

"Thirty lashes? Who's goin' to give me thirty lashes?"

"The committee, that's who. An' you're gettin' off lucky after the way you treated men like Mister Clay Fitzhugh."

"I'd like to see any lard-eaters try to lay a whip on Zack Irons," Irons said softly, his eyes suddenly bright and glittering. "Who's this Clay Fitzhugh you're hootin' about?"

"A Kentucky gentleman that's headin' for California," the jailer said. "It's a miracle he didn't shoot you down in your tracks. You called him a loblolly an' smashed his top hat over his ears. Bein' a man of honor he couldn't soil his hands by killin' a drunken ruffian. He said the whippin' post was good enough for the likes of you."

Irons vaguely recalled the incident. "Served him right," he growled. "He's one of them damned, blue-blooded aristocrats. Refused to join me in a sociable drink. I ought to have throwed him in the mule trough. He looked at me like I was dirt under his boots."

"You won't feel so uppity when they lay the whip on your hide in the mornin'," the jailer smirked.

Irons leaped to the window, his long arm whipping out between the bars in an attempt to grab the man. But the jailer leaped out of reach just in time. He swore at Irons and went away.

Irons grasped the bars. With the agility of a panther he braced his moccasins flat against the wall while he tested their strength. Muscles rose in flat hard plates on his back. One bar gave a trifle, but would yield no more.

IRONS desisted, his chest heaving. He prowled the cage with the stride of an aroused tiger. He explored the floor, investigating the joints where the puncheons were fitted together. He found an opening that offered a grip. He heaved and wrenched the puncheon from the floor. It was a six-inch split of thick and sturdy lodgepole pine.

It made an effective lever as he thrust it between the iron bars in the window. With a splintering sound he wrenched a bar from its socket. The other bars were torn loose as swiftly.

His supple body slid through the opening. The lockup stood on the fringe of the settlement, and the jailer who had been heading for a canvas-topped bar, turned and sighted him.

The man came running ponderously, but suddenly thought better of it, stopped at a safe distance and began shouting for help. Other men quickly appeared and came hurrying.

Irons laughed scornfully, then turned and ran around the far corner of the lockup. He heard pursuit form as he headed for the flats where the wagons were camped. He had never reached the end of his strength at running yet, and while he gained on his pursuers, they glimpsed him in the moonlight and kept coming.

He raced through the center of a small wagon camp, startling a woman into dropping a dishpan. A few hundred yards farther on was the bigger, lighted, crowded circle of wagons where the dance was being staged.

Lily Maroon was still singing. It was "Buffalo Gals," now and everyone was dancing to the music. The noise of the big celebration and the singing and music drowned out the shouting of the slow-footed men who were pursuing Irons.

Irons slowed to a walk as he reached the outskirts of the wagons beyond which the dancers were whirling. There were many

onlookers, and he mingled among them as he moved through the shadows back of the wagons.

A few scattered prairie wagons stood alone apart from the wagon camp. Most of them were dark and deserted, their owners being engaged in the dance.

One of these wagons was a big new Pittsburg, its tilt snow-white, its paint and varnish unmarred as yet by travel.

"Whose wagon?" he asked of a bearded man who seemed interested in the vehicle.

"Belongs to Miss Maroon," the man said. "She bought it yisterday, along with a fine bunch of oxen. She's goin' to California."

Irons knew that his pursuers must have reached the scene of the dance by this time. He debated a moment, half of a mind to stand his ground. He ruled against it. There wasn't much chance they would go to too much trouble to search for him, but if they did they'd hardly expect him to take refuge in the wagon of an important person like the singer.

Making sure nobody was looking, he moved to the wagon, mounted over the front wheel. The bow curtains were drawn, but he freed a hook and slid in.

The moon on the tilt turned the canvas to a faint golden hue. In that light he made out a pallet bed, covered by a ruffled spread. Baggage and supply boxes were lashed down. An open space had been left through the wagon, and a thick rug was under his moccasins. There was even a little dressing table with a mirror. Lily Maroon evidently meant to travel in comfort.

A silver water decanter stood on the dressing table. It had been freshly filled, and Irons drained it to the last drop, feeling content as his parched throat stopped burning.

Feminine garments were hanging from hooks. Irons recoiled with disdain as he brushed against rustling, silken objects.

A queer-shaped, canvas-covered object that occupied a considerable space in the fore part of the wagon aroused his curiosity. Finally he solved the mystery.

"A piana, by hell!" he marveled.

He chanced a peek through the bow curtain. He glimpsed a few men wandering aimlessly about. They looked hot and panting, and it was evident that they were losing interest in the search.

The dance was reaching a climax. Lily Maroon's voice lifted to a clear crescendo, and Irons stood listening, suddenly touched by a mood he had never known . . . . loneliness, a knowledge of futility and aimless purpose.

Her voice broke off on a high note, and the song was over Irons looked down at his dusty, ragged buckskins, a sudden harsh rebellion in his face.

A BABBLE of voices arose as the crowd began to break up. They were calling good wishes to the members of the wagon company who were pulling out in the morning.

People were streaming past, talking and laughing. It was impossible for Irons to leave the wagon now without being discovered.

Presently voices came directly toward his hiding place and paused outside. Irons cautiously parted a wagon sheet an inch and chanced a look.

Lily Maroon stood there, chatting with half a dozen men who surrounded her, bidding for her smiles.

Irons recognized one of the singer's admirer's as the tall Kentuckian whose hat he had smashed during his celebration.

He eyed Clay Fitzhugh disparagingly. Fitzhugh had found another natty, fawn-colored cloth topper, which he wore jaintily on his thick, dark hair. He was straight and handsome, his linen immaculate, his buff-colored waistcoat and gray pantaloons the last word in fashion.

Clay Fitzhugh had been a cavalry captain under Jeb Stuart and he bore a faint, distinguishing saber scar on his left cheekbone. A gentleman and an aristocrat, impoverished by the war, he was a hot, proud blade of tempered steel, and he had fought more than one duel of honor.

The others were strangers to Irons. One spoke with a cultured accent that aroused Irons' pitying disapproval. This was Mark Alexander, graduate of Harvard, with a degree as doctor of medicine. Quiet, reserved, with the eyes of a dreamer and sensitive features, Mark Alexander had been one of the most promising young surgeons in Philadelphia until, one day, a patient he had been operating on had died while he worked. He had blamed himself. Shaken,

he had laid aside his scalpel and had vowed never to practice his profession again.

Another of Lily Maroon's admirers was a square-jawed, blunt-spoken stocky, brown-eyed man who wore stout, blunt-toed shoes and a conservative woolen store suit. Otis Knight owned a bull wagon loaded with bolts of cloth and hardware and flour and food supplies which he had brought by wagon all the way from Indiana. He meant to triple his investment in trade somewhere along the trail.

A big, shy giant of a man with a round, frank face and curly tow-colored hair, was in the group too, hovering near Lily Maroon with the devotion of a Newfoundland puppy. Rufus Slocum, from Ohio, had plows and harrows and seed corn and wheat in his wagon. He was heading west in search of virgin soil, but he had found gold instead—the intoxicating golden allure of Lily Maroon's hair.

Rufe Slocum could straighten a horseshoe with his massive hands. He could lift the wheel of a loaded bullwagon clear of the ground with the power in his wide shoulders. But he could think of nothing to say to Lily Maroon. He could only stand tongue-tied and worshipful, envying the easy drawl of Clay Fitzhugh who knew how to make love to any girl.

Lily Maroon said, "Good night, gentlemen. You are all so kind."

A plump young Negress had appeared. This was Jenny Washington, the singer's maid.

Irons looked hurriedly around for a hiding place. There was a space back of the piano and the baggage near the front bow. He slid his lank frame into that crevice. He found that he had room to stretch out to full length.

He heard Lily Maroon and her maid enter the wagon. A candle flared.

Chapter II

THE STOWAWAY

LILY MAROON had thrown a light scarf over her shoulders. At twenty-four years of age she was a self-possessed young woman, but with just a trace of disillusionment in her eyes which were hazel gray and could be disturbingly direct at times. Tall enough so that she made tall men feel at ease in her presence, she was slim-legged, slim of waist, but with a full, swelling grace of figure.

She walked to the dressing table and gazed thoughtfully at herself in the mirror. Jenny Washington then helped her out of her gown and stays. She sat before the mirror in her chemise, grateful for the coolness and the relief from the stays.

She pulled the combs and pins from her hair, letting it cascade in a coppery flood to her waist.

"I declare to goodness, if you wasn't as purty as an angel from heaven, standin' on dat wagon, singin' to them folks," Jenny Washington chattered.

"I'm afraid I'm far from being an angel at heart," Lily Maroon said.

"You sing like an angel too, Missy Lily. Yo'll be a sensation in dat 'Fisco town."

"I'm not going to San Francisco, Jenny. I've changed my mind. I'm going to a place called Montana. To a new gold camp named Virginia City. I'm joining the wagon company that is pulling out in the morning for Montana by way of the Bozeman Trail."

"Oh, my good lordy, Missy Lily. You ain't lost yo' mind has you? I heerd men talkin' about dat Bozeman Trail. They say de Injuns are as thick as flees. Why you goin' dar?"

"To find me a husband, Jenny."

"Husband. What you want wif a husband? You goin' to be a great singer, Missy."

Lily Maroon laughed a trifle grimly. "I'll never be a great singer," she said slowly. "I can sing a little, yes. I've been trying since I was fourteen. Starving and struggling while I lived on the hope that some day I'd set the world on fire. I'm almost an old maid now and I know the truth. I can sing well enough to entertain wagon camp crowds. Well enough to be invited to pink teas and receptions where I can sing for my supper. But I'll never be anything more than that."

"Now, Missy—!"

"Oh, I've known the truth for a long time, Jenny. I'm just another girl who tried and fell short. I've got by on my looks and my shape up to now. But I'm tired of living that way. I'm going to take advantage of what youth and beauty I have before it's too late."

"Who you goin' to marry, Mis' Lily?

Dat Kentucky gen'man? Or Doctuh Alexander? An' dar's plenty others you kin have at the crook o' your finger. Dat Massa Knight from Indiana, an' dat big farmer from Ohio is crazy 'bout you too."

"I'd do none of them any favor by marrying them." Lily Maroon's voice was level, weary. "What use would I be to an ambitious man like Otis Knight? He needs a wife who can help tend the store he intends to own some day. Or Rufus Slocum? I can't cook or sew or milk a cow. What could I do for Mark Alexander, a man sick at heart, his confidence in himself gone? He'd become a successful doctor again with the right girl at his side. Clay Fitzhugh needs nobody. He's self-sufficient, proud, restless. Some day he'll probably die in a duel in a matter over some woman's honor."

"Who you goin' to marry?" the maid wailed.

"A rich man," Lily Maroon said tersely. "San Francisco would be full of talented, beautiful girls, but up in Montana I won't meet so much competition, and there will be many men there who have made their strike and will be looking for a wife."

"Oh, Missy, you don't really mean dat!"

"I do mean it. I'm beaten. A failure. As useless as a flower for any practical purpose."

Lily Maroon arose and moved about the crowded wagon in an anguish of spirit. Her shadow passed the crevices through which candlelight filtered into Irons' hiding place.

"Good night now, Jenny," the singer said huskily. "Don't start crying or you'll have me bawling too. I know you don't want to go to Montana. I'll send you back to Aunt Dodie in Cincinnati. Go to bed now. Save anything you have to say until morning."

"Who's goin' to look after you, Missy?" Jenny Washington blubbered.

"There will be plenty of men around to protect men," Lily Maroon said a trifle bitterly. "There always are. Those four men you mentioned have decided to go to Montana too, since I told them I was changing my destination. They all believe they're in love with me. I've hired a bullwhacker to drive my wagon. All I'll have to do, as usual, is play the lady and be waited on. Good night, Jenny."

Jenny Washington left the wagon, weeping. Lily Maroon snuffed out the candle. Irons heard the rustle of bedding on the pallet. There was the faint sound of a woman's lonely sobbing in the wagon. It went on for a long time before the singer finally fell asleep.

Irons was comfortable enough where he lay. Like the wild things of the plains he had learned to accept each minute, each day as it came, and let the future take care of itself. Years of danger in the Indian country had disciplined himself to sleep wherever and whenever he could and store up energy for the hardships that were the inevitable part of his calling.

They would be looking for him in the morning to drag him to the whipping post. He was secure here, and this wagon would be pulling out at dawn, carrying him where he wanted to go—back to the plains where he would be at home, free from the intolerances of men he did not understand.

He was nauseated by the crowding and the herd instinct he had found here. And a little frightened and bewildered too, though his pride caused him to hide that beneath the armor of lofty scorn that he presented to these newcomers to the plains—his plains.

He closed his eyes and was asleep too; without dreaming, without sound. Occasionally the passing of a night guard, or the movement of an oxen aroused him. He awakened completely, instantly, scanning the night with his ears until sure there was no danger. He heard Lily Maroon's soft breathing each time.

Then he would drop asleep again.

THE camp awakened as first dawn streaked the horizon. Irons listened to the crack of bullwhips and the rattle of chains. He heard the grunting of beasts as the stock was inspanned.

Lily Maroon had aroused. He heard her dress and leave the wagon.

After a time the whips broke into a crackling chorus. Voices were calling goodbyes. Lily Maroon returned to the wagon and stood in the rear bow. The vehicle heaved into motion. The train was rolling—heading north toward the North Platte. Beyond that was the Sioux country.

Irons turned to a new position in his crowded niche. "A piana!" he reflected

scornfully. "Gawd, don't these boomers know what that trail's like beyond the north fork? They'll be killin' their cattle for grub an' boilin' the hides and hooves before they make it to the Powder. An' their scalps will be hung on a lance 'afore they hit the Yellowstone. If the Indians don't get 'em, the blizzards will. Don't they know that winter ain't far off on the high plains?"

* * *

When the breakfast stop came Lily Maroon left the wagon. She did not return. Irons was beset by a raging thirst, but he found that she had refilled the silver decanter. He drained it again.

He spent the day like a lazy cat, sleeping at intervals, or lying for long periods in idle content. He was hungry, but that was no novelty to him.

Occasionally he emerged from his hiding place, and cautiously parted the wagon-sheet to study the situation. Twenty wagons were in the train, and all seemed to be driven by boomers whose inexperience aroused Irons' wrathful criticism. Twelve wagons were drawn by oxen, the others by mule or horse teams. A poor arrangement, for the oxen could not keep pace with the faster-stepping harness outfits.

The train gradually separated into two groups. As the day advanced the bullteams fell farther and farther behind until a gap of more than a mile separated the two sections of the train.

In addition, the wagons traveled in single file, and were loosely strung out as drovers sought to keep clear of the dust from preceding vehicles.

Julesburg had vanished into the buff-colored distances astern. The wagons now traveled a plain of buffalo grass that rolled swell on swell to an empty horizon.

The bullwhacker whom Lily Maroon had hired to handle her wagon was a listless, watery-eyed individual in hideboots, checked shirt and sagging breeches. He had a dispirited mustache and took no pride in himself, and less in his ability as a bull-man. His whip was always cracking, but he had a damnable genius for heading the wagon into every wheel-chuck and rain rut on the way.

Lily Maroon spent the biggest part of her time in Clay Fitzhugh's company, riding sidesaddle on one of the pair of blooded horses that the Kentuckian owned, or traveling in the wagon which Fitzhugh and Mark Alexander had bought in partnership.

She wore a dove gray riding habit and a leghorn hat that was becoming but impractical in the dust and heat. Now and then she and Fitzhugh set off in hot pursuit of jackrabbits, riding recklessly into the distance.

Irons watched them at such times with narrowing eyes. He scanned the plains with taut apprehension. When they would come riding safely back he would relax, but he would berate them with hearty ferver under his breath.

"Waugh! Don't they know that any Brule brave or a Cheyenne buck would give his hope of the Happy Land to lift a long yalla scalp like that?" he burst out once, when they had come back after a particularly distant chase.

AS SUNDOWN approached great thunderheads began to mass on the horizon. The heat bore down with menacing weight—summer's last fling. Irons watched the fat bellies of those clouds grow dark and ominous. Sundown came and a thin, yellowish haze crept in from the plains. That haze seemed to hold within itself an eerie light. The heat was a tangible force.

Irons peered ahead. As soon as it became dark enough he planned to take his leave unseen. He could probably help himself to what little grub he needed. Then he meant to head for Fort Laramie. The trading post there would furnish him with the possibles for a winter's hunting trip. Maybe he would follow the buffalo herds south this winter into the Staked Plains. Or take a pasear into the Great Basin beyond South Pass.

The harness teams had made camp far ahead. As the tired oxen slowly picked up what ground they had lost, the yellowish glow faded from the sky. As they reached the fires that sprang up as a beacon, darkness was falling, sullen and ominous, and the clouds were moving in from the west.

Irons stared in disgust. The campsite that had been picked was on an open, flat, exposed to the sweep of the wind off the plains, though only a quarter of a mile farther on he had sighted a line of low bluffs. He eyed the black overhead; it was the color of a shroud.

A faint sound came from the far plains—

thunder. Lightning darted above the bluffs, giving a glimpse of massive clouds writhing and boiling in agony, with heavy streamers hanging almost to the earth.

He turned suddenly. Lily Maroon was standing at the tail of the wagon, holding the bow sheets apart, gazing up at him in consternation. She had been about to enter her wagon.

Clay Fitzhugh was at her elbow. Both of them stared blankly, taking in Irons' ragged buckskins, his shaggy hair and unshaven face.

"Who are you? Lily Maroon exclaimed. "What are you doing in my wagon?"

"I'm just leavin'," Irons said laconically. "I stole a ride."

"A ride? You mean you've been hiding in my wagon?"

"Yep." Irons was casual.

"It's a drunken buffalo hunter named Zack Irons who tried to pick a fight with me in Julesburg," Clay Fitzhugh exclaimed. "They threw him in jail. He was to be given thirty lashes, but he broke out of the lockup last night."

Lily Maroon straightened. "Last night?" She glared angrily at Irons. "Surely you haven't been hidden in my wagon since last night?"

"I reckon," Irons admitted.

"Why—why, you impudent scoundrel! You mean to say you were hiding there when I—when I—"

"I didn't look," Irons assured her with a grin. "I didn't see a blasted thing, ma'am.

"Of all the infernal impudence!" Lily Maroon exploded. "You—" She went suddenly silent, flushing. Irons knew she was remembering what she had said to Jenny Washington. She was realizing that this wild-looking person who looked like an Indian, must have heard all of it.

Other men appeared. Mark Alexander joined the singer. Rufus Slocum's big bulk loomed up, along with Otis Knight.

CLAY FITZHUGH said, "This fellow has been skulking in Miss Maroon's wagon. He escaped the whipping post in Julesburg. I ought to kill the insolent devil. He insulted me in Julesburg, and now he has insulted Miss Maroon."

"I'll take a lot of killin'," Irons said softly. "Come on, you lard-eaters. I didn't do any harm. The lady was as safe as she was in church. Safer, if you ask n with Zack Irons along. Seems to me li you all need a little lookin' after from wh I've seen of the way this outfit is bei handled."

"Give him a gun," Fitzhugh said, l lips white. "So he can have a chance defend himself."

Rufus Slocum pushed forwa "Shucks!" he scoffed. "There's no call f anything like that, Clay. What he needs to have his hide tanned with a bullwhi That'll teach him the lesson they was goi to give him in Julesburg."

"Oh, no," Lily Maroon protested. "Fc get it, gentlemen. After all, he's only drunken ruffian. There's been no har done."

"I don't need any petticoat to hide ba of," Irons raged at her. "If they figu they're men enough to bullwhip me, let 'e come at me. I'm waitin'."

Lightning split the sky overhead at th moment. Thunder came like a physic blow.

Irons suddenly lifted his voice in a baw ing command. "Shake a leg, you flathead Round up yore stock an' start these wago toward them bluffs to the west. That's storm comin', an' a big one. It'll be blowi the hair off your head before long, a there'll likely be hail an' sand flyin'. Get move on if you want to have a head of sto left!"

The four men had started to surge fc ward. Big Rufe Slocum had a massive bo already planted in the wagon, preparato to coming to grips with Irons. He pause

Lightning ripped across the black vo again, revealing a terrorizing scene ove head. Seething clouds seemed to hang rig above the wagons. And from the blackne that followed the flash they could all he a distant, moaning sound. Wind! B wind!

The urgency of his warning lifted the into action. That and the glimpse they h of what hovered above them.

Men raced toward the stock which h been turned out on grazing. Rufe Slocu hesitated, glaring at Irons. Then he turn and began running too.

Clay Fitzhugh gave Irons a look from l hot dark eyes. "I'll see you later, fellow he promised.

Chapter III

HAILSTONE HELL

THEY were all gone, except Lily Maroon.. Irons alighted from the wagon beside her. Then the heavens opened up in full fury. Lightning came, flash upon flash, and the thunder was a nerve-dazing, continous cannonade.

And rain! It came in a blinding roar, driven by a rising wind. Irons lifted Lily Maroon off her feet and placed her in the wagon. He shouted, "See to it that the tilt is lashed down tighter. Hurry."

Then he went racing to where men were struggling with the frightened stock. A gust of wind came, driving rain before it in a solid wall. The hood and bows of one wagon were carried away and went sailing into the storm. Sand was beginning to fly.

Irons began shouting orders, his voice cutting through the uproar. There was a whiplash crack of authority in his tone that brought obedience. Even the frightened stock seemed to respond and understand that here was a man who knew what he was doing.

Order came out of fumbling confusion. The scattered stock was rounded up before it could stampede, and driven in a mass into a wagon circle.

Men were leaning against a terrible wind now, half-suffocated by the rain which came like a torrent over a waterfall. And the thunder seemed to reach to their marrow.

Animals were being hooked to wagons. Some of them began to move, heading toward the bluffs in which they would find a lee against the rising storm.

Water began to run knee-deep through the camp. Another wagon tilt went, and the mule team stampeded. Irons saw the vehicle capsize, and a moment later the lightning showed the mules free and scattering into the storm. Another wagon overturned and oxen began to bellow. Loose animals which had broken from their masters stampeded through the confusion.

Irons pushed aside the weak-willed bullwhacker whom Lily Maroon had hired to care for her outfit. The man seemed numbed by fright.

"You ought to have been hooked up an' headed out of here ten minutes ago," Irons raged.

He pushed the trembling oxen bodily into position, heaving at them, saying things that seemed to reassure them.

Men were beginning to shout in terror now. Some were deserting their outfits, and heading on foot through the flying sand and wind in search of shelter.

Irons worked in a dazing uproar, yoking the last of Lily Maroon's oxen to her wagon, while she crouched in the bow, staring white-faced at the storm.

Her wagon was the last to get into motion. "Ee—yah!" Irons' voice cracked. "Ee—yah!"

The oxen responded, all eight of them facing the storm as they leaned into the yokes.

"Ee—yah! Ee—yah!" It was like a chantey, a rhythmic song of encouragement to the straining bulls.

The wagon never stopped moving through the blinding storm, although wind tore at it, causing it to slew wildly, and several times it was on the verge of upending. Irons saw other wagons which had capsized, but ahead were nearly a dozen still on their wheels and racing for the bluffs. The wind had stripped the tilts from the majority, but Lily Maroon's vehicle was still intact.

Irons glimpsed a bewildered white-faced man who seemed to have lost his sense of direction. He picked the dazed man up bodily and tossed him into the wagon with Lily Maroon.

"You'll live to go back where you belong an' shuck corn and slop hogs again, boomer," he jeered at the man, who was too stunned to understand. "The plains ain't any place for whickerbills like you."

Then came the hail. Irons prodded the oxen into a shambling trot. The hail came down like stones, battering the animals, battering Irons. But the bluffs were near. Many of the wagons already had reached their lee.

A MOMENT later Irons brought his outfit into the lee of the bluffs also. Blood trickled from a gash on his head where he had been hit by a hailstone. He grinned at Lily Maroon who stared white-faced, still unable to comprehend the sudden surcease from the howling wind and hail.

The plains were white with hail in the

harsh glare of the lightning, and the howl of the storm as it swept over the rim of the bluffs above them was a banshee wail.

But presently the violence of the wind began to weaken. Lightning flickered with fading ferocity. The thunder was receding eastward. The hailstorm had ended, and soon the rain abruptly tapered off and then stopped entirely.

The silence seemed unreal. After a time oil lanterns were lighted and the drenched boomers huddled together in that illumination and counted noses.

Eight wagons were lying out on the open plain, wrecked or so badly damaged that it would take time to repair them. Half of the stock was missing. But no lives had been lost.

Otis Knight and Rufe Slocum had saved their wagons without serious damage. And the prairie wagon in which Clay Fitzhugh and Mark Alexander were traveling was also in fair shape, though minus its top.

Irons eyed the boomers ironically as they took stock of their situation.

"My advice to you greenies is to head back to Julesburg," he told them. "But if you decide to keep goin' north, you better learn the ways of this country, an' stick together. If you travel all strung out like a flock of danged sandpipers as you done today they'll be countin' coup on your scalps in some Cheyenne village before long. What are you anyway—a bunch of popheads? Don't you know that the plains tribes claim this country as their huntin' grounds, an' mean to keep it?"

He spat scornfully on the ground. "Boiled shirts, an' silk petticoats, an' a piana!" he concluded scathingly.

He turned, started to walk way into the darkness—the vast and mysterious darkness of the plains.

"Hold on!" Clay Fitzhugh said, blocking his path.

Irons paused. "You still figure on tryin' to lay a bullwhip to me?" he snorted belligerently.

Lily Maroon answered that. "Of course not. We appreciate the way you helped us when we needed it. But where are you going?"

"Laramie, I reckon," Irons said briefly. "Maybe back to Julesburg if I get the notion."

"Laramie?" Fitzhugh exclaimed. "Alone? On foot? Why that must be a hundred miles."

Irons was mockingly amused. "Well, I swow!" he marveled. "A hundred miles. It'll likely take me two, three sleeps to make it."

Fitzhugh flushed, and glanced resignedly at the others. Lily Maroon had her purse in her hand. She opened it and produced some gold coins. "You seem to know this part of the world, Irons," she said. "And you demonstrated that you know how to handle oxen, which is more than I can say for the drover I hired. Perhaps you would be interested in replacing him for this trip. I'll pay you well."

IRONS suddenly seemed to tower above them. "Me work for day pay? Hell, ma'am I've dug out that yella stuff with my knife up in the Shinin' Mountains where the Missouri River is born. I've panned it in Oregon an' California. But I never worked for any man—not to mention a petticoat."

"You've been to California? You've been to Oregon? And Montana?" Her voice was skeptical.

Her doubts incensed Irons. "Put your money away, ma'am," he said coldly. "I'll handle your wagon as fur as the Platte, anyways. I reckon all you boomers will have your craws filled by that time, an' be willin' to go back where you belong. But you need lookin' after."

He glared around at the wet, disconsolate boomers. "Shake a leg!" he roared. "Get the stock out on grazin', you bourgway! Round up some firewood an' start rustlin' a meal. How 'bout startin' to repair them damaged wagons? Or are you goin' to huddle there like a flock of sheep all night? Let's make camp. Tomorrow's another day."

His vehemence aroused them. He stalked among them, ordering them around. He treated them like children, whose ignorance was appalling, but must be indulged.

Lily Maroon smiled helplessly at the men. "I suppose we can tolerate him for awhile," she said apologetically. "After all we owe him some consideration. He might have gone back to Julesburg and gotten into trouble again. He'll get tired of us and drift away after a few days, no doubt."

Big Rufe Slocum scowled at the way

Irons had usurped authority. "I'd like to wring his blasted neck," he growled. "He treats us like we was a bunch of calf-brains. What's that name he keeps callin' us? Bourg-way! What does that mean?"

Mark Alexander answered that. "Bourgeois!" he said in his cultured voice. "That's a French term for the common people. The mountain men picked it up from the French trappers. With them it is a term of contempt."

They looked at each other, both amused and annoyed. "So we're common people as far as he's concerned," Rufe Slocum sniffed. "Look at him! He acts like he's doing us a favor by associating with us."

Iron's strident voice rang over the camp. He showed them where to find dry buffalo chips in the overhang of cutbanks where the rain hadn't penetrated. He was very particular about the way they formed the wagon circle, refusing to be satisfied until the vehicles were arranged in compact formation, with the wheels overlapping so that they would offer the maximum protection in case of attack. He was everywhere in the camp, criticizing, scoffing, treating them all with superior tolerance.

He eyed with particular disdain the heavily loaded wagons belonging to Otis Knight and Rufe Slocum. "Walkin' plows an' fooferaw!" he said condemningly. "It's enough to make a man laugh. Some of that stuff will make good firewood, by hell. I betcha a piana would burn purty on a cold night up there beyond the dry fork of the Cheyenne."

He stabbed a finger at Slocum and Mark Alexander. "You two dudes will stand first guard duty," he stated. "An' stay awake. Don't get to moon-gazin' an' dreamin' about a putry, yalla-haired petticoat. Your job is to keep your eyes open for Indians. Save your love-makin' for daytime."

Clay Fitzhugh whirled. "Irons!" he said, his voice thick with anger. "From now on, keep a civil tongue in your head, or you'll answer to me personally."

They faced each other, the dark-haired handsome Kentuckian and the lanky, raw-boned man in buckskins, ready to fly at one another's throats.

"No fighting, please!" Lily Maroon said peremptorily. "Ignore what he said, Clay. He's only a—a savage."

Fitzhugh got a grip on his temper. Lily Maroon drew him away, smiling cajolingly at him. Irons saw that smile. He looked down at his soaked buckskins. His ragged garb had stretched, as buckskin will when wet, and it hung now on his big, spare frame in slippery, mishapen folds. He turned abruptly and walked away into the darkness.

From the black void of the plains drifted an eerie, sobbing wailing that caused Lily Maroon to quail. Irons stood attentive to that banshee lament. He finally decided it was genuine and not from the throat of any prowling Indian.

It was a cougar. Out there some antelope or fawn was being stalked. It was always thus on the plains. Death and life were but a sound in the night.

* * *

They halted the wagons and stood staring. The North Platte ford lay before them.

Only six mud-caked wagons remained of the score that had left Julesburg. Autumnal rains had swept the plains every day. Clinging mud had gaunted men and beasts and slowed the pace to a few hard-won miles a day.

The others had turned back to Julesburg, discouraged by the hard going.

Lily Maroon left her wagon and joined the men. They stood in silence gazing at this mysterious river of the Great Plains whose treeless channel barred their path.

Rolling along in its shallow, barren bed, the North Platte was as evil as a snake, saffron in hue and nearly a mile wide. A few sand bars jutted above the surface here and there.

A pack train, bound for some fur post, was in the act of fording the river. The mules were mere dots nearing the north shore, with mounted men urging them on.

As they watched, a rider's horse slipped into some deep hole. The animal came up, floundering wildly. They saw a human head appear a time or two. Then both man and horse were gone—drowned.

Lily Maroon turned away, sick at heart.

Irons said bleakly. "All right. That river's risin'. We'll never get acrost by gapin' at it. Get them wagons rollin'!"

They drove the oxen to the brink of the ford. The Platte was an ugly sea, the north shore far, far away. Lily Maroon's hands

were shaking a trifle as Irons told her to get into the wagon.

They could see men of the pack train riding along the opposite shore downstream in the hope of finding the body of their comrade to give it a decent burial.

Irons looked at their taut faces. "Or maybe you're more of a mind to turn back to Julesburg?" he said ironically.

Days of association had brought no understanding between them. Irons handled the oxen with expert care, and his knowledge of stock and the country had saved them many miles and much needless exertion in the muddy going. He had shot game, bringing in antelope, buffalo meat, and the haunch of an elk, when no other person in the company had seen a sign of life on the plains.

He never seemed to sleep. Many times Lily Maroon had awakened in her wagon to look out and glimpse his restless shadow prowling the camp, listening to the night, making sure the guards were alert. But he was always aloof and superior in his attitude toward these people he considered as interlopers in his domain.

Mark Alexander straightened. "Lead on, Irons!" he snapped. "We'll follow you."

Irons, grinning at the way he had aroused the quiet, intense young doctor, swung the bullwhip. "Ee—yah! his voice rang out.

Lily clutched the wagonsides and closed her eyes. She had steadfastly refused to even give Irons the satisfaction of displaying resentment at his superior ways. Except when matters of camp routine brought them in contact she treated him as though she hardly knew he was alive.

"Ee—yah!" There was he rush and sigh of the Platte as her wagon lurched into the river.

"Ee—yah!" Irons had not used that strident, dominating chant since the night of the storm. Evidently it was something special that he saved for emergencies. Some mysterious insight he had into bovine intelligence that gave him added power over the beasts.

The oxen moved steadily, confidently into the river. Irons waded with them, a hand on the haunch of one to brace himself against the push of the current.

Otis Knight's heavily-loaded wagon came next. Otis, his blocky jaws hard-set, drove grimly, but expertly. Following came Rufe Slocum's wagon and then the one handled by Fitzhugh and Mark Alexander.

That was all. The other two wagons remained on the south bank. The courage of their owners had failed. They were waving farewell. They were turning back.

Chapter IV

"EE—YAH!"

MID-STREAM. Both shores seemed sickeningly remote. They reached one of the islands that jutted a foot above the rushing river. Irons looked up at Lily Maroon. She opened her mouth and he thought she was going to frenziedly order him to stay on that refuge. Then she clamped her lips. Irons drove the oxen onward and into the water again. The other men followed grimly.

The north shore came nearer. The oxen were tiring. An uprooted tree came sailing by, narrowly missing them. Lily Maroon wondered where a tree had come from in this brutal world. She had hardly seen a tree since they had left Julesburg.

"Ee—yah!" The shore crawled nearer. Then the oxen surged forward eagerly as they reached shallower water and realized that the worst was over.

Irons turned, staring. Another tree, a sizeable cottonwood, was bearing down on Otis Knight's wagon.

He tossed the whip to Lily Maroon. "Take over," he shouted.

He went wading at furious speed back to Otis Knight's assistance. The drifting cottonwood had been uprooted recently, and still bore the biggest part of its frost-yellowed leaves. Otis Knight had recognized the danger and was trying to goad his team into greater speed, knowing that if the drifter struck his wagon it would upset his outfit, and sweep the wagon and team into deep water below the ford.

Lily Maroon looked at the heavy bullwhip that she had instinctively caught as Irons tossed it to her.

Then she leaped from the wagon into waist deep water, her skirt billowing around her. "Ee—yah!" she choked, trying to imitate Irons' command. She even tried to swing the lash. But her oxen

needed no guidance with dry land so near. They were moving with a rush.

Irons fought his way upstream toward the oncoming drifter. He met it fifty yards above Knight's wagon. It was floating trunk foremost and he met it, bracing himself, his hands planted against it, seeking to check its momentum long enough for Knight to drive his wagon out of its treacherous path.

The current was back of that sodden drifter. For an instant Irons stood poised, his muscles taut as a bowstring.

The sheer weight was too ponderous to be checked instantly. He was driven back, his moccasins clawing at the bottom. But he had slowed the tree. It began to swing broadside, the current guiding its big leafy top farther out into the river.

The other men were too far away to be of any help, for this issue would be decided one way or another in a very few seconds.

Irons found another toehold, and this time he stayed there. He heard Lily Maroon begin to scream exultantly.

It was evident that the momentary respite he had given Otis Knight was enough. Knight's wagon was lumbering out of the course of the tree.

The drifter whirled suddenly with increasing speed. Lily Maroon screamed again. The bulky, leafy network of branches loomed above Irons like a haystack. It rolled over him before he could turn and dive clear, trapping him in a mass of branches that drove him beneath the surface.

The drifter brushed the back of Otis Knight's wagon as it cruised past.

Irons' did not appear. Otis Knight stared an instant. Then, with a choked sound, he left his wagon which was safe now, and went floundering in pursuit of the tree which had now floated into deeper water below the ford. Knight took a clumsy stroke or two then went down among the branches into the muddy depths.

Time seemed to stretch out to an eternity as the tree floated silently downstream. Lily Maroon had been screaming, but now her voice faded. Her hands dropped lifelessly to her side.

Then Irons came swimming to the surface. He gulped a mighty breath of air, and struck out powerfully for shore.

"OTIS dove to find you!" Lily Maroon screamed. "He thought you were trapped in the tree. He can't swim!"

Irons whirled in the water and then went under again in a swimming dive. Again time seemed to stand still. Then Irons' head appeared. And he had Otis Knight with him.

He brought Knight to shore two hundred yards downstream. Lily came running, her soaked skirts clinging to her slim legs, and helped him lift the Indianan's lip weight out of the water.

Otis Knight looked as though he were dead. Irons laid his body over a rock, forced water from his lungs, then began to restore respiration.

The other wagons reached shore and the men came running to help.

Presently Lily drew a thankful sigh. Otis Knight was breathing again. After a time he opened his eyes and looked at the four men and the girl.

Irons glared at him. "Why'n blazes did you do a foll thing like that when you can't swim?" he demanded.

Otis Knight smiled wryly. "I wasn't brought up to stand by and watch a man drown without turning a hand to help him," he commented.

"You shouldn't have done it," Irons said gruffly. "Dang it, I can take care o' myself." But he was eyeing Knight puzzled, a trifle uncertain and abashed.

* * *

The rains ended. The day turned clear, but cold as the four wagons crawled northward into a land that became increasingly gaunt and forbidding. Wheels crunched brittle sagebrush. Yellow buttes loomed in the distance, mysterious and bleak, brooding over a land whose silence became a weight on the mind.

After the sun had gone down the nights became bitterly cold. Lily Maroon chopped thick ice from the water barrel one morning, and looked at snow on a mountain range that Irons said were the Bighorns and nearly a hundred miles away.

Water became something to treasure and there were days when they could not even find sagebrush for fuel.

They camped at times on white-rimmed alkali pools. Their food was gritty with sand. The oxen were showing the strain now.

The Bozeman Trail, which they had heard so much about, was a disillusionment. Lily Maroon had pictured a well-traveled wagon road. What she saw was an occasional wheel rut worn by wind and weather, made weeks ago.

"Ain't many gone up the Bozeman this year," Irons told them. "An' some that did start likely didn't make it."

They learned what he meant a day later when they reached the dry fork of the Cheyenne River. As they topped one of the endless swells in the plain they saw black, jagged objects ahead, scattered over a wide area. And there were dull white objects too, shining weakly in the thin sunlight.

They came closer. Then Lily Maroon shuddered. They were looking at the gaping skull of a human being. It lay near the charred embers of a wagon. There were a dozen other circles of charcoal and wagon wheels nearby and more sun-bleached bones.

"More'n a month ago," Irons said.

He stood looking at the empty, jeering land, his weather-darkened face bleak and thoughtful. As they had crept deeper into the Sioux country his vigilance had doubled. He was always striking out alone on foot, or on one of Fitzhugh's saddle-horses, on the excuse that he was hunting game.

He never brought in game now. Once, when Lily fired a pistol at a gopher on a dare from Otis Knight, he came storming at them in a fury. "Blast it!" he had raged. "They'll find us soon enough without you shootin' off guns to notify 'em we're here."

As day upon day had passed with no sign of danger, the thought of Indian trouble had receded far back into their minds. Now, looking at this burned caravan, the false security into which they had been lulled, was brutally torn away.

THEY trailed on past that scene of tragedy. That night, after they camped, Irons came in with a wagon-sheet filled with buffalo chips for fuel.

Lily looked at him. "Irons," she said. "I'll take care of the camp work from now on, including gathering buffalo chips. You have enough to do with the scouting and taking care of the stock."

Irons gave her an odd look. Lily Maroon no longer arrayed herself in any of the modish costumes that filled the trunks in her wagon. Since the crossing of the North Platte she had, little by little, changed to practical cotton or woolen dresses, a heavy fleece-lined jacket that resisted the cold wind, and a tam o' shanter or sunbonnet according to the temperature.

Wind and sun had tanned her cheeks to a soft buckskin shade. She drove the oxen now whenever Irons left on a scouting trip. She had studied the way he handled the stock, and even he was becoming grudgingly satisfied with the way she had acquired the knack. She could even make the bull-whip pop and talk.

She had also taken over the cooking. She didn't know much about cooking at first, and she and Irons had clashesd repeatedly when he voiced his opinion of her efforts with the dutch oven. But she had persisted. She had burned her fingers, singed her hair, and had done some cussing too as she labored in the smoke of the erratic, quick-burning buffalo chip or sage-brush fires.

But now she was beginning to get that satisfied glint in her eyes that a woman shows as she watches the masculine appetite being satisfied. She no longer felt apprehensive or self-conscious when Irons sampled her culinary efforts.

"Fetchin' buffalo chips is no job for a female," Irons said gruffly. "I reckon us men can find time to take care of it. You 'tend to the cookin'."

"Irons," she asked impulsively. "Where were you born? Where is your home?"

"Home?" He was bewildered. Then he laughed shortly. He swung a long arm, indicating the darkness. "Anywhere I spread my robe at night. I was born somewheres up on the Missouri River."

"Somewhere Don't you know?"

"I've been told that my parents was missionaries that was killed by the Shoshones," he said tersely. "I was raised by a Shoshone squaw. A fur post factor ransomed me when I was only a shaver. I was raised as a trapper an' hunter. I've just sort of knocked around footloose an' fancyfree. I'm beholden to no man—or no woman."

He walked away then, ending the questioning. He had changed in the past few weeks. He had made himself a new jerkin of elkhide and new buckskin breeches and

a smock-like outer garment, that he called a capote, of wolfskin. Lily Maroon had secretly envied his skill with a needle and the tough thread he had used.

He had bought half a dozen pairs of Sioux-made moccasins from the traders they had met at the Platte ford, paying for them with the skins of game he had shot himself with a rifle borrowed from Rufe Slocum.

He had also bought a razor, and shaved every day. Lily had discovered that he was, in fact, rather fastidious about his appearance, and abhorrent of squalor and untidiness. It became evident that this had always been his way of life.

He had never mentioned that spree in Julesburg, but Mark Alexander had heard that old trapper's story of how Irons had been the only survivor of his previous season's hunting party, and how he had tried to drown his memories in rum. Often when he sat staring moodily into the fire she wondered what grim trails of the past his mind was traveling.

SINCE that day at the Platte ford he had accorded Otis Knight a measure of respect, and he treated Rufe Slocum also with a certain tolerance. Physical prowess seemed to be his measuring rod.

There was constant friction between Irons and the hot-tempered, proud Fitzhugh. Lily had averted open trouble several times between them by using tact and diplomacy.

Irons' attitude toward Mark Alexander was an enigma. Sometimes there was faint pity for the cultured Alexander in his eyes. Irons had sensed Mark's lack of faith in himself. Otis Knight had told him the story of that patient who had died under Mark's hands.

As the days of dust and toil followed one on another Irons and Otis Knight were much in each other's company. Often at the noon stop they would draw apart from the others and discuss some mysterious matter.

One day, during a stop to rest the gaunt oxen, Lily surprised Irons with a book open on his knees as he sat back of one of the wagons. It was a blue-back spelling book. His bronzed finger was moving over the words, his lips moving silently as he enunciated them to himself.

He flushed and closed the book with a snap when he discovered her presence. He arose and stalked away.

She asked Otis Knight about it later. "I'm teaching him to read and write," Knight said. "Irons asked to to do that. And he's learning fast."

After that she realized that Irons used the jargon of the plainsmen with less and less frequency—but he also seemed to grow more aloof, more apart from his comrades of the trail.

The days kept growing colder. Winter was just over the hill. They camped one night on a tiny, frozen stream. "Last water for eighty miles until we hit the Powder at Fort Reno," Irons told them. "Fill every barrel an' canteen. That's rough country ahead."

Fort Reno! They all brightened at the mention of that army post which stood midway to their destination. To all of them it meant respite from the grind of the lonely trail, the chance to look at new faces, and, above all, to restock their depleted food supplies.

They came in sight of Fort Reno five days later. Men and oxen were thin and hollow-eyed. Their water had given out twenty-four hours previously, and they had lost three head of stock during the heart-breaking pull past Pumpkin Buttes the lonely eminence that landmarked that stretch of trail.

They pulled up staring wordlessly. For the past few miles they had been eager, buoyed by the prospect of sleeping safely inside guarded walls for one night at least.

They stood now, shivering in a bleak wind, staring at another heap of ashes. Fort Reno's barracks and sutler's store and stockade leered at them like a fire-blackened mouth.

"It—it just can't be!" Lily sobbed.

Irons voice was stripped of emotion as always in moments of crisis. "I heard talk that the army was going to make treaty with the tribes and pull out all army posts along the Powder," he said. "I figured it was only idle gossip. But it was sure enough the truth."

They drove on. Silently they camped on the river, recruiting the strength of their failing stock.

Irons left on one of his scouting trips. The afternoon waned and he did not re-

turn. Freezing twilight came. Gray, sullen clouds roofed a hostile sky overhead.

Lily began pausing often to listen as she started the evening meal. From now on they would be on scant rations unless Irons began bringing in game. The men prowled aimlessly about camp. Nobody mentioned Irons' over-long absence, but the tension was there, black and forboding.

Then they all looked at each other as they heard him riding out of the darkness. He dismounted at the wagons, squatted by the fire and spread his cold-stiffened hands to the flames.

"We'll have to shove on tonight," he said slowly. "Keep the fire goin', ma'am, but not so bright that it'll light us too much as we inspan."

They all rose to their feet, waiting.

"I cut the sign of a war party," Irons went on. "Northern Cheyenne by the moccasin tracks I found where they had stopped for a palaver."

"They've—?" Mark Alexander began.

Irons nodded. "There's no doubt they're after us. They are around somewhere—and close. They likely won't jump us before daybreak. They figure we don't know they're around. And anyway, Indians don't like to fight at night. Superstitious. They're afraid that if they get rubbed out their spirits can't find their way to the Happy Land in the dark."

IRONS looked up at the sky. "Snow comin'," he said. "Maybe it'll be heavy enough to cover our trail. Maybe we can make a clean getaway. Snow is what I'm gamblin' on. Otherwise I'd say to take our stand right here."

He straightened to his full height and looked at Clay Fitzhugh. "You've got two good horses," he said. "It's less than two hundred miles to a settlement called Billings on the Yellowstone River. Travelin' at night, bushin' up in daytime you and Miss Maroon can make it in two, three days. Better start fixin' your grub packs. You can hit the trail in an hour."

Clay Fitzhugh turned crimson, then white. "And leave you other men here?"

These two were flint and steel. Irons turned on Lily. She had taken to wearing her hair in a long, thick, plaited pigtail which hung down her back and was tied with a little ribbon.

Irons touched that golden rope of hair. "Don't you know what them—those Cheyenne want?" he exploded. "A woman's long, yellow hair drives 'em scalp crazy!"

"You are the one to go with Miss Maroon," Fitzhugh said icily. "You know the trail."

Irons saw concurrance in the faces of the other men. "You softheads!" he raged. "There's no Inj—Indian in moccasins that can lift Zack Irons' scalp. I'll pull through, but you greenies don't know how—"

Lily spoke, halting him. "None of us are leaving," she said quietly. "I'm staying with you. We're all staying. All except Irons. He has a perfect right to leave if he wishes."

She looked around, her eyes softening. "None of you would be here if it wasn't for me," she added. "I know that. Mark, you and Clay had intended to go to California. Rufe was bound for Oregon. Otis for Denver City. But—because I decided to take the Bozeman Trail you all changed your plans. I know why, and I'm proud—prouder than I have any right to be. Do you think I'd leave you now?"

Her voice was shaking. She leaned against big Rufe Slocum. "We'll stay together," she repeated with finality.

Irons watched them. They seemed so united, these four men and the young woman. There was understanding among them, but he was still an alien in their midst.

He turned, and without a word, started breaking camp. Lily moved around the fire, maintaining a pretense at normal activity in case an Indian scout was watching. While the men inspanned the oxen she finished cooking the meal.

She even sang a song, in the clear, unhurried voice of a woman busy at homely tasks. The song was one Irons had heard at army posts a few times. It was called "The Star Spangled Banner." He had never heard it sung just the way Lily Maroon sang it, soft and clear. At times he felt the hair prickle on his neck.

They pulled out, leaving the fire burning. For a long time, whenever they looked back, they could see that lonely red beacon behind them as they pushed the weary oxen ahead.

"Snow!" Irons burst out at last. He lifted a fist to the black sky in supplication. His voice was a fervent plea.

IT DID not snow. A cold wind cut through their garb. The night was an impenetrable wall. The cattle failed. Two animals gave out after midnight in Rufe Slocum's team, and one of Otis Knight's oxen broke a leg in a gopher hole and had to be killed with a knife. Irons performed that task, and even in the darkness Lily was aware that it left him shaken by self reproach and pity.

Otis Knight unloaded barrels of flour, bolts of silk and calico, casks of cheese and cases of delicacies that would have brought almost their weight in gold in the Montana gold camps.

Rufe Slocum unyoked his remaining oxen. "I'll load the seed wheat and corn in your wagon, Otis," he said. "It'll make good stock feed. I'll divide up my bulls among the outfits.

The Ohioan was abandoning his beloved plows and harrows. Irons waited for some word of complaint. None came.

Lily spoke. "I'm leaving my wagon too," she said. She looked at Irons. "That piano would have made such good firewood, as you said, Irons. It would have saved our having to gather a lot of buffalo chips."

She added with a little laugh, "And I was going to play the great lady in the gold camps with my piano and my singing, and draw the rich miners around me like flies around a sugar barrel."

It became colder, but it did not snow.

Freezing dawn came and they were hardly more than a dozen miles from their previous night's camp.

"I said it would snow," Irons spoke harshly. "An' it didn't. Now I've got all of you into real trouble."

Mark Alexander turned, smiling. "Irons," he said. "Don't ever say anything like that again. Please!"

As the contour of the country heaved out of the dawnlight around them, Irons scanned the flats and distant buttes with taut attention.

He finally pointed to a rounded knoll that stood alone above a wide plain of silver gray sagebrush. It had once been a red butte, but it had weathered down until only a few jagged rimrocks stood above talus slopes that bore a scant scatter of sagebrush. It rose perhaps fifty feet in elevation.

"We'll make our stand there," Irons said. "By this time they know we made a night march and they'll be upon us before long. Better to pick our own ground for a fight."

There was no room for the wagons or oxen on the knoll. They could barely find shelter for Fitzhugh's two saddle horses among the outcropping boulders on the small summit.

They filled canteens and carried what food they had up the talus slope into the redoubt. They abandoned the wagons and turned the cattle loose.

They mustered six rifles, all single shot breech loaders that took paper or linen cartridges, and two muzzle-loading shotguns, and four six-shooters.

Irons handed Lily one of the pistols. "Don't shoot unless they over-run us," he said. "If you open up, aim at their bellies. That stops 'em the quickest. There are six bullets in this gun. Save the last one—for—for—"

He left it unfinished. He didn't need to finish it. Lily took the gun. "I understand," she said.

Chapter VI

WALKING WOLF'S DUEL

IRONS gathered a few scraps of sagebrush and built a fire. "A little smoke won't do any harm now," he shrugged. "They'll know where we are anyway."

The quick-burning sage warmed them a little. An hour passed. Full daylight came, cold and gray beneath a sullen overhead.

Then Irons, squatting on his heels, said calmly, "Here they come."

The others saw nothing at first. Then they made out tiny, dark objects emerging from the yellowish waste of a dry creek a mile away.

They saw the flash of color, the first color they had noticed in days in this land. Barbaric red. Vivid orange. The brown and white of spangled ponies. The flutter of feathers and the dull flash of gun steel.

"Northern Cheyenne, mostly," Irons said. "And a few 'Rapahoe. The tribes are bandin' together to hold their hunting grounds. About forty all told."

How he could make out tribal identification at that distance none of them ever

knew. Irons looked at Lily. Her face, thinned by hardship, was taut, but there was no hysteria in her eyes. Her hands were the color of wax.

The Indians first killed the scattered oxen, running them down and slaughtering them with wanton savagery. Then they looted the wagons, scattering the contents about. Lily had retained one trunk of clothes. Now she watched painted warriors make merry with gowns and finery that had seemed so essential to that other life she had led. She watched with a complete indifference.

The wagons were fired then, and began to blaze redly. The Indians fanned out, circling the knoll out of rifle range.

"They don't like it much," Irons commented. "They'll have to charge us uphill, without much cover. That isn't the Indian style of fighting. See that Cheyenne with the single crimson feather in his scalp lock? The one on the bay horse with the orange blanket tied around his waist. That's Walking Wolf. He's a young Cheyenne war chief, and a bad Indian. I hunted buffalo with his village a couple seasons back before he hit the warpath. I had a little trouble with him durin' that hunt. He knows me, and I know him."

Walking Wolf was a powerful, deep-chested Indian, scarred by the sun dance. Bare to the waist in defiance of the cold, he rode proudly, arrogant in his strength, and as implacable and savage as the land that was his background.

Irons suddenly lifted his voice. He began shouting in the Cheyenne tongue. The Indians pulled up, listening. Walking Wolf rode a few paces forward, peering.

"He's recognized me," Irons said with satisfaction. "I told him to make tracks away from here. I promised him I'd take a switch to him like I would to a squaw if he got within my reach."

"Why rile 'em up worse than they are now?" Rufe Slocum protested.

"Let me handle this," Irons snapped. "Get ready! Here they come! Pony charge! Remember that you're shooting down hill. Allow for that when you lay a sight."

Unshod hooves drummed. The warwhoop arose, rolling as thin as a knife through the freezing morning.

Irons intoned, "Hold your fire! Hold it! Wait'll they come closer. Now—! Ee-yah! Stop 'em. Pile 'em up. Ee—yah!"

His rifle was the first to open up. A warrior who had been riding on the offside of his horse, hanging from the toe loop, suddenly dangled limply. The Cheyenne's pony turned and headed back down the slope, seeking to buck free of that dragging weight.

Then all the Indians were shooting and the five men were firing into the scattered, charging line.

OTIS KNIGHT had that familiar bulldog set to his jaw as he knelt, making sure of a target each time he pulled a trigger. Rufe Slocum was yelling in his deep, booming voice. Clay Fitzhugh stood coolly erect, ignoring the snap of bullets and the thin hiss of arrows as he used his rifle. Mark Alexander's sensitive mouth was twisted in a grimace of protest at this necessity for shedding human blood.

Three Cheyennes were down and others were wounded. The charge broke fifty yards short of the summit. The warwhoop ended and the Indians whirled their ponies, lashing them back down the slope.

Irons looked around. "They'll likely come again," he said. "And then next time they'll keep comin'."

Rufe Slocum was staring surprised at an arrow that dangled from the sleeve of his heavy canvas outer coat. But the point had barely scratched his skin. One of Fitzhugh's Kentucky saddlehorses lay dead, hit by two bullets and several arrows, but the other horse had escaped, uninjured. Those were the only casualties.

The Indians had taken their dead with them. They grouped now on the flat near the burning wagons.

Irons began calling to them again in the Cheyenne tongue. He arose, making taunting gestures.

Several Indians fired rifles at him. One or two spent bullets bumbled past. Irons laughed jeeringly and continued upbraiding them.

Suddenly Walking Wolf left his warriors and rode nearer the knoll. Irons went silent, a queer, hard glint of triumph in his eyes.

Walking Wolf began riding in a circle, brandishing a lance and chanting in his tribal tongue. There was anger and hurt

pride and a fierce challenge in that litany he was reciting.

"What's this all about?" Clay Fitzhugh asked impatiently. "What's this dirge he's chanting."

"He's countin' his coups," Irons said. "Bragging about how many scalps he's taken, and how many more he's going to take. I accused him of hidin' back of his warriors so he wouldn't get hurt. I told him his blood was water, and his coup stick wasn't fit even for firewood. His pride is hurt."

Walking Wolf ended his recital. He reared his pony and uttered a single wild shout of defiance.

Irons lifted both arms, and shouted a reply. Then he began stripping off his capote. His hunting shirt followed. He was bare to the waist.

He ran a cleaning rag down the muzzle of his rifle and reloaded it with meticulous care. He drew his skinning knife, inspected its edge, then returned it to the sheaf.

"I'll have to borrow your horse," he said, half-apologetically to Fitzhugh.

They were staring at him, puzzled. "It's better this way," Irons explained earnestly. "They'd likely over-run us if they started another pony charge. It's going to snow soon and they know it. Indians don't like snow. They're anxious to finish this business so they can go back to their lodges."

He saw they still didn't understand. "If they lose their chief they'll likely give it up as a bad job," he went ont. "Anyway it will stall 'em off for awhile, and the longer you can keep an Indian waiting, the better chance you have that he'll decide to let you alone."

Lily guessed the answer. "He's arranged to fight that Indian single-handed," she burst out. "A duel."

"Not by a hell of a sight," Fitzhugh exploded. "Good lord, Irons, we're not babies, no matter what you consider us. If anyone fights that Indians I'm the one."

Fitzhugh started stripping off his heavy winter jacket. Lily Maroon turned suddenly. Before anyone could move to stop her she raced into the open and began running down the slope toward the Indians.

"Damnation!" Irons gasped. He vaulted from cover and overtook her within a dozen strides. He scooped her up in his arms while running at full speed.

She panted, "Please, Irons! You said it was the—the yellow scalp they wanted most of all. They might go away if—if they got that."

IRONS carried her back into the shelter of the rimrock. She went limp and resigned. There was humbleness in Irons as he released her. "An' I once called you a shameless woman," he said regretfully.

He looked at Fitzhugh and the others. "This is my job," he said, and there was no impatience, no superiority in him now. He was merely speaking it as an indisputable fact. "I know how to fight Indians, Fitzhugh. You don't. These Cheyennes know me. Walking Wolf says they'll go away and leave the rest of you in peace, but don't bank too much on that. Anyway, it's worth trying."

Fitzhugh stood for a long time. Then, in weary resignation, he walked to his thoroughbred and led it to where Irons was finishing his preparations.

Irons used only a halter and a bellyband fitted with a toe loop as rigging for the horse. He got a jug of bear grease from the supplies, and when Lilly saw what he wanted, she rubbed the grease on his back and arms and chest.

"It makes it easier to slip out of the other man's fingers in a close fight," Irons explained.

He tied a buckskin thong around his thick hair to keep it out of his eyes. He looked like an Indian as he mounted.

Fitzhugh placed a hand on his knee. "Irons," he said, "If you die and I live I'll remember you each day the sun rises, each time I look up at the heavens and see a star shining there. And I'll be forever proud that I knew you. Would you honor me by shaking my hand?"

Irons looked from face to face, and suddenly the brooding loneliness that he had known so keenly, was gone. His hand closed on Fitzhugh's for a brief, fierce, understanding instant.

Then he touched the horse and rode into the open. Walking Wolf was waiting at the base of the knoll, with his warriors grouped in the background.

The Cheyenne chief was stripped to a breech clout, and his body gleamed like polished mahogany. He had a rifle and his bow, and had three arrows in his teeth,

and his scalping knife hung in a belt sling.

As Irons rode down to the flat ground Walking Wolf lifted his voice in a chant, calling on the spirits of his fathers to make his medicine strong.

Then they rode toward each other at a gallop. Walking Wolf's chant ended, and the only sound was the rubble of hooves on the frozen ground.

Walking Wolf suddenly threw himself to the far side of his horse. Irons did the same.

Both riders fired when they were scarcely fifty yards apart, aiming beneath the necks of their mounts.

Each duelist had the same purpose in mind, and their bullets went true. Walking Wolf's pony was killed in midstride, with Irons' slug through its heart.

The thoroughbred continued on for another half dozen strides, and then it upended, dead.

Irons leaped clear and found himself facing Walking Wolf only a rod away. There was no time to reload. They tossed their rifles aside. But the Cheyenne had his bow and three arrows. The bow was as deadly as a rifle at such close quarters.

Irons closed in desperately, racing in long strides, his knife in his hand. He saw the bow rise, and leaped aside in time to miss death. The arrow grazed his shoulder, and then he was at grips with his savage opponent.

Walking Wolf dropped the bow and managed to snatch out his scalping knife. For a moment they stood locked in a test of strength. Then Irons broke the chief's defending grip. There was a burst of wild, writhing conflict—the bitter, heart-wrenching struggle of men at grips with violent death.

Then Walking Wolf suddenly went limp, a knife buried in his heart.

Irons stepped back as the chief crumpled to the ground. He looked at the warriors and made a scornful gesture with his knife as of scalping an imaginary foe.. Then he turned his back on them and began walking proudly up the knoll.

But his face was gray as death, his eyes set rigidly. Only a supreme effort of will was keeping him on his feet, for Walking Wolf's knife was imbedded in his right chest, driven to the holt in a lung. Blood began to show on his lips.

BUT he did not hurry. He played out his role to the limit, maintaining his pose of complete superiority. He knew Indians. Once they became convinced they were confronted by medicine stronger than their own they would grow discouraged and abandon the fight.

He came up that slope like a walking dead man. His arm concealed the hilt of the knife until he came closer, and the girl and the four men did not comprehend at first that each step he took was at the cost of dazing agony.

Fitzhugh was the first to guess the truth. "He's hurt!" he exclaimed.

Fitzhugh arose, intending to come to Irons' assistance. Irons made a gesture.

"Go back," he warned with an effort.

Irons came walking into the shelter of the boulders. Once he was out of sight of the Indians below, his knees began to buckle.

Rufe Slocum caught him before he fell. They carried him to a flat slab of rock and looked at the knife.

"He did that for us," Fitzhugh said, his voice high, harsh. "He despised us, but he fought for us."

Fitzhugh turned fiercely on Mark Alexander. "You're a doctor," he said, his voice shaking. "Are you going to stand there and let him die?"

Mark Alexander looked at his hands, his slim, sensitive hands which had been trained for just such emergencies as this. The hands in which he had lost confidence.

He had no surgical tools, none of the precise instruments that he needed now so desperately. He had throw them away months ago.

"Otis," he said crisply to the Indiana man. "I'll need you. I have no anesthetic, of course, and he may be partly conscious at times. Your nerves are the steadiest. Lily, you will help me too."

* * *

Fitzhugh and Rufe Slocum kept watch on the Indians while Mark worked. Mark used Irons' hunting knife and other improvised instruments which he selected from among the meager belongings they possessed.

It was evident that Irons had only a bare chance of survival. The knife had penetrated his lung, and the thin blade had broken. Removing the broken fragment of

steel was an operation that would have tested the skill of a surgeon who had all the facilities of a fully-equipped hospital at hand.

Down on the flats the Indians were holding a council of war. They had carried Walking Wolf's body into the council circle, and warriors were gesturing and talking.

Overhead the sky was the color of dull steel, low and menacing. Presently a hard, gritty particle stung Lily Maroon's cheek. Snow!

Soon it was snowing steadily, coming down hard and gritty, and driven by a rising wind. The council abruptly ended below. All the Indians mounted and rode away. The snow came harder, and the Cheyennes vanished into that wind-driven haze that was whirling across the plain.

Mark Alexander continued to work over Zack Irons. Fitzhugh gathered up a wagon-sheet and what few articles of spare clothing he could find, and built a shelter and windbreak to protect the patient.

Then Clay Fitzhugh stood by, silent and almost without moving, watching Irons' gray face.

Time passed. The fury of the weather increased. It was blowing a blizzard now. Lily Maroon's eyes looked big and vast against the strained tenseness of her face. The strain grooved deep furrows around Otis Knight's square mouth, as though he had been there for days.

Finally Mark Alexander looked up. He stepped wearily back, warmed his hands over the roaring sagebrush fires that Rufe Slocum kept replenishing.

"I don't know," he said. "He's still hanging on. If he can make it for a few hours until the shock passes, he may pull through."

Mark Alexander looked at his hands again, with the grim satisfaction of a man who had found himself. He knew that but for his skill Irons would have died two hours ago.

Fitzhugh did not move. He stood there watching Irons.

THE blizzard was hitting in full strength now. White ghosts were dancing across the flats. Rufe Slocum brought in fuel from the charred embers of the wagons. Lily cooked a scant meal that hardly anyone more than tasted.

Night came with the storm moaning across the plains around them. At times the spark of life flickered so low in Zack Irons that they all stood gripped by a vast and icy loneliness and dread.

Then he would strengthen again. It was nearly daybreak when Irons finally won the fight that he and Mark Alexander had fought together. His breathing suddenly strengthened, became more certain. The gray sheen that had covered his face faded a trifle.

Mark Alexander looked around at his comrades. "All right," he said. "You can all get some sleep now. He's on his way back."

It was hours later, and they were all sleeping except Mark, when Irons' eyes finally opened. He looked around, took in the camp and the sleepers.

He looked at Mark, smiled a little in understanding. "Thanks, Doc," he murmured.

Mark's hand closed over Irons' arm in a brief, fierce pressure. "I'm the one who ought to say that, Irons," he said.

The blizzard blew for three days, and then the wind died, and the clouds began to lift. Great drifts lay in the coulees and against the curve of the buttes, but the wind had broomed the flats clear.

They left their refuge after dark that night, for Irons believed the Cheyennes would return now that the storm was over.

They carried Irons on a pallet made of poles and blankets, the men spelling each other in pairs.

They traveled at night for three marches, huddling together for warmth during the bitter days in hidden camps, fighting frostbite on their weary struggles through the darkness.

Sure at last they were free of danger of Indian pursuit they camped again for a week in a hideout until Irons was able to get on his feet.

Winter gripped the land now. Their food dwindled out as they pushed on, forced to travel slowly until Irons recovered his strength.

Except for one or two rabbits that rifle bullets almost tore to pieces, they saw no sign of game. Winter seemed to have drifted the elk herds out of the country, and if any deer was around not even Irons' eyes could detect a sign of them.

Billings, the settlement on the Yellowstone was less than fifty miles away when they camped on a frozen stream that Irons called the Little Bighorn.

Only fifty miles, but it seemed a hopeless distance to them now. They had not eaten in forty-eight hours, and now the sky was closing in overhead, pale gray and forboding. Another blizzard was coming.

Irons watched Lily stir a meager pot of food that consisted of a few scraps of rabbit bones that they had treasured. Her cheeks were thin, her skin translucent.

The story was about told. A few more hours without food in this brutal temperature would finish them.

Rufe Slocum slowly relaxed on his side on the frozen ground, and fell into exhausted slumber.

Irons removed a ragged buffalo robe from around his own shoulders, and added it to the one Rufe Slocum had wrapped around his big, gaunt body. He tucked them carefully in and stood with a queer, tender smile on his dark, drawn face.

"You damned, brave sod-buster," Irons said reverently aloud. "Always loyal, always faithful. And I once called you a lard-eater, a bourg-way."

He turned. They all heard the sound at the same instant, for sounds carried a long distance in the brittle, windless silence.

LILY LIFTED her head as she crouched beside the cookfire and remained motionless.

Something was moving on a rocky, snow-dappled slant a long rifleshot away. Irons saw the glint of gray-brown hair, and then the outline of antlers.

It was a bull elk!

Irons picked up his rifle. He looked at his comrades, and hesitated an instant as though vastly afraid of this responsibility.

The elk was moving fast, drifting ahead of the coming blizzard. Irons lifted the rifle. He stood a long time, and nobody moved or breathed as he laid his sight.

He pulled the trigger at last, and the report echoed emptily among the hills.

The bull elk gave a frightened leap and went crashing over the crest of the ridge out of sight, running at full speed.

Irons lowered the rifle. His face was a

twisted mask of remorse. "Missed!" he croaked in an agony of self reproach. He stared wildly at them. "I killed you," he mumbled. "There was fresh meat enough to see us through. An' I failed you."

Lily Maroon walked toward him. She was smiling as she stood before him. "Irons," she said. "That was an impossible shot under impossible conditions. No man alive could have done better. No man alive could have done more than you have done for us. You have taken more than your share of all danger and toil, and I have never heard you utter a word of complaint and reproach. But for you we would have been dead long ago. You could have left us and been safe in some settlement weeks in the past, but it was not in your nature to do such a thing."

She still stood there, smiling mistily up at him. "I love you, Irons," she said. "I will always love you. You are the rich man I was looking for—the one you heard me talk about. For you're rich in everything a man needs."

Irons looked at the other men dazed.

Fitzhugh spoke. "You are the one, Irons. The rest of us have known it for a long time. We've known Lily was in love with you. And that you are in love with her. She knows that too."

Lily Maroon drew Irons' gaunt face down and kissed him. She held him against her, fiercely, protectingly.

Irons, slowly, haltingly, like a man in a dream, drew her closer against him.

"Look!" Knight cried. "The elk!"

The bull elk, a tiny figure at that distance, had appeared again on the crest of the next ridge. It was moving slowly, uncertainly. Suddenly it crumpled, and fell, rolling back down the slant.

When they reached it they found Irons' bullet through its lungs.

Irons stood looking at it. Lily was at his side, pride for her man in her eyes.

They had the means of life now—and safety was only fifty miles away. Irons began working on the elk with his skinning knife. Lily helped him.

She saw a vast gentleness and a content in him now. The brooding loneliness was gone from his face—forever.

THE END

(Continued from page 103)

his mind at the sight of Seepee with a gun in his hand.

"What safe?" demanded the sheriff.

"I tried to tell you yesterday, but . . ."

"Never mind that," interrupted the sheriff. "What happened?"

Seepee was shaking like a leaf, but he did his best to explain. The sheriff was doubtful, but could he afford to indulge his doubts?

"Come on," he commanded, and started for his house, with Seepee close behind. He changed his course. He turned and headed for the bank building. Hatless, barefooted and in his white woollen nightshirt, walking quickly with long strides, trailed by Seepee who was soon panting, the sheriff appeared in the moonlight as a rare, fat ghost, pursued by a black, sinister thing in a derby.

The pair mounted the stairs and dashed to the offices of the Lost Lode Mining Company. The door was open, and the miner's lamp still glowed upon the floor where it had been placed. In front of the safe lay its misshapen door, and around it and upon the floor were blankets and remnants of blankets used to muffle the blast. Upon the floor of the safe itself sat four heavily wrapped canvas packages of meaningful character and the sheriff knew well what they were.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "We'll take these to the house a-fore somebuddy else gets 'em," he said. He took the four heavy packages of wealth from the battered safe. He handed one to Seepee—just then putting his gun in his coat pocket—and watched him sag under the weight of it.

With their precious load, the pair hurried back to the sheriff's home. Before going into the house, however, the sheriff dashed into the fire department—which housed a hose and bucket wagon and a hand pump, all man-drawn—and rang the fire-alarm bell eight times, which was the call for a posse. He then went into dress.

The shooting in the streets had been somewhat of an alarm itself and by the time the sheriff was dressed and had his own horse saddled and one for Seepee, riders were beginning to appear from near-by sections of town.

They gathered around the sheriff and Seepee. Quickly the necessary portion of

the story was told. And with that, the posse took off in the direction of the fugitives, with other riders who had heard the alarm joining in the pursuit.

Seepee rode painfully and valoriously beside the sheriff. The road the fleeing safecrackers had taken led past his home and past the barn where he had heard the plans of the outlaws being discussed the night before.

He had a hunch. He kept his silence, except for the grunts the jolting of the horse forced out of him until, at last, they reached the point of the road opposite the abandoned barn.

"Whoa!" he bellowed, and reigned his horse. The sheriff and the posse halted with him.

"What is it?" the sheriff asked incredulously.

"They're most likely hiding in that barn," Seepee said hoarsely, pointing to his wayside inn with a wide sweep of his arm.

"What makes you think so?" the sheriff asked.

"Try it and find out," Seepee answered with the confidence born of the leadership he now assumed.

The sheriff dismounted, went to the door, but did not open it. "Come out you men; the place is surrounded!" He did not know if his call were idle or not. There was no answer. He called again. The prancing about of the horses gave ample assurance that the place was surrounded. Then a voice spoke from within.

"All right, sheriff, yuh win."

The barn door slowly opened, two men came out, one with a hand heavily swathed in bandanas, leading their horses.

"Turn over your guns," the sheriff said with the confidence of a man backed by ten possemen. Seepee sat disdainfully upon his mount, the only one not holding a gun.

The lone gun between the safe-crackers was surrendered.

IT WAS daylight when the posse broke up and the sheriff took Seepee into his home where his good wife prepared a huge breakfast for the winners of justice.

Seepee was too nervous to eat very much, but he consumed numerous cups of coffee, between which he recounted the details of his accomplishment. He told how he had tried to warn Hardrock Carter, and received a boot in the pants for his pains.

"Now," he concluded, and satisfying himself that the sheriff's wife was out of earshot, "I need a drink."

"How long's it been since you had a drink, Seepee?" the sheriff asked sympathetically.

"Except for two drinks yesterday, I haven't had a drink for three days. I have to have a drink after all I've been through."

"That's pret' near a record, ain't it, Seepee?"

"It *is* a record," and Seepee wiped the perspiration from his bald pate with his blue bandana handkerchief.

"Just a minute, then," the sheriff responded, and arose, left the room, and went to the jail-house. He returned very quickly, walked to the seated Seepee, and pinned a glittering deputy-sheriff's badge upon the dusty broadcloth lapel.

"Deputy Clayton P. Palmer," the sheriff said with pride. "The salary that goes with this is seventy-five dollars a month—and no drinkin'."

That night, the parched-throated, fighting and valiant new Deputy Sheriff of La Mesa County herocially declined the drinks of countless toasts proposed in his name at the Hangtown and Red Dog Saloons.

True to his concepts and his new badge, Deputy Sheriff Palmer borrowed a five-dollar bill from his boss—against pay-day—and with part of it liquidated his debt of twenty cents for his last two drinks at the Red Dog Saloon.

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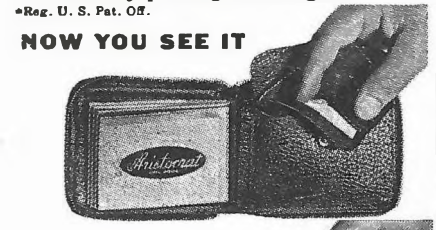

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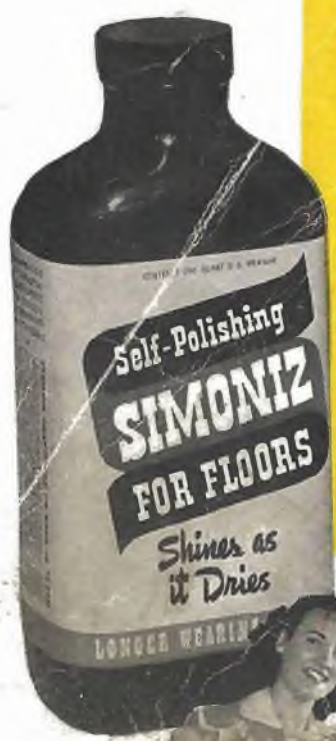

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