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BIG-BOOK WESTERN

MAGAZINE

RIMROCK'S HOT-LEAD ELECTOR
by DEE LINFORD

SCHUYLER · ROAN
COX AND OTHERS

For once they actually agree!

Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on —they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U. S. A."

BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"

Give the finest gift of all ... U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

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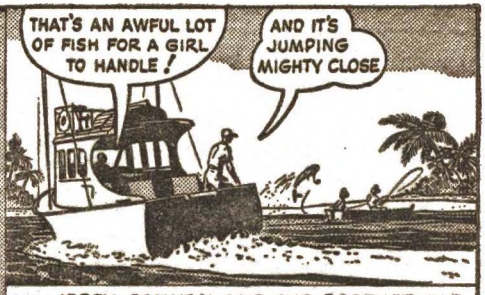
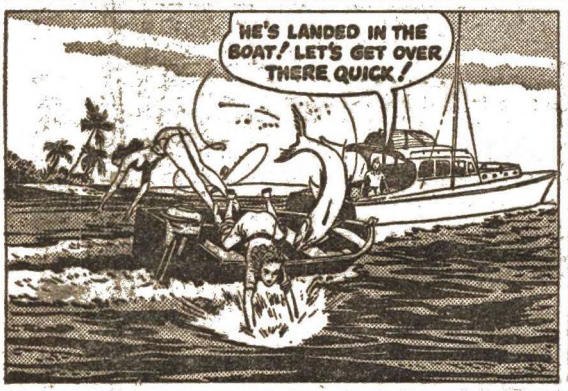
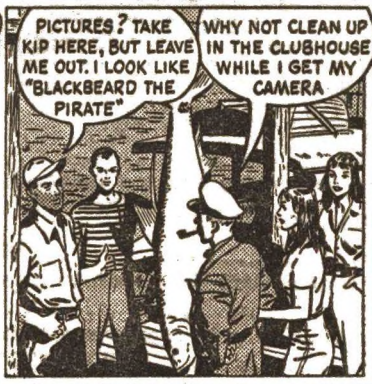
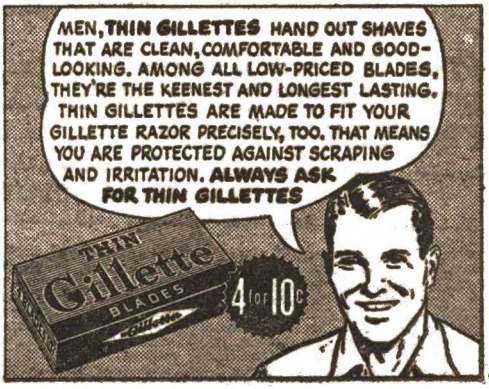
LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN • • •







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BIG-BOOK WESTERN

ALL STORIES NEW **MAGAZINE** NO SERIALS

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(Two Exciting Gunsmoke Novelettes)

(Three Action-Packed Short Stories)

(Two Thrilling Western Features)

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ROLL 'EM ON TO GLORY!

By BARRY CORD

Indian fighter Lieutenant "Lucky" Baldwin knew his string of luck had suddenly played out as his detachment faced the blood-hungry Cheyenne, who waited for a sure-fire scalp-hunters' holiday!

THE 5TH INFANTRY scout dismounted and saluted Lieutenant Frank D. Baldwin, commanding, in the informal manner of the frontier. "We guessed right, sir. Graybeard's camped right behind the hill." He shifted tobacco into his left cheek and spat carelessly. "Looks like we have a bear by the tail, Lieutenant. Judgin' the size of his encampment they outnumber us five to one."

Lieutenant "Lucky" Baldwin hesitated. It was a hard decision to make.

Graybeard and his Cheyennes had been raising hell in this section of the plains country for a long time. A wily general, he had outfoxed and outguessed the 10th Cavalry all along the line.

Lieutenant Baldwin had already earned a reputation for Indian fighting when he was given command of the 5th Infantry unit. Assigned to the task of smashing Graybeard he had finally caught up with the Cheyenne chief on this north branch of McClellan Creek. Only to find the odds heavily against him.

He turned to look at the members of his command, sprawled along the bank. With the infantry he had a number of supply wagons and a small detachment of cavalry.

Major Price, with two detachments of 10th Cavalry, was somewhere nearby, but "Lucky" Baldwin knew he could not wait. At any moment one of Graybeard's scouts would spot the camp, and then the tables of surprise might well be turned.

Surprise. That was in his favor, at the moment. A surprise attack could mean all the difference against odds.

But such an attack meant hitting Graybeard with everything he had at the same moment. And his infantry could never keep up with his cavalry in a charge over the hill. Splitting his forces in face of such odds would be suicidal.

Baldwin thought fast, and his orders were typical of the man who knew but one command when he sighted the enemy: "Charge!"

Surprised soldiers went to work on the supply wagons, stripping them of gear and canvas. Teamsters were given their orders as they took their places on the seats, ready to handle the reins.

Into the empty wagons Baldwin ordered his infantry, rifles loaded and ready to fire. Then he lined the wagons into a single rank facing the hill. Splitting his cavalry into two units he placed them on each flank of the wagon brigade.

The sun was shafting through low-hanging eastern clouds when "Lucky" Baldwin rode to his place in front of his troops and drew his saber.

"Charge!"

The bugle sounded its thin, challenging notes against the hills. The teamsters stood up and lashed their mules into a dead run. Sweeping a little ahead on the flanks, bending the charging rank into a crescent, came the cavalry, riding hell-for-leather, sabers glinting in the sun.

Over the ridge they went and down the slope, thundering down into camp of astonished Cheyennes. The wagons bounced over the rough ground like blitz-buggies, the infantry men firing with everything they had.

That reckless charge caught Graybeard completely by surprise. The Cheyennes were routed. They scattered into the hills, leaving their lodges, their hosses and their possessions to the jubilantly triumphant conquerors.

That attack broke the back of Graybeard's resistance, and it brought Lieutenant "Lucky" Baldwin the Congressional Medal of Honor, an honor he received twice in his lifetime.

• • RIMROCK'S HOT-

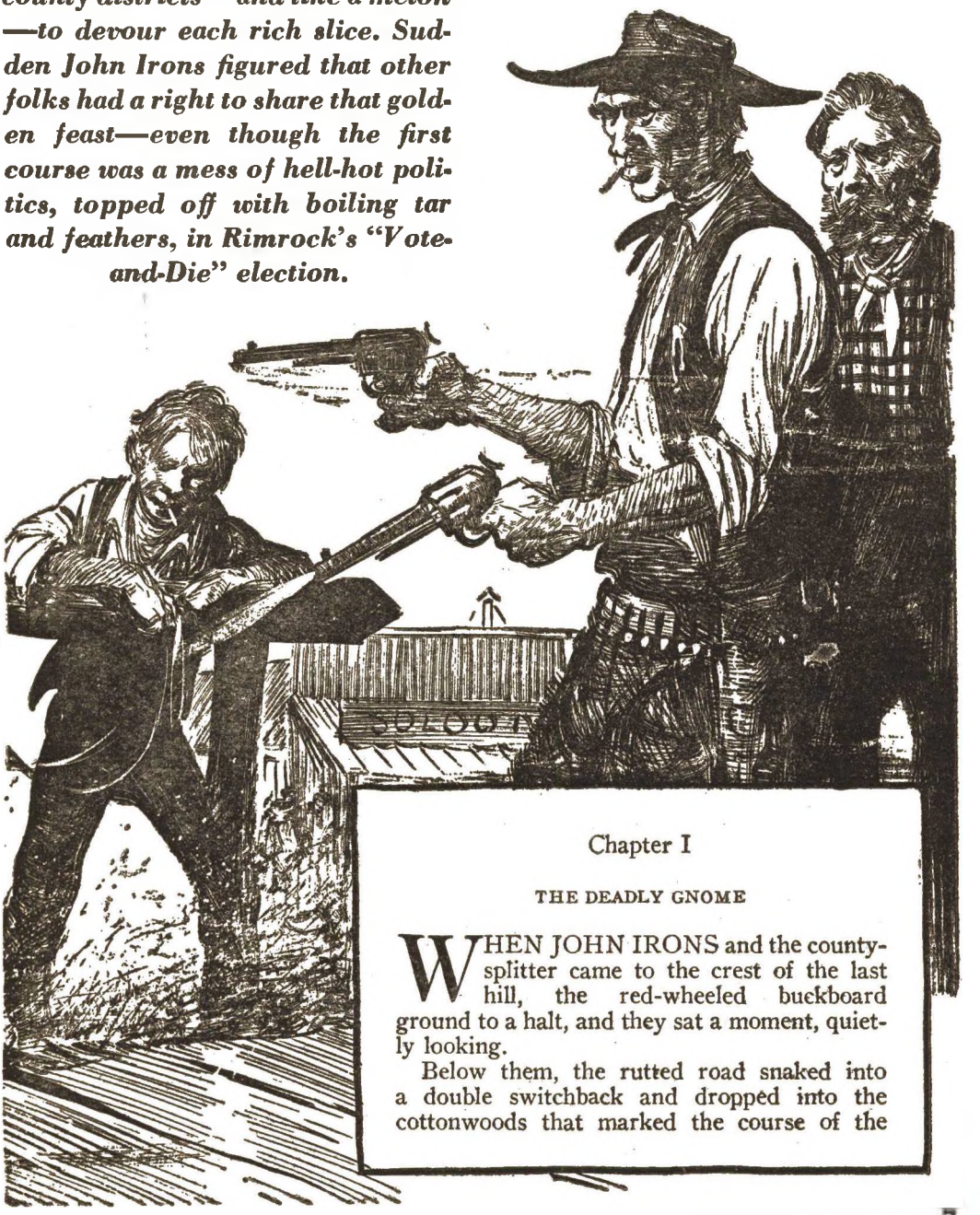
A Smashing "Sudden John Irons" Novel

John Irons feigned fright, and danced an ungainly dance with pistol slugs perforating the planks under his feet.

LEAD ELECTOR

That strangely sinister politico, Jacob Frome, rode the twisted badlands trails, slicing the Powder River country like a melon, into county districts—and like a melon —to devour each rich slice. Sudden John Irons figured that other folks had a right to share that golden feast—even though the first course was a mess of hell-hot politics, topped off with boiling tar and feathers, in Rimrock's "Vote-and-Die" election.

By
DEE LINFORD



Chapter I

THE DEADLY GNOME

WHEN JOHN IRONS and the county-splitter came to the crest of the last hill, the red-wheeled buckboard ground to a halt, and they sat a moment, quietly looking.

Below them, the rutted road snaked into a double switchback and dropped into the cottonwoods that marked the course of the

silt-laden Powder River. Beyond the trees, there on an open flat in the crook of the river's wide elbow, lay their mutual destination, the cowtown of Rimrock. All ten buildings of it—five of them saloons.

The county-splitter sighed prodigiously, and stretched his stubby limbs. "It's lovely!" he pronounced in his piping, breathless voice. "Perfect setup for a county seat!"

John Irons' gaze swept the eye-sore scene, finding it poetically unlovely, superlatively unsuited to the purpose mentioned. But the range detective's interest was focused at the moment upon his strange frock-coated companion, not on the rolling Powder River badlands. He grunted noncommittally, and his eyes slid back, expecting to find at least a trace of irony upon the round, cherubic face. But the smile on the sweet merry mouth was one of genuine admiration. The deep-set, mud-brown eyes were glowing with a kind of rapt serenity that held no hint of ridicule.

"I'll build the courthouse by the river," the enthusiast was saying, pointing with one pudgy hand. "There in the pluming cottonwoods on the bank. The jail will adjoin on one side, the livery barn on the other. I'll have a sheriff's quarters, and a dancehall, in the loft. We'll get a cannon from Fort McKinney, and a pole to fly a flag. Sir, I can see it now, and it's—it's *lovely*!"

The speaker's ecstacy was convincing, and John Irons looked down at the setting once more, thinking that perhaps he had overlooked its real possibilities. But now, as before, he saw only an ugly sun-baked settlement squatting uncertainly at the edge of the badlands—as if it realized it had no business being there in such an all-forsaken spot, and half expected the next strong wind to blow it elsewhere. He saw this, and a number of even graver obstacles to his companion's grandiose scheme. Characteristically, he spoke his mind.

"Where and how will you raise the money for such a layout?" he inquired dubiously. "You haven't got enough people on this end of the Powder to fill the county jobs, let alone to finance a deal like that. And if all the folks up here quit their farms and go to work for the new county, who is goin' to pay the taxes—to foot the bills and pay their salaries and keep things moving?"

It was, in John Irons' opinion, a legitimate question. But the county-splitter was plainly a visionary and a zealot, with all the visionary's usual impatience with boring questions of finance. He shrugged a thoroughly Latin shrug, and the glance he bent upon the range detective was pained and stern with censure.

"Sir," he said archly, "you cannot set a dollar price upon liberty and self-government—the one embodying and being synonymous with the other. I've no doubt, sir, that the same questions were posed at Independence Hall, where tyranny was dealt a mortal blow and the cornerstones of our glorious republic were laid. Sir, the Founding Fathers devised a way, and I for one am not prepared to believe that the virtues of initiative and ingenuity which guided them at Philadelphia have died amongst our people!"

John Irons winced and blinked under the word-heavy bludgeoning. He knew he should feel rebuked. But Sudden John Irons was a firm believer in the democratic system. He simply did not see how that system's ideals would be advanced by the creation of another county in a territory which was already burdened with more subdivisions of government than it could support.

The populace of Rimrock, after all, had a representative voice in the present county setup at Buffalo. And Buffalo wasn't so far away that the Rimrockers could not make themselves heard.

"And if you choose to put it strictly on a basis of the size of the population," the roly-poly figure went on, as if he had read the detective's mind, "I'll remind you, sir, that there are more people in this United States today than were present when the Thirteen Original Colonies banded together in Union, to offer freedom and asylum to the oppressed populations of an evil, misguided world. The population of Rimrock, too, will grow—once the area is freed from domination by the thieves' government in Buffalo—which is jealously seeking to retard the growth of this community!"

The singular individual had worked himself into a state of agitation as he spoke. His brown eyes glared at the range detective, daring him to say more against the division of Johnson County into two independent units. John Irons could still

think of several reasons it should not be done. But he'd had sufficient Fourth-of-July oratory for one day, and he glanced away, tacitly admitting defeat in the one-sided debate.

The county-splitter cleared his throat several times, threatening to say more. But John Irons' glum silence gave him no opening, and he turned his attention back to his team, with the smug and self-satisfied air of a circuit-riding preacher who has just brow-beaten another heretic into embracing the faith.

He wiped his moist chubby hands on his black broadcloth pants, tightened his grip on the long black lines, and clucked to his team. John Irons tightened his own hold on the reins of the dun gelding he was leading behind the buckboard, and as the rig rattled lightly down the steep grade, the detective studied his strange companion covertly, trying to decide what it was about the semicomic figure which impressed him as slightly sinister.

THERE WAS nothing in the man's outer appearance, certainly, that could account for the feeling of revulsion which had been growing on the range detective ever since he met the county-splitter at a crossroads.

The man's body was shaped like an egg, with arms and legs attached. From his broad haunches, his trunk tapered up past narrow shoulders to a neck as wide as the head to which it was joined. His hair was silky white, combed back to fall straight below his wide-brimmed hat, cut off square at the collar of his coat, like a senator's. His eyes, it was true, were the eyes of a zealot. But his soft, smoothly shaven face was white and strangely free from wrinkles —the face, John Irons reflected, of a saint.

Yet when the wind flapped the tails of his claw-hammer coat, John Irons had a glimpse of a bone-handled pistol together with a long bladed Bowie in a combination holster-sheath.

John Irons reasoned that a man who traveled as much as this one, had reason to go armed. But John Irons liked a man who wore his weapons openly—not one who bushwhacked through the country armed like a pirate and dressed as a citizen. On the other hand, although he searched his memory for tales he'd heard of the little man—in chandelier lighted parlors and around dusty campfires—he could find little to justify his distrust and dislike.

Jacob Frome roamed the country, creating new county subdivisions in the states and territories which congress was carving out of the vast Indian domain. But throughout Wyoming and Colorado and the Dakotas, where he wandered like an itinerant preacher, he was known merely as the county-splitter.

There was no region west of the Missouri where his gnome-like figure and his improbable exploits were not known. He was a fable and a ballad—a figure to rival Johnny Appleseed and Old Dan Tucker. Poets and minstrels acclaimed him, and little girls who had no idea what a county-splitter might be recited his adventures in school.

In many respects, the county-splitter exceeded and outclassed his rival ballad heroes. Unlike Johnny Appleseed, he was no humble mendicant, sleeping in friendly lofts. Unlike Dan Tucker, he was never obliged to sing for a cold supper. The county-splitter wore linen and black broadcloth, and drove a red-wheeled buckboard, drawn by sleek Sunday horses. He smoked black cigars and put up at the best hostelries, drinking bonded brandies and straight whiskeys, like a man of affairs.

Fable or no, the county-splitter made his mission pay, and John Irons was one of many who wondered just how he did it. The question loomed large in the range detective's thoughts at the moment. It buttressed his hunch that beneath his shiny, holier-than-thou veneer, the county-splitter was a slippery customer. And, as the buckboard rattled down the steep incline, the range detective gradually became aware that he was being studied and gauged in his turn.

"I have seen you somewhere," the little man said suddenly. "I never forget a face."

"I expect you wouldn't forget this one," the detective said ruefully, fingering his chin. "Likely, you have been followin' the reward notices."

John Irons' dark eyes lighted suddenly with recognition, and the detective knew that his weak dodge had failed.

"I got you, now!" the gnome-like politician cackled jubilantly. "You're John Irons—o' the Anti Horse and Cow Thief Association. Rob McDade's right bower!"

"You know Rob?" the detective countered, disturbed by the apparent importance the other attached to his identity.

The county-splitter nodded, profoundly. "Know 'im well—too well, you might say. Great friends of the squatters an' little ranchers. Patron saint of nesters an' thieves!"

The disparaging reference was to Oregon Rob McDade, executive secretary of the Wyoming Anti Horse and Cow Thief Association, John Irons' long-time employer. He looked down his long nose.

"Rob McDade operates a business," he said in a tone that held an edge of warning. "He sells protection to every deserving man that can pay for it. And he don't count a man's cows or acres to decide if he's deservin'. If every man that can't qualify for membership in the Stock Growers' Association is a thief, like some say, why I expect Rob is just that then!"

The little politician edged away. But John Irons still had the feeling he was being scrutinized.

"I hear that Rob is out to buck the creation of a new county up here," he mentioned in a tone that was too casual to be natural. And John Irons sat silent for a moment, not knowing the answer himself.

In the range detective's pocket at the moment was a sparsely-worded telegram he'd received the day before at Buffalo, the "nesters capital of Wyoming." The wire said tersely:

PROCEED AT ONCE TO RIMROCK & INVESTIGATE ELECTION SCHEDULED THIS WEEK. SIGNED R. MCD.

There had been no hint as to what the election concerned, or why it deserved the attention of a stockmen's protective league which ordinarily limited its activities to tracking down stock thieves. And while John Irons was a competent authority on the techniques and methods of rustling, he kenned little of the blacker art of politics. He'd resented the puzzling vagueness of his instructions, and had almost ignored the wire to continue on the trail of a horse-stealing syndicate he was scouting. But now his interest was increasing.

"I ain't discussed politics with Rob, lately," he said. "I don't reckon I know just how he feels about breakin' Johnson County in two."

He had a feeling the evasion was not a successful one. And when the county-splitter pulled rein suddenly in the midle of the road, he was instantly on guard. But the mud-brown eyes were soft and humorous, and the smile on the cherubic face was sweet as a woman's, and equally disarming.

"If you'll reach me that brief case behind the seat," the gnome said brightly, "I will show you somethin' that will open your eyes."

John Irons turned on the seat, to comply. His fingers were closing on the brief case's leather handle when the feelers at the back of his neck telegraphed an urgent warning. He turned quickly and found the county-splitter on his feet, a blackjack upraised in his hand.

The Association man straightened on the seat, throwing up an arm to ward off the blow. His other hand shot out to shove his assailant back. But the gnome-like man could move with the flowing speed of a striking rattlesnake. He eluded the up-thrown arm. The sky came down and smote John Irons a sickening blow, just above his ear, and he knew the blackjack had found him.

A strange and terrifying paralysis held him helpless on the buckboard seat, while the blackjack went up again. He knew he was going to be hit again, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Then John Irons knew nothing at all.

Chapter II

DIVIDE AND PISTOL-WHIP

WHEN JOHN IRONS came around again, he was tied hand and foot and stretched flat on the ground. The setting sun was in his eyes, and the drone of voices came from the red-laced fog that enveloped him.

The fog thinned after a bit, and memory filled his hurting head. He raised his head and looked around him. He was lying in the shade of the cottonwoods at the bottom of the switchback he had descended in the buckboard, along with the county-splitter, not far from where he had been slugged. A dozen men were standing about the buckboard, less than ten yards from him. A smug, pontificial voice was speaking, and the sound of it filled the range detective

with futile anger, but he did not move.

"I met him back at the Kaycee cross-roads, couple of hours ago. We got to talkin', and found we was both headed for Rimrock, so he decided to ride with me, and lead his horse behind. Time we hit the switchback, I had him pegged, and I allowed he wasn't up to any good, riding into Rimrock right now. So I slugged him and threw him in the trees, and sent you word. He's *your* baby now, Mark."

A dry, wizened man of sixty with a whangleather face and a sour, knocked-down mouth stepped over and gazed down at the range detective a moment.

"It's Sudden John, all right," the sour mouth conceded, glumly. "Too bad you didn't hit him a mite harder, and put a stop to his infernal meddlin' ways."

"It's not too late now, is it?" the county-splitter's voice insinuated. "You could crack his iron skull with a boulder, and drop him over that ledge yonder, like he met with plain poor luck."

But the other grunted skeptically. "It's daylight, and you don't know who saw you slug 'im. Besides, Oregon Rob sets a heap by that long-geared bloodhound. If he was to die up here, Rob would be right hard to handle. Rob's a nasty cat to clean after, once he's riled."

It was slightly eerie, lying there helpless as a roped calf while his captors debated whether or not to let him live—the same as if he'd been a trapped, stock-killing dog. But the pain was receding somewhat, and he was beginning to thing again.

The weazened, sour-mouthed individual he now recognized as Mark Meer, cattle baron and territorial politician, whose questionable range holding covered most of the southern half of Johnson County, surrounding the Rimrock area on all sides. He was also a member in high standing of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, the big operators' high-powered combine which ran the territorial government as it chose, and which frequently found itself at loggerheads with the small operators' league, headed by Rob McDade and served by John Irons.

Mark Meer was known throughout the territory as a particularly arrogant and ruthless individual who murdered his rivals as readily as he'd shoot coyotes. He could not be convicted in court because of his political influence with the territorial judges, and the fear his name instilled in the juries. He did have a healthy respect for McDade and Wyoming Anti. But John Irons knew he could expect the worst from him—though he did not see clearly why Meer found his presence in Rimrock so objectionable.

"I'd ruther not kill him, without I have to," the cattle king mused. "I'd ruther just discourage him and run him off."

"How could you discourage a man like Irons—without you killed him, first?" the county-splitter demanded, still favoring death. But, receiving no answer, he shrugged and turned aside. "Well, suit yourself. He's your baby, now."

John Irons, watching through slitted eyes, saw the cattle baron scowl and turn on the county-splitter, snappish and irascible.

"That's twice you've said that, Frome, and I don't like it. I'd say he's your baby, too, if he's here to spike the deal on the county election, the way that telegram sounds. I said I'd pay five thousand dollars to have a new county organized up here. But you don't get a cent till the thing's set up and operating."

John Irons now saw how the county-splitter came out on his seemingly profitless occupation. Though just why a division of Johnson County into two separate units should be worth five thousand dollars to Mark Meer was not yet evident.

The county-splitter lifted his narrow shoulders and let them fall. "You'll get your county—John Irons or no John Irons. All I say is I don't see how you'll discourage a man like that, without killing him."

"I'll discourage him, all right," the cattle baron said grimly. "I'll make him wish we *had* killed him. Lefty," he continued, raising his voice, "take the county-splitter's rig and drive down to Mulford's store. Pick up a barrel o' tar, and a featherbed. Have 'em put on my bill, an' get back here, pronto. Rest o' you boys, switch your tails around here an' get a fire goin'. We'll give this meddler the tar an' feather cure!"

John Irons knew an instant's panic, in which he struggled with his bonds in a frenzy of horror and revulsion. But whoever had tied him had known his business. And when his wrists and ankles were wet with his own blood and the ropes still held

firm, he recognized the futility of further effort. He saved his strength for the coming ordeal.

He knew that any attempt to dissuade or to bargain with his captors would be as futile as his struggles against the ropes, and he wouldn't give his enemies the satisfaction of hearing him plead for mercy—only to have it denied him. So he lay tight-lipped and sweating while the tar was heating, feigning unconsciousness in the hope that when it came time to strip him his tormentors would untie his hands.

But Mark Meer and his minions took no such long chances with a captive of John Irons' reputation. When the tar was melted and they got around to removing his clothing, they left his hands and feet tied and cut the clothes off with their knives. John Irons endured the indignities and obscenities to which he was subjected, because he knew that worse was coming. And when at last he lay naked and helpless in the firelight, and Mark Meer strode toward him, holding a paddle that dripped hot, black tar, the range detective permitted himself the luxury of language.

"You'd do better to kill me, Meer," he said in a voice that was gratifyingly calm. "This way, you're opening an account that I'll pay off, if it takes me twenty years."

"I thought you was playin' possum on us," the rancher exclaimed acidly, his sour mouth assuming an expression of pleasurable anticipation. "Well, I'm glad you know what's going on, so's the lesson won't be wasted. We don't like meddlers up here, Mr. Irons. And, by the time we've finished with you, you won't be worryin' about squarin' accounts. You'll only be thinkin' about gettin' a long ways from Rimrock—and gettin' shed of your coat."

As the rancher spoke, he jabbed at John Irons' mouth and nose with his dripping stick. The detective jerked his face away and took the scalding, sticky stuff on his neck and shoulder.

Then the others came, bearing dripping ladles, and John Irons said no more. He writhed, and sometimes he groaned, as the hellish hot tar filled his pores and seemed to penetrate into his very flesh.

They started with his head and shoulders, and worked down. He thought at first he wouldn't be able to stand it, they went so slow. But he did. And when at long last they slit the featherbed and rolled him in it, he scarcely minded at all—even though the feathers stuck to his eyes so that he couldn't see, and filled his nostrils when he tried to breathe.

He felt swollen and monstrous when they lifted him onto his snorting horse. The gelding promptly threw him off, but they boosted him back into the saddle. This time they tied him, so that no matter how savagely the gelt pitched and crowhopped, he could not escape the harrowing jolt and lurch that made such a hash of his insides.

The voices of his tormentors made a raucous and meaningless clamor in his ears, and he thought that the jolting and yelling would never stop. But finally they did stop, and he felt himself falling, endlessly, into a black void that was cool and friendly, and which held an end to agony. After a time, he heard other voices. Different voices. Gentle voices, with tender hands that pulled him back out of oblivion, only to lose their hold and let him slip into the void again.

WHEN John Irons next was aware of being alive, he was lying on a poster bed in a two-roomed cabin built of cottonwood logs—chinked with river mud and neatly whitewashed from rafters to floor. His clothes had been removed, and the tar somehow been cleaned off him. In many places, the skin had been removed with the sticky black substance, and the insides of his legs were raw and inflamed, where the scalded skin had been peeled off in rolls against the leather of his saddle.

The smell of kerosene and camphor hung heavily about him, and he was smeared from his hair to his heels in a light, clean-smelling oil. He wore a loose night shirt many times too large for him, and his wounded head was swathed in a bandage improvised from a white turkish towel.

The sun was streaming in through the curtained window beside the bed, indicating that he'd lost many hours, perhaps several days, in unconsciousness. He tried to move, but found the effort too painful to endure, and lay still once more, turning his sore eyes in their sockets to examine the room.

He was disturbed, and a little mortified, to find that it was indubitably a feminine room—all pink and pastel blue, with lace on the curtains, and frills on the bedclothes.

He was wondering who his Samaritan friend might be when a door slammed somewhere and a thunderous voice boomed in another part of the house. An instant later, the bedroom doorway was filled with the mountainous form of a man—the biggest John Irons had ever seen. His great paunch filled his high-bibbed overalls to overflowing, and he had to stoop to get through the door.

He wore a luxuriant growth of ebony whiskers on his huge open face, and the deep-set blue eyes were genial and greatly humorous.

"So you're back with us, eh?" the sonorous voice boomed. "Well, you're welcome to this house. But, man, I'll bet you're sore—in more ways than one, eh?"

The effort of replying seemed prohibitive, and John Irons lay quiet, watching. The giant nodded in understanding and crossed the groaning floor to ease his tremendous bulk down upon a chair near the bed, overflowing it marvelously on every side.

"Well, Mr. Irons, I guess you're wonderin' how you got here, eh?" the trumpet voice blared, rattling the windows in their frames. "Well, when them heathens in town got done with you, they tied you to your saddle an' tin-canned your horse. Tied all the cans an' old buckets they could find to his tail, an' headed him up the homesteaders' lane. Shoved a curry comb under his tail, an' let 'im go!

"Talk about a racket!" the great buffalo head wagged in fresh wonderment, recalling it. "We thought they was a shivaree, else maybe the Sioux was up again. Then your horse pounded up, and we seen what it was. The horse was about run out, but we had to choke him down to get you off. I and Caro, that's my daughter, got you cleaned up and to bed. Then I rode into town to find out who you was, an' what was up."

"The horse hurt any?" John Irons inquired faintly, finding that even his tongue was sore.

The man-mountain shook his head. "Nothin' to fret yourself about. Run-down, and wire cut on the hind feet, but not bad. We rubbed him down last night, and put creolin on the cuts. He'll be ready to ride, b'fore you're ready to ride him."

John Irons mumbled a thanks. But the bearded giant waved those words away.

"It wasn't nothing. And besides, I expect it was me got you into that fracas. So don't thank me."

"*You* got me into it?"

The big man nodded. "I'm Black Johnson—pres'dent of the local Grange, and the man that asked McDade to send you up here. We wasn't lookin' for you today, or some of us would of been on hand. I expected Mark Meer would try to run you off, if he got a crack at you."

"If you're the man that sent for me," John Irons rumbled irately, "maybe you can tell me what this is all about."

"I can tell you, short an' sweet," the giant growled, the good humor draining out of him as he spoke, "Since the farmers won the last election an' voted their own candidates in to the county offices in Buffalo, Mark Meer's style has been cramped, and he's plumb sick of Johnson County. So he aims to saw off the south half an' set up a county of his own."

John Irons, always baffled by the devious intrigues of politics, did not immediately follow. "What's he expect to gain?"

The giant snorted eloquently. "Gain? Why Meer's cow range covers ninety per cent of this end of the county. Outside of Meer's cowhands, they ain't fifty families live south of the line he aims to draw. He's aimin' to turn his ranch into a county—with himself as the county board. Name his own sheriff, build his own jail, an' run the county like he runs his ranch. And if he gets away with it, why God help the rest of us that get caught in his trap!"

"Fifty families means a hundred votes at the inside," John Irons objected, "since the ladies got the vote. Mark Meer surely don't have a hundred riders. Why not let him set up his county, then beat him at the polls and name your own ticket?"

"Beat him at the polls—with Meer naming the election committee an' runnin' the show?" The giant's tone and expression withered Irons. "Know how many signatures Meer got on his petition to the gov'nor to have a new county created? Six hundred an' twelve—twice as many people as live in the whole area, countin' kids. And they wasn't a man outside of Meer's own crew that would sign!

"Meer's hired men signed their first and last names, then they signed their first and

middle names. Then they all signed again, spellin' their names backwards. Then they pulled a few more names out the air, an' tacked them on. The gov'nor authorized the election, on the basis of that petition, an' put Mark Meer in charge of it, as the petition asked. Then Mark sends for the county-splitter to come up an' take care the dee-tails!

"Hell, John, if Mark can get six hundred signatures out of fifty men, he's li'ble to come up with a thousan' votes—or ten thousan'—or how ever many he thinks it will take!"

The whole project sounded slightly fantastic to John Irons, political greenhorn. "It takes a lot of money to operate a county," he protested. "With Mark Meer the big landholder, and with only fifty other property owners in the county, all small scale, Meer would break himself payin' taxes to meet the county payroll—wouldn't he?"

Black Johnson shook his head. "That's the dope Mark Meer is putting out—that he'll be the big taxpayer an' support the county. An' Meer's a slippery damned liar! Mark Meer runs twenty thousan' head of cattle, but he don't own ten acres of deeded ground. He runs his cattle on the public domain—ground that belongs to me an' you as much as to him, an' stands the rest of us off it with guns. He don't pay no taxes, and he don't pay no rent. He wouldn't pay taxes in his new county setup. Us that own our ground, we'd pay the taxes. We'd finance the scheme he's dreamed up to crowd us off what little ground we got."

The giant fell silent, and gazed moodily for a moment at his big ham hands.

"That's what's behind the whole deal," he resumed gloomily. "He don't like us homesteaders in here on ground he's been usin' for nothing. Long as him and his crowd run the county, he could kill or scare the homesteaders out, without any risk to himself. But, since the farmers elected their own commission an' sheriff, in Buffalo, killin' homesteaders hasn't been so free an' easy as it used to be. So now he's tryin' another way.

"If he gets his county," he concluded, "his assessor will set taxes so high it'll break us, an' we can't pay. Then his sheriff will ride around and move us off our ground. The land will be put up for sale, but nobody will have any money to bid. So the ground will revert back to public domain—an' Mark Meer will use it for nothing again, like he does the rest of it.

"Pretty neat, ain't it?"

JOHN IRONS did not reply. But he was beginning to see why Oregon Rob was breaking a long-time rule and mixing up in politics. He was beginning to see why the Powder River farmers had sent for help, and why Meer and the county-splitter had gone to such lengths as they had to run him out of the country. Above all, he was beginning to appreciate the cold, calculating intelligence of the man he was bucking. The man who already had tarred and feathered him, and promised more if he showed up in Rimrock again.

He was roused out of his bleak rumination by the slamming of an unseen door and the sound of running feet. An instant later, a dark-haired, blue-eyed girl burst into the room. She was so pretty that the thought of her scraping the tar from his body and massaging his scalded skin with camphorated oil brought a blush to his face.

But the girl had no eye for him, just then. Her manner was urgent, and her worried gaze was for her father alone.

"Dad," she burst out breathlessly, "there are a dozen men coming across the meadow! They have guns and they're riding fast. They're heading this way!"

Black Johnson was on his feet in an instant, moving with a swift agile grace which was surprising in one so immense. He took one lingering look out the rear window, and reached down the old Winchester rifle that hung on the elkhorn rack above it.

"It's Mark Meer's bully boys," he said in a voice that was reassuring, by reason of its matter-of-fact calm. "They ride like they got something on their mind."

John Irons sat up in bed, unmindful of his cooked skin, that seemed to crack like wet paper with every move.

"You got another gun?" he demanded. "They kept both of mine."

The giant frowned at him, ready to order him back on the bed. But the rising sound of the hoofs outside changed his mind, and he spoke to his daughter, instead.

"Caro, get the pistols—just in case. Give

one to Irons, and keep the other yourself. They might mean mischief."

Sudden John had purposely kept his fists clenched during the ordeal in the cottonwoods out of Rimrock, and his palms were the only part of his body which had not been burned. The grips of the old Frontier Colts the girl handed him felt comfortable in his hand, and he drew himself up to the window beside his bed, to wait.

The wait was a short one. The drumming of hoofs grew louder, and the cavalcade arrived in front of the house, in a cloud of dust. The blowing horses were pulled to a sliding stop, and one of the troop reined his mount close to the cabin door, and kicked at it with his boot.

John Irons, peering through the curtained window, saw that the man who did the kicking carried a rifle across his pommel, the muzzle pointing squarely at the door.

"Better not open it," the detective called to the big farmer in a muted tone that would not reach the men outside. But Black Johnson was no man to hide behind a barred door, even when the odds against him were impossible. Holding his Winchester in one hand, he wrenched the door open with the other. The muzzle of his caller's gun almost touched his nose. But he ignored it and looked at the mounted man with defiance and contempt.

"When you knock at my door," he rumbled, "it's a good idea to use your fist. Unless you got business with me, it's a good idea not to knock at all."

The man on the horse had a pair of pale green eyes and a heavy lantern jaw that John Irons remembered seeing the night before. He grinned thinly at the farmer, and shifted the rifle across his pommel, so that the muzzle was centered exactly between Johnson's eyes. John Irons drew a bead on his heart and waited, watching the finger that casually touched the rifle's trigger. If that finger moved, its owner was a dead man.

"We've got business with you, Johnson," the horseman twanged in a voice as thin as his grin. "This here is the election committee, in charge of tomorrow's ballotin'. We only wanted to remind you farmers that no man's eligible to vote, without he's lived in the county five years."

Black Johnson stared a moment in silence. Then he spoke softly. "I get it. There ain't many farmers that will qualify. Ain't many of Meer's riders been here that long either, is they?"

"The committee will decide who votes," the other sneered. "We've already done decided about you. Unqualified voters who try to crash the polls will be dealt with, Johnson. Just givin' you a word to the wise."

The warning delivered, the lantern-jawed man turned his horse and rode away in the direction of the other farms up the river, followed by his bodyguard. Black Johnson stood in his doorway for what seemed a long time, staring after the dusty troop. When he turned, his dark eyes were somber. His heavy shoulders drooped.

"Well, there it is," he said bitterly. "Tomorrow's election. And they ain't even going to let us vote."

Sudden John Irons had recognized several faces in the cavalcade, and the sight of them had filled him with the poison of hate. He felt a vast impatience to be up and doing the thing he had to do. In a way, he was glad he had a personal score to settle with Meer and the county-splitter. That way, he would find it easier to take extreme measures when the showdown came. And, from the way things were shaping up, he expected that extreme measures would be required.

"If you could scare up something I could wear for clothes," he suggested, "there are a couple of things I'd get at."

The farmer shook his head, regretfully. "It's hard on us. And it'll be hard on you. But you ain't fit to get out o' bed."

"Round me up some clothes—unless you want me runnin' around, bare-back nek-kid!" the detective groused. "I'm a-going to vote in that election. And I've got some qualifyin' to do, in the meantime!"

Chapter III

DANCE OF DEATH

THE NEXT morning's sun, rising above the Powder River badlands, found the normally somnolent town of Rimrock an armed camp.

Black Johnson had called an emergency meeting of the Grange the night before, at John Irons' suggestion, and a plan of action

had been offered them. It was not easy for Sudden John to put himself forward as leader, while still incapacitated. But he did put himself forward, and—backed by Black Johnson's thundering persuasions—he had his way with the assembled farmers.

At dawn, the homesteaders assembled at Johnson's cabin. Since it was necessary that the women cast their votes, and since it was not thought advisable to leave the children at home alone, each man brought his family. At Johnson's place, those who had no wagon or rig doubled up with those who did, and the thirty-team caravan set out for Rimrock, escorted by twenty armed men on horseback.

Mark Meer, who'd spent the night in consultation with the county-splitter, saw the company coming, and sent a rider spurring toward his ranch to bring up reinforcements. By sunup, the farmers' wagons were rumbling down Rimrock's abbreviated Main Street, watched by thirty-odd cowhands who gawked at the imposing array from the hitching rails, their weapons conspicuous in the early light.

"Mark Meer don't want any shoot-out," John Irons told Black Johnson, just as he'd told the assembled farmers the night before. "That would focus too much attention on what he's trying to put over here. So I don't reckon the women and kids will be in any danger. But we'd better play it safe and camp a safe distance from town. The women can cast their votes, under escort, after we've made Meer see that we mean business."

Accordingly, the farmers' wagons rolled through town without stopping, and camp was pitched in the cottonwood bottom a quarter of a mile away—on the exact spot where John Irons had been tarred and feathered two nights before. The wagons were corraled, pioneer-fashion. The horses were hobbled out to graze, under guard. Fires were built and Dutch ovens heated to prepare an early lunch. A gala atmosphere prevailed as the womenfolk visited and gossiped and the younger children ran through the trees.

John Irons stood aside contemplating the scene. He had seen many similar scenes, at rodeos and county fairs and church picnics over the territory. The women were dressed, some elaborately, in clothes which were saved for special occasions—and therefore were mostly of quaint cut, bulging here and there where the wearer had grown larger or the dress smaller. There were little girls with hair braided so tight they could not shut their eyes. Little boys, scrubbed clean that morning, but already disheveled and wrinkled and covered with dust. Men with "iron" hats too small for their heads, and celluloid collars too big for their necks—threatening to burst out of their little-worn Sunday suits.

Saint Joe Roylance, bachelor and city slicker of the homestead settlement, had a fiddle and a jug of corn whiskey; and when the teams were taken care of the men began to congregate around Saint Joe's white-topped sparking buggy—ostensibly to hear and applaud the whiskey-flavored tunes that issued from the fiddle, but really to be on hand between tunes, when the jug was passed around.

It was a picture, generally, that appealed to John Irons' deep-rooted conviviality. But he knew it was no church picnic which occasioned the gathering, and he confiscated the jug, turning it over to the womenfolk for safekeeping.

"There'll be time to celebrate," he told the rebellious group, "when you have a reason for it. We don't want any these women to be widows tonight, if we can help it. And orphans have a tough go in a country like this. So lay off the jug and look to your guns. Pretty quick we'll go in and vote."

At that moment, Black Johnson drove up in his wagon from town, where he had stopped to scout the setup.

"The polls open in half an hour," he announced, climbing down from the high spring seat to stand huge and reassuring among them. "They're votin' in Jim Click's pool room, right next to Jed Pickett's saloon. Meer an' the county-splitter are runnin' the booths. Homer Hoy, Meer's foreman, is the doorkeeper. Meer's got thirty-five of his bully boys on hand, all of 'em packin' guns. Meer told me there would be a fight, if we-all tried to vote."

"I still don't reckon he'll try it—if we don't bluff out," John Irons opined. "From what I've heard of Meer, he's more likely to play it cute and try to outsmart us, not outfight us. Does this poolroom where they vote adjoin the saloon?"

"Same building," Black Johnson af-

firmed. "A door opens between them."

John Irons considered, and found the setup to his liking. "It don't hurt any to copper your bets before you put your money down," he said aloud. "I'll borrow your team, Johnson, and drive in now. I want to be on hand when the polls open. Rest of you men mosey down in half an hour. Leave the womenfolks here, with four or five men, just in case. They can all vote later. You that come first, come in a body, with guns. But string out, and act peaceable. We might put over a deal."

"You going alone?" Black Johnson demanded skeptically.

John Irons' gaze went over the crowd and came to rest on Caro Johnson, the giant's daughter. She wore a tight-fitting green velvet bodice that did justice to her in every way, and there was a saucy tilt to her bustle. Her blue eyes met his without wavering, and beneath their humorous sheen lay a disturbing challenge.

"I will take Caro with me," he announced.

"Caro?" Black Johnson looked thunderstruck, then stern. "Take Caro into that hornet's nest?"

"You ain't going to like it," the detective conceded. "Maybe Caro won't like it. Maybe she won't do it. But Mark Meer is going to crook this election, just as sure's I'm a foot high. And he's sharp enough that—with the county-splitter there to help him and show him the tricks—he'll do it in such a way we won't know anything about it, until it's too late. Our only chance is to plant a spy who can get around Meer's cowhands, and find out what's going on."

"Bu—but why Caro?"

"Because she's a woman," John Irons said, his eyes on the girl's, "and a pretty one. And women are not as plentiful on the cattle range as in your settlement. You or I or any man here couldn't get a word out of Meer's crew, except fighting words. Caro could hang around the bar, pretend to drink a little, and be friendly, and they'd give with all their secrets."

"Hang around the bar—Pretend to drink a little?"

Black Johnson's dark features turned blue. His hands balled into awesome fists.

"Not *my* daughter, Mr. Irons!"

But Sudden John was still watching the girl, seeing her blue eyes brighten.

"Unless I'm mistaken," he said, "Caro's of age and can decide for himself. Will you go, Caro, and maybe keep this valley fit for folks to live in?"

The girl's bright eyes left John Irons, passed quickly over her father, and looked over the crowd. Perhaps she was thinking of the lives she might save. Perhaps she was thinking of a memorable adventure, in company with a man whose name was a byword in her country. At any rate, she saw nothing but consent in the eyes of the other women present—women who normally would have frowned on such conduct, but who now saw it as the means, perhaps, of saving the lives of their men.

When she turned back, the spots of color in her cheek had deepened, and her head was held a little higher.

"I'll go," she said, and climbed up to the wagon's high spring seat.

Black Johnson fumed and puffed, fists clenching and unclenching, endlessly. But he sensed the will of the crowd and didn't force a showdown. His only word was for John Irons.

"I'm a-warning you, mister," he rumbled. "If she comes to harm, I'll break you in two with these hands!"

"If harm comes to her," John Irons promised, "I'll let you."

Then he climbed to the wagon, took up the reins, and headed the team toward town. Because sitting was too painful, he stood behind the seat, as he had done on the drive from the homestead that morning.

"You ever been in a saloon?" he asked the girl, shouting above the rumble of the dead-ex wagon.

Caro Johnson shook her head.

"Ever drank whiskey?"

The answer again was negative, and John Irons considered. "You don't need to drink it today," he told her at length. "You only need to make it look like you drink it—and act like a hussy. Can you act like a hussy?"

She looked up at him and smiled with gypsy impertinence. "Did you ever see a woman who couldn't?" she asked him. "It's when we're not hussies that we're acting. Or did you know?"

"You're acting now," John Irons told her gruffly, "and doin' a first-rate job. Keep it up, and you'll have all Meer's bully boys eatin' out of your hand!"

JOHN IRONS took a swing through the wooded bottoms so they would enter town from a different direction. He had counted on not being recognized, and after a moment's apprehension, he was certain that none of Meer's crewmen associated him with the stranger they had tarred and feathered two nights before.

Nor was there much about him to suggest the well-dressed, clean-shaven horseman they had found hog-tied in the cottonwoods, where the county-splitter had thrown him. His face was still a raw, boiled red from the tar, and—too tender yet to shave—it was covered by a three davs' growth of his fast-sprouting beard. His clothes he had borrowed from his elephantine host, and these misfitted his lean frame marvelously. The high-bibbed overalls were big as a tent; the blue flannel hung on him as on a scarecrow; the dusty felt hat rode low on his ears; the number thirteen shoes on his feet made him walk like a foundered horse.

He had inspected himself in the mirror before leaving the Johnson house, and had found himself a caricature of the rustic clodhopper. The cowhands whistled and hooted in ecstasy when he rolled the wagon down the street to pull up in front of the Pickett Bar. When he'd climbed awkwardly from the box and handed the girl down from the seat, a crowd was collecting, its grins poorly concealed.

"Where to, Timothy?" a freckled-faced youngster with a contagious smile demanded.

"By Grab," John Irons replied, removing the hay stem from his mouth, "I ain't ben to town in a dog's age. Before I cast my vote, I and my girl air goin' to have some fun. Ary dancehall in this town?"

"No dancehall, clodhopper," a voice said from the poolhall door, and the detective saw it was the lantern-jawed man who had called at the Johnson ranch the day before. "But here's dancin' music. *Dance!*"

As he spoke, Mark Meer's foreman pulled a pistol, and clipped the toe of the detective's oversize shoe with a .45 caliber slug. John Irons feigned fright, and grabbed Caro Johnson in his arms, and danced an ungainly dance there on the hollow walk in front of the Pickett Bar, with the pistol's slugs perforating the planks under his feet at every step.

When the jokester's pistol had emptied itself, John Irons released the girl, bowed to the applauding audience, and faced his tormentor.

"That warn't no fitting music tune for dancin'," he said querulously. "Street-dancin' music goes this-a-way."

The far-famed gunman produced a pistol from his pocket and fired so quickly that the lantern-jawed man had no chance to move before the heel of his boot had been clipped off, close to the sole. The other heel followed the first one, as the surprised foreman shifted his weight on his feet. And thereafter, until his gun was empty, Sudden John kept him lifting one foot, then the other, in flawless, measured cadence.

"That there is dance music, where I come from," he remarked, casually pocketing his pistol. Then he turned and put his arm around the girl's shoulders. "Come on, honey," he said. "We got some fun to have."

Leaving the wide-eyed crowd to stare after him, he escorted the girl into the bar, and called loudly for drinks. When they came, he tossed his own off and shielded the girl from the staring eyes up front, while she poured it in the sawdust at his feet. Then his eyes centered on a mounted elk head on the opposite wall, and he pulled his other pistol.

"It pesters me to have glass eyes a-watchin' while I'm drinkin'," he confided to the girl. In two shots, he knocked both eyes out of the elk head. Then he reloaded both guns, and turned toward the door.

"You wait here, honey," he said loudly. "I'm a-going to vote, an' tend to some affairs. An' don't make no eyes at the cowboys, on account you can't trust a one of 'em!"

He staggered slightly as he headed for the door. Behind him, he heard an awed voice whisper.

"Who *is* that gun-crazy galoot anyhow, ma'am?"

"That?" he heard Caro Johnson purr throatily. "Why! That's Goin' Jesse, from Whiskey Crick. An' I jus' love 'im! Only he ain't a real cowboy, like you-oo."

He smiled inwardly, knowing then that Caro Johnson would do her part. The rest was up to him. At the door, he stopped, picked up three empty beer bottles from a case against the wall, and carried them out-

side. On the sunlit walk, he halted, hurled them all high into the air at once, and broke them with three shots before they touched the ground.

It was cheap bravura, but it impressed the watching cowhands, and nobody came forward to compete. Once more he turned toward the pool room door, lurched forward a step, then halted, twirling his gun on his finger.

"I'm a-goin' in to vote," he declared flatly. "That all right with you?"

The lantern-jawed man shrugged. "That's what the polls are for."

"Then stand to one side!" John Irons commanded, thickly. "Git away from that door, an' down the street. It pesters me, seein' you stand there!"

Mark Meer's foreman hesitated a moment, his hand near his own gun. His eyes went to the men behind John Irons. But he found no offer of help there. He shrugged again and moved off slowly, waddling like a duck on his heel-shy boots. But he was green around the gills, and no matter how slowly he moved, he was running, and everyone present knew it.

John Irons stepped quickly inside the door, and quickly away from the door, planting his back against the wall. At a table just below a side window, Mark Meer and the county-splitter were seated, a large pasteboard box on the floor between them. Both looked at the gaunt scarecrow with extreme distaste. Then the county-splitter jerked erect.

"That's—that's—"

He choked and did not finish. But Mark Meer need not be told. He stared, then scrutinzed, and paled.

"You're a hard man to discourage, Irons," he commented thinly.

"If you mean that party you held for me the other night," John Irons said, "that only got me inter-ested in this affair. So much inter-ested that I've agreed to act as one of the judges of this here election."

Mark Meer sneered. "If you're thinking of using force to turn this voting your own way—"

"I don't aim to turn it one way or the other," the Association man said. "I only aim to see that it *is* an election. I'm going to sit here, and see that your hired men come in, one at a time, and vote—once each. I'm going to see that the farmers and their wives do the same. And if either of you boys try to leave the votin' precinct before these votes are counted, you got to convince me it's necessary."

The rancher and the politician looked at one another, then back at the man they had run off. The rancher's hands were out of sight below the table, and the county-splitter's right hand was inside his coat, where John Irons had seen the gun and knife. They were gauging him, and studying their chances of taking him, together.

"Try it, if it looks right," the detective invited them. "Make it easy on yourselves."

The pious-faced little politician seemed inclined to accept the invitation. But the rancher's thoughts plainly were more circumspect.

"Why, sit down, John Irons," he invited at length, the tension going out of him. "We're glad to have a third judge here—a disinter-ested party who will vouch that the voting is on the up and up!"

His eyes gleamed as he spoke, and John Irons knew then that his hunch was a good one. Mark Meer had another card to play before he called for showdown. That card

would be played behind John Irons' back, and he wouldn't know what card it was until it was down.

He wondered how Caro Johnson was doing in the bar, and listened for sounds from across the wall. Judging from what he could hear, she was doing well.

Chapter IV

BULLETS OR BALLOTS

THE ELECTION itself went off smoothly, without a hitch. Mark Meer heeded John Irons' instructions implicitly, regarding the voting of his crewmen. He called them in one at a time to cast their ballot, and no man attempted to vote twice.

When the farmers and their wives arrived, they followed the same procedure. According to John Irons' rough count, the proposal for a new county would fail by a top-heavy majority of around one hundred to thirty. But Mark Meer and the county-splitter continued cheerful, consulting in whispers from time to time. And when Homer Hoy, Meer's lantern-jawed foreman, came in to register his vote, the detective heard them whispering together, and saw Meer pass him a folded slip of paper.

John Irons was tempted to draw his gun again and demand the paper. But he knew he'd precipitate a shoot-out if he did, and a shoot-out was what he was working to avoid. So he decided to trust Caro Johnson and let the matter stand.

His faith was well placed. When Black Johnson appeared to mark his ballot, he caught the Association man's eye, and they held a whispered consultation of their own.

"I've talked to Caro," the Grange president reported. "She says they are fixing up another ballot box, identical to this one, in the back room of the bar. They have a bunch of ballots they were marking a while ago. Looks like they mean to substitute that box for this one, before the count."

John Irons did some rapid calculation. Once more, he saw the choice as between an open shoot-out between the factions, and a more crafty attack that would maybe beat Mark Meer at his own game. The latter appealed to his sense of the appropriate.

"Is the box under guard?"

The big granger nodded. "Homer Hoy himself is settin' by it, with a loaded gun."

John Irons scowled. "That makes it harder. But, somehow, we got to switch the boxes ourselves—an' let Mark switch 'em back. You reckon maybe Caro could distract Hoy long enough for you to get in the back way an' get that box around here to the window?"

"We kin try it," Black Johnson told him. "But how would we make the switch in here?"

"I would tend to that," the Association man promised. "Only thing is, Caro would have to hold Hoy long enough for you to get this box back in there without him knowin' there had been a trade, or we would outsmart ourselves."

"We kin try it," the granger repeated.

John Irons nodded. "Wait till dark. I'll see that window stays open, and I'll have the box where you can reach it, to make the trade. Give me a signal, and I'll create a fuss in here that will attract attention away from the window, while you take care your end of it."

Black Johnson murmured assent and turned to leave the hot pool room. Mark Meer and the county-splitter eyed him with only mild interest, and their bemused glances communed for a single savored instant, seeing that all the farmers' schemes were due to fall in the face of their own plan.

Food and drink was brought to the judges by their respective partisans, so that each could stay on the scene and watch the others. The votes were all cast before noon, and the long afternoon dragged. As evening neared, Meer and the county-splitter showed signs of restlessness. But John Irons understood that they too were waiting for darkness, so that neither suggested an early closing of the polls.

As dusk filled the room, John Irons professed a suspicion that the ballot box might be tampered with, sitting on the floor between his colleagues. He placed it upon the table near the window, in plain sight of them all, and seated himself upon the table near it.

The county-splitter called for a lamp. When it came—a huge brass affair, elaborately scrolled and graven—the gnome-like politician placed it on the table directly in front of his chair, lighted it, and looked at the Association man. The county-splitter was a shrewd judge of human nature, and

he knew that John Irons was not the kind to take the kind of treatment that had been handed him, without striking back. It bothered him because the detective had made no overt attempt to avenge the affair in the cottonwoods. He knew that something was brewing, and he didn't know what.

The county-splitter was like a chicken beset by a hawk. He knew that disaster was about to strike, but he didn't know from where. John Irons sensed his uneasiness, and was prepared to make capital of it, when the time came.

The politician had barely resumed his seat by the lighted lamp when the Association man heard a faint tapping on the wall outside the open window. He guessed it was Black Johnson, ready to switch the ballot boxes, and he yawned prodigiously, and stretched. One arm struck the heavy lamp, apparently by accident, toppling it from the table into the county-splitter's lap, plunging the little pool room into darkness.

The county-splitter came to his feet with an oath, juggling the hot lamp chimney in his pudgy hands. Mark Meer whirled from the outside door, through which he had been staring into the maturing night. John Irons reached him in two steps and confronted him squarely, blocking off his view of the window above the table. His gun was in his hand, and he shoved it against the rancher's stomach.

"Don't try any tricks, Mark Meer," he warned. "Don't touch that ballot box, or I'll drop you!"

The rancher swore dismally, and yelled for another light. When it came, John Irons pretended to be mollified, and put away his gun. The county-splitter at last had eased the hot glass cylinder which had burned his hands upon the table top, and was staring at the detective out of aggrieved eyes. John Irons looked at the ballot box, and caught his breath in apprehension.

BLACK JOHNSON had exchanged the boxes during the confusion, right enough. And the boxes were near enough alike that the switch would not be noticed. But, in his haste to get the substitute box in through the window and get away with the other, the granger had missed the table with it completely, and the box lay overturned on the floor. John Irons held his breath.

If the other two were at all suspicious of the disturbance the detective had created, the misplaced ballot box would be a dead give-away. But, so far as John Irons could tell, neither of the two had any such suspicions. The legitimate box, after all, held a clear-cut majority for the farmers, and the others saw no reason why the farmers would be tampering with a box that held their own victory.

At least, if either of the two held any such suspicions, he kept it well concealed. Mark Meer glanced at the county-splitter with lifted brows. The county-splitter nodded profoundly. And the rancher spoke.

"It's time the polls closed now. Let's make the count, and get it over with."

His eyes were on John Irons as he spoke. The Association man began to wonder if he had outsmarted himself.

"You want to make the count in here?"

The rancher shook his head. "We'll be more private, in the back room of the bar. There, we can have a little drink."

John Irons nodded his agreement, breathing a little easier. Mark Meer stepped to the door, and addressed the crowd outside.

"Men, the polls in this election have now closed. You have all of you seen that it has been an honest and fair election. The count will be just as fair. Black Johnson, name four of your farmer friends to serve as counting judges, along with yourself. I'll name five from my side. You ten men will come with us to the back room of the saloon, and witness the count. When it's all over with, we don't want no bellyachin' that the count was fixed. That arrangement suit everybody?"

A cheer from the crowded street gave him his answer. He nodded at the county-splitter, and the little politician picked up the ballot box, with a sidelong glance at John Irons. The Association man did not object, and the procession filed out of the pool room. Mark Meer led, with the lamp in his hand. The county-splitter followed, carrying the ballot box.

In the Pickett Bar, they were joined by the five farmers and five cowboys designated as witnesses to the counting. John Irons glanced at Black Johnson. The granger met his eye and nodded slightly.

Then the party proceeded back to enter the unlighted back room, where the genuine ballot box should be hidden, ready for the second switch of the evening.

Sure enough, just inside the door of the little back room, Mark Meer stumbled and cursed, and dropped the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. By the time he'd righted things and relighted the lamp, the box that held the actual vote was sitting on the gaming table in the center of the room, and John Irons knew that his little ruse had worked. In the instant's darkness, the county-splitter had traded the boxes again, and all was well.

"You witnesses rally around here and watch this count," the rancher said expansively, seating himself at the table in front of the box. "This election ain't going to please everybody, and we want everybody to know the count is on the level."

With his knife, the rancher ripped off the box's top. The county-splitter sat at his right, John Irons at his left, and the count began.

The first ten ballots showed three favoring the county, seven against. The rancher looked puzzled, and began to count faster.

By the time he'd reached twenty-five, the count was eight in favor, seventeen against. The rancher began to sweat, and raced on. At fifty, the tally was fifteen to thirty-five, against, and Mark Meer knew at last that something had gone wrong.

He stood up, wiped his forehead on his hand, and looked accusingly at the county-splitter. The gnome-like man looked baffled and harried, and did not speak. The rancher turned then on John Irons. John Irons found the moment satisfying, and permitted himself a little smile.

"Go on with the count, Mark," he said gently. "You got ten witnesses here, remember, to vouch that it's on the level."

"You've crooked us, you infernal meddler!" the rancher hissed, comprehension breaking over his puzzled face at last. "You switched the boxes on us!"

John Irons shrugged. "The county-splitter carried the box. If there was any trading, he did it. I had no chance. Go on with the count."

"Count, and be damned!" the rancher snarled. "You switched the boxes, back in the pool room! You knew we—"

Mark Meer stopped, aghast at what he had almost said. But he might as well have finished, since John Irons said it for him.

"You're just one hundred per cent, dead-level right, Mark," the Association man said softly, but loud enough for all to hear. "I knew that you had stuffed a ballot box that you aimed to substitute for the genuine article, ahead of the count. So I switched boxes first, and let you and the county-splitter trade them back again. I—"

"So you admit you traded the boxes!" the rancher cracked, triumphantly. "Then we'll throw this one out, and make the count from the other. And we'll have you up for trying to crook an election!"

John Irons looked unimpressed. "That's pretty weak, Mark. I've got a witness that saw you stuff the box to twist this election the right way. You're the one that's going up for crooking an election."

"It'll be your word against mine," the other snapped. "The time I'm through with you, you'll wish you'd rode away from here, while you had the chance!"

"The sheriff of Johnson County is a friend of mine," the Association man said honestly. "I reckon he will take my word, and the word of my witness, against yours. Besides, if there's any doubt which one of these boxes holds the vote, the election can be held over again—under the sheriff's supervision. I expect that would show which of us was trying to crook the deal."

The rancher opened his mouth, but closed it without saying anything. John Irons had played his trump, and the card was good. Mark Meer's play was busted.

THE RANCHER turned from the table, a defeated and whipped man. He strode toward the back door without looking to left or right. But he too still had a card to play. If John Irons and Black Johnson died, there in the back room, Mark Meer could still produce his stuffed ballot box for a count. He could tell his own story of the shooting, and the five farmers present likely would be too cowed to take the witness stand against him.

John Irons guessed what his enemy was thinking, guessed what was building up. And when Mark Meer pivoted at the door, his pistol in his hand and spouting blue flame, the Association man was ready. His own gun was drawn, and he dropped to his knees beside the table. The rancher's slugs

buzzed over his head, and John Irons dropped him with two closely placed slugs in the head.

The instant the rancher dropped, John Irons whirled on the county-splitter behind him, his gun poised for another shot. But the need for shooting was over. The rancher's bullets, passing over John Iron's head, had found the little politician behind him, still seated on his straight-backed chair.

The county-splitter was still on his chair when John Irons turned. His saintly face was gray with pain. One hand was pressed against his chest, close to the heart. When he removed the hand, it was stained with red, and he looked at it out of puzzled eyes —like a child which has been punished without explanation. Then he grunted and fell from the chair to the floor.

The legend of the county-splitter had come to an end. The man in the fable had fallen at last, victim of his own plotting, and the ballad-makers would now have to devise another verse, telling mournfully of his end—shot by a friend, in error.

John Irons stood and faced the cowboys present, smoking gun still in his hand. "It looks like you boys might be called on to witness more than just an election count tonight. What story you going to tell about this shooting?"

His eyes singled out Homer Hoy who could answer for the others, as well as for himself. Hoy's eyes flicked to Meer's body on the floor and touched the dead county-splitter before he spoke.

"Hell," he said, seeing the futility of saying anything else, "I'll tell the truth, Mark tried to kill you, an' got the county-splinter by mistake. You killed Mark in self-defense."

John Irons nodded and spoke gruffly. "Just remember to tell Red Angus the same, when he rides up here with the coroner to investigate—as he'll have to, bein' sheriff. Now, if everybody's ready, we'll go on and finish the vote count."

The final tally was one hundred and five to forty-one, against creation of a new county. Rimrock would remain in Johnson County, and the farmers received the news with jubilation. A celebration was planned to last the remainder of the night. But John Irons was restless.

"I ought to be drifting," he told Black Johnson. "And we ought to tell Red Angus what happened up here before he hears of it from another source. If you'll drive me in to Buffalo, I'll be obliged."

The granger went in search of his wagon and team, and John Irons' eye fell on Caro Johnson, who by now was looking somewhat frowsed and very pretty.

"You did a first class job of spyin', miss," he told her warmly. "It was you put this job over, and don't let 'em tell you anything else."

The girl was looking at him, but seemed to pay no attention to his words.

"They tell me you are leaving—tonight," she said, the challenge in her eyes again. John Irons nodded, and she made a small impulsive gesture with her hands.

"If you wouldn't mind," she said, blushing, "I would like to act like a hussy, for just another minute."

Then, before the Association man knew what she was about, she had come close and kissed him on the mouth, and was gone before he could touch her with his hands. He stood staring after her, feeling a transient but poignant stab of sadness and regret. Then a heavy step sounded beside him, and Black Johnson's voice spoke in his ear.

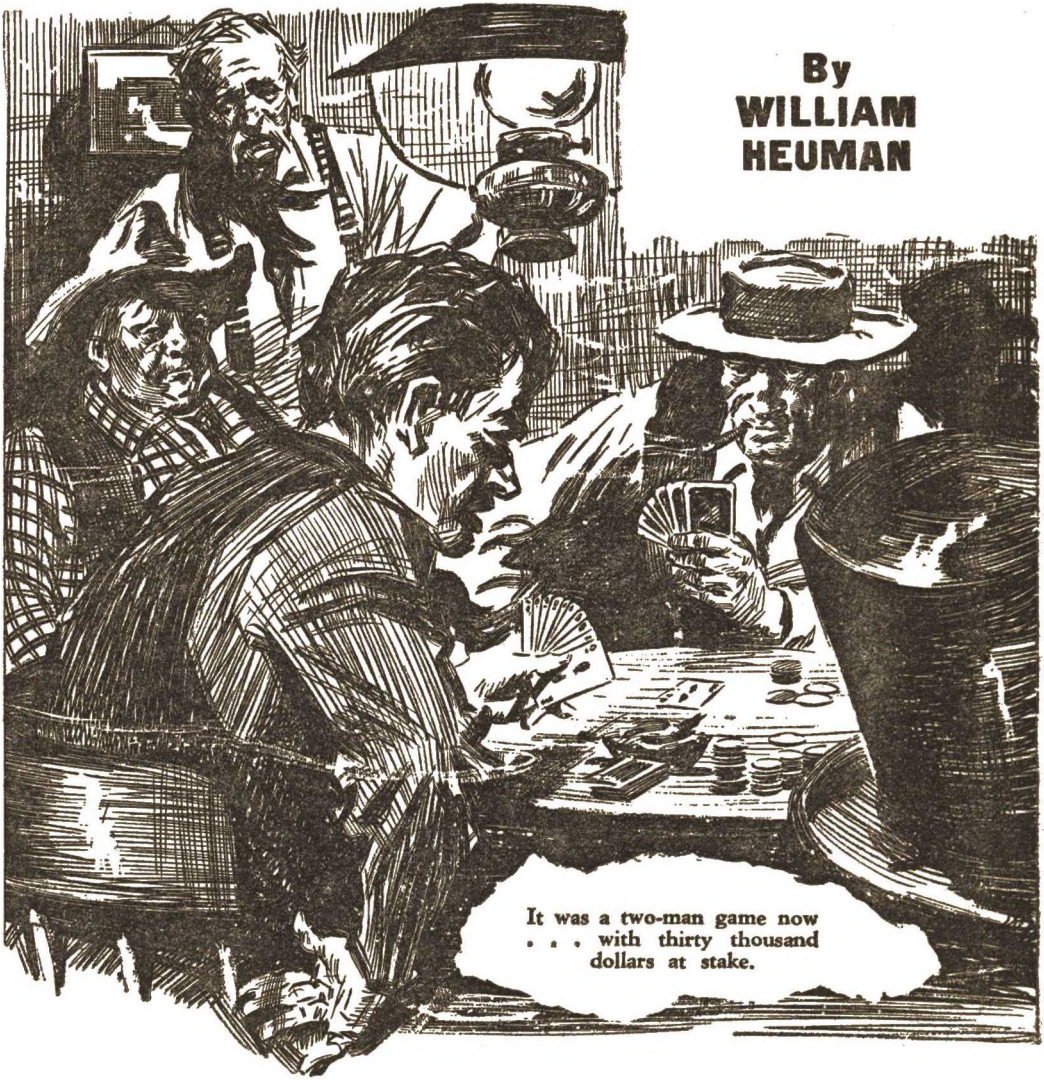
"My team's turned out to graze, and I can't find 'em in the dark. Looks like you will have to wait till tomorrow—or walk to Buffalo."

John Irons grinned, his eyes searching the crowd. "My mother weaned me on horseback," he said. "I never learned to walk!"

THE END

LUCK OF THE DAMNED

By WILLIAM HEUMAN



Con Featherly stacked the deck against himself to build up another man's chips. But a killer-boss and his hired gunman didn't trust such strange benevolence, and made their last bet on black sixes—with bullets wild!

LIKE BIRTH and like death, the luck came to a man once in a lifetime. He had it; he played the string for all it was worth, if he was a wise man, and then it was gone. No man had ever been able to explain it, but Con Featherly, professional gambler of Elder Creek, had seen it happen too often to mistake the symptoms. It was happening to him tonight as he stood before Smiling Sam Moran's green-topped faro table, and half a hundred breathless, sweating men were jammed around him, standing on chairs to see better, afraid to talk, to break the spell.

And then suddenly it was over. Smiling Sam, the perspiration standing in beads on

his forehead, snapped his gold-inlaid case box shut. He was still smiling, but his blue eyes were dead.

Outside on the porch a man shattered the silence which had held in the big gambling room for the past two hours. Con Featherly heard the yell, and he still didn't quite believe it.

"Con Featherly broke Smilin' Sam's faro bank!"

Men behind him were slapping his back, yelling as if part of this small fortune Con had won was going into their pockets. There was something contagious in this mystery of true luck. Like true love it had the power to make other men happy who witnessed it.

Smiling Sam Moran took a cigar from his coat pocket, bit off the end, and stuck it in his mouth. He was smiling still, and he'd just lost thirty thousand dollars. Near the end of it, Con Featherly, placing his bets unerringly, knowing tonight that he could not lose, had put as much as five thousand dollars on a single card.

"I believe," Sam Moran said softly, "that you should buy me a drink, Con."

"My pleasure," Con said. He turned away from the table, leaving his enormous pile of chips there to be picked up later. He pushed through the excited crowd, a slim, black-haired man, turning silver at the temples, black eyes, white, smooth-shaven face.

He didn't like the look in Smiling Sam's eyes. Moran was not the kind of man who liked to lose, which made him a poor gambler, and Con Featherly had always regarded him as such. The true professional lost like a true gentleman, and there was no ill-will accompanying the dust which left his pockets. Con Featherly had gone broke many times in the twenty years he'd been in the California, and now the Montana gold fields. He was thankful that never had he had the look in his eyes which marred the handsome features of Smiling Sam Moran.

"All drinks on me," Con said at the bar. He placed both hands on the wood and he stood there, looking into the mirror, listening to the noise all around him. He was thinking then of the farm back East, the chickens, the cows, the orchards, fertile soil which produced good things for men to eat. He didn't quite remember when he'd first started to think of the farm, but it went way back into his past; it had started at a time when the luck had been against him, at a time when he was weary of gambling and sweaty men with the lust of gold in their eyes.

He'd thought he would like to own a farm in the back country; he'd told himself that some day when he'd made his clean-up he would buy that farm and put away his cards for ever, but he'd never quite believed that it would happen.

Tonight, on the way down to the Opal Gambling House it had come to him very suddenly that he should buck Smiling Sam's faro game. Faro was not his game; very rarely had he ever placed a chip on a faro card. Ordinarily, at the Opal, he had his own card table where stud poker and seven-up were played. He'd left his table because the hunch still persisted, and no true gambler ignores a hunch.

Now Smiling Sam Moran's bank was cleaned; he, Con Featherly, had thirty thousand dollars, and the long-awaited farm, the retirement to the country, had become realities.

Smiling Sam lifted his glass, held it up to the light, admiring the amber color. He said,

"So you are a rich man, Featherly."

Con Featherly inclined his head slightly, a little smile on his thin face. He'd caught the note of envy, almost of hatred, in Sam Moran's voice, and he had his moment of contempt for this man who had broken others, but who, himself, lacked the fortitude to accept losses with equanimity.

More men were streaming into the Opal, having heard the startling news that Smiling Sam's faro bank had been broken. They came in to congratulate Con Featherly, whom they liked, at whose table they had won and lost money, whose game was regarded as the fairest in Elder Creek.

Con pushed through the crowd to retrieve his chips, cashed them at the bar, and then placed most of the money in Charlie Doyle's safe behind the bar. He was accepting Charlie's receipt when he spotted Nick Steele coming through the door, his face still battered and puffed from the beating he'd received at the hands of footpads the previous evening.

Every man in Elder Creek camp knew of Nick Steele, and held kindly feelings to-

ward him. Nick was very young, and Nick was in love. Men had seen the picture of the girl back East; Nick Steele had spoken of her reverently, and the rough gold camp had never jested coarsely as they would have referring to another match.

Nick had spent two years at the camp, making his pile so that he could return East and marry the girl who was waiting for him. Every one had watched Nick laboring at the almost worthless claims he'd held along the Creek. No man had worked harder than young Nick. He didn't drink and he didn't gamble, but he always had a song, and a glad smile for a man. Nick was the camp favorite, and the camp had been outraged the previous night when the news came out that Nick, who finally had acquired a few thousand dollars in dust, and was pulling out in the morning, had been set on by footpads and robbed of his poke.

Con Featherly had been in the crowd when Nick Steele regained consciousness after being carried into the Opal from the back alley where the beating and the robbery had taken place. He'd seen the despair in the boy's dark eyes when he learned that his money belt was gone, that his two years effort in the camp, all the backbreaking labor had been in vain.

Men had combed the camp that night to ferret out the thieves, but nothing had come of it, and Nick Steele sat at a table in the Opal, broken up inside, with the knowledge that he couldn't go home with nothing in his hands; that he'd have to wait, no one knew how long, before he could leave for the East, and his girl.

Con Featherly watched Nick walk over to the end of the bar and stand there, elbows on the wood, pushing his hands through his thick black hair. A bartender placed a drink in front of him, still handing them out on Con's invitation.

Nick Steele looked at the liquor, stared around, the dazed, beaten expression still on his face, which Con had seen last night, and then gulped down the drink. Con could see that he'd had a few others prior to this, and not being used to hard liquor, it was already showing on him.

CON walked over to him, placing a hand on the younger man's shoulder. He said quietly,

"How goes it, Nick?"

Nick Steele looked up with his flushed, brutally-battered face. He said slowly,

"All right, Mr. Featherly."

That was another thing everyone liked about Nick Steele, this respect he had for other men. In the two years Con had known him he'd always spoken to him as Mr. Featherly.

"Your luck is down, Nick," Con said. "Mine is up. It's a hard life for some." He was thinking that he had enough money in Charlie Doyle's safe to make up Nick Steele's losses and scarcely feel it, but he knew that Nick wouldn't accept money like that. The boy had his pride; other men in the camp had tried to help him when they heard his story of the girl waiting for him to come back with his pile. Nick had refused favors, politely, gently, thankful for the gestures. He wouldn't take money now.

"We wanted to buy a farm," Nick Steele was saying, "with chickens and cows. I wanted to get a horse and a plow."

Con Featherly took a cigar from his coat pocket, bit off the end, and inserted it between his even white teeth. He said,

"You're from the farm, Nick?"

"That's right," Nick Steele said miserably. "I should have stayed there. My father and mother, and Myra's father and mother put up the money to get me out here. We'd heard of men coming back loaded down with dust. We—we wanted our own farm. It took my father thirty years before he was able to own his. I didn't want to go through that."

Con nodded. He'd seen them for twenty years coming into the fields the fever in their eyes, thousands upon thousands of young men like Nick Steele, grubstaked by the folks back home who believed that the dust lay at the grassroots, and that anyone with a strong back could dig it up for the asking.

Nick had learned differently, but he'd been willing to work, and he'd had something to work for.

Instead of crawling back home with his hackneyed story of defeat and ill-luck, he'd stuck it out, digging up his five and ten dollars worth of dust a day, making it the slow way, saving it when he made it, taking over almost-worthless claims which other men had abandoned, re-working them,

adding to the little can-full of dust in his cabin. And then in one night it was gone, and with it some of Nick's heart.

"Figure on trying it again, Nick?" Con asked.

Nick Steele shook his head in bewilderment. "Haven't made any plans," he muttered. "I sold out my claim. Guess I'll have to look around for something else now."

Con Featherly leaned on the bar and looked at himself in the mirror. He'd known for some time that the Elder Creek camp was about played out. Experienced mining men with whom he had contact, had informed him of this fact, and many of them were already drifting to other goldfields. When Nick Steele learned this, he, too, would start to drift, and when he got the drifting habit, like the others, he would never go home.

Now Nick was still young, and he had something, someone to go back to, but he'd been hit terribly hard and that had had its effect. If the bad luck persisted, if he couldn't make out in other gold fields, he would become bitter, and he'd be ashamed to go home. After awhile home would become only a memory, something the argonauts tried to forget.

A man came over, slapped Con's back, and congratulated him on his luck. Con bought the man a drink, thanked him for his kindness, and then moved toward the door. He saw Smiling Sam Moran sitting at one of the card tables. Moran was shuffling cards, but his cold blue eyes were following Con as he pushed through the crowd, the eyes were following Con the way the eyes of a wolf follow its prey.

Con Featherly stood on the porch, smoking his cigar, listening to the sounds, the whir of the roulette wheel from the upstairs room of the Pioneer Gambling House directly across the street, the clink of glasses, the shuffle of dancing miners' feet from the Roseland Dance Hall down the street.

The night was cool, brisk, clear, as only the nights in the mountains are cool. Down the long, crooked, rutted single street of Elder Creek camp, its motley collection of log cabins, canvas tents, occasional frame buildings, Con Featherly heard the coarse sounds of men, the shouts, the drunken talk, the arguments, the singing, and high above this from the pine-covered slopes above Elder Creek, the sound of the night wind moving through the trees.

He was thinking rapidly now, trying to acclimate himself to this new condition of wealth. He did not have to go back inside to his table tonight, or any night. He did not have to depend upon the single turn of a card to show a profit for the evening.

He had his farm and all the things he'd longed for so many years.

He had a picture of himself sitting before a log fire on a winters' evening, listening to the crackle of the fire, and the wind outside, telling himself that he was very happy. At long last he had reached a state of security; he'd have his land which no one could take away from him; he had no more worries the remainder of his life.

And then he knew that he'd be thinking of these high mountain camps, listening for the sound of the wind in the tall pines, hearing the whir of the roulette wheel, and the clink of the glasses, the shouts, the songs, the coarse talk, the dancing feet. He'd be thinking of his table and the clean decks of cards which came to him each evening, the men who tried to break him and sometimes did when the luck was not with him. He would miss watching their faces, reading their minds, knowing the cards they held from the expressions which flitted across their faces. He would miss this because it had become part of him. He loved it, and this dream of the farm and the chickens was for a boy like Nick Steele and his girl. Only they weren't having it, possibly never would have it.

CON FEATHERLY threw away the half-smoked cigar and went back inside the Opal. Fat Charlie Doyle was hanging on the far corner of his bar, watching his customers, a stub of cigar clenched in his jaws, an expression of pleasure on his face. Charlie Doyle had been one of the first men into Elder Creek, along with Con Featherly. Charlie's games, and Charlie's gamblers, as far as he knew were honest, because Fat Charlie was honest himself.

Con moved over to the bar, pulling up beside Charlie Doyle. The fat man took the cigar from his mouth and said softly,

"Con, I'd be careful of Sam Moran with all that money."

"You have the money," Con reminded him.

"But I won't have it all the time," Charlie Doyle stated. "Smiling Sam didn't like to lose money like that to you, Con."

"No," Con said. "Now I'll hear what you have to say Charlie."

"I think," the fat man observed, "that Sam Moran's boys knocked down young Steele in the alley last night, just as they've knocked down other good miners and stripped them of their money belts. I think Moran built his bank that way."

Con Featherly rubbed his long fingers together. "I had wondered about that," he admitted. It had long been a source of mystery to the Elder Creek camp. Beatings, robberies and murders occurred constantly, with no one able to trace their origin. It was thought that someone well known in the camp had organized the footpads, but it was not known who.

"What's on your mind, Con?" Charlie Doyle asked.

Con glanced over to where Nick Steele was sitting at an empty table. He said,

"Take five hundred of my money, Charlie. Stake young Nick. Tell him you have a hunch he should plunge at my table, and that you're staking him to do it."

Charlie Doyle sucked on his cigar thoughtfully. He looked at Con, and then across at Nick Steele, sitting with his head bowed. Doyle said,

"You're a damned fool, Con."

"It's my money," Con reminded him.

"What about that farm?" Doyle asked. He was the one man in Elder Creek in whom Con Featherly had confided.

Con smiled wryly. "I thought about it, Charlie," he said. "It wouldn't work. I'd be sitting in my parlor, telling myself I should be happy, but I'd be thinking of you boys back here. I'd miss the games, the talk, the high mountains, the luck."

"I thought you would," Charlie Doyle nodded. "I could have told you that, but why throw this money away? Why not put it somewhere so that you'll have it when your luck changes? We've both seen too many washed-out gambling men."

"I'll take my chances," Con said. "What gambler ever worries about tomorrow?"

Charlie Doyle shrugged. "Five hundred?" he asked.

"Five hundred," Con said. He drifted away, moving eventually toward his own table which was reserved for him in the Opal. He sat down, and a boy came over and dropped a new deck of cards on the table. Con gave him a silver dollar, and the boy grinned his thanks.

Breaking the seal on the new package, Con slipped the cards out and placed them face down on the table. A waiter came over and said,

"How many chips, Mr. Featherly?"

"A thousand dollars," Con said. He wrote on a slip of paper, handed the paper to the waiter, and then leaned back in his chair. He watched the waiter give the paper to Charlie Doyle, and he saw the frown on Doyle's face as he went to his big safe, took out the dust, made the proper entry, and gave the waiter the chips.

A mining engineer by the name of Saunders, who had been in Elder Creek for several months, looking over possible claims which had been played out for placer mining, and were ready for heavy machinery, sat down at one of the three vacant seats, smiling as he took off his flat-crowned hat and placed it under his chair.

"I'll have some of that thirty thousand, Con," Saunders grinned. "Your luck can't hold all night. You know that."

Con shrugged. "When it's running, play it to the hilt," he said.

Hemmington, owner of the Pioneer Stage Line, took the next chair, and then Tom Blaine, editor of the Elder Creek Journal, filled out the table.

It was already past one o'clock in the evening, but the big gambling games in the Opal were only getting underway. Con Featherly, shuffling the cards absently, watched Charlie Doyle speaking with Nick Steele at the bar. He saw Steele turn around and look his way in bewilderment.

Hemmington, a small man with a golden moustache, said,

"Featherly, I'm buying you a drink first, and then I'm cleaning you out."

"I'm ripe for the plucking," Con smiled, and he knew that he wasn't. He still had the luck tonight. He could feel it; it was like something in his pocket. He couldn't lose tonight unless he desired to.

The first pot he drew three aces; the second he had a full house, kings high, and Hemmington was frowning, shaking his head.

"He's dealing from the bottom again," Hemmington growled in mock anger. "This

evening's game will surely end in gun play."

Con Featherly smiled at him. He was able to deal from the bottom; he was able to slip cards and pack a deck whenever he wanted to because he'd learned that in New Orleans from the smartest and smoothest operator who ever rode the Mississippi river boats. He'd never in his life made use of this knowledge except for the amusement of close friends.

In one hour Tom Blaine, the editor, had enough. Blaine dropped three hundred dollars, scowled at Con whose pile of chips was mounting steadily, and then dropped out of the game.

The vacant chair was filled by Nick Steele. Con Featherly's eyebrows lifted. Hemmington and Saunders were staring at the young man in astonishment.

"Hell, Nick!" Hemmington muttered. "What's this?"

"Thought I'd play a little cards," Steele told him. His face was white, and Con knew what was running through the young man's mind. Nick Steele saw a way to retrieve his losses. He was playing another man's hunch, with another man's money, but it was the long chance, and he was praying inwardly.

"Might be Nick's lucky night," Con observed. He shuffled the cards thoughtfully, and he shuffled honestly because Saunders and Hemmington were still in the game.

Nick Steele had beginners' luck. He drew three of a kind on the first deal, holding two cards, a pair, taking three. Con saw the young man's dark eyes light up. Nick Steele was trying to be impassive, trying hard not to reveal his hand, but he could not keep the light out of his eyes.

Con held a pair of red threes. He watched Nick Steel cautiously push three chips out to the center of the table. Saunders and Hemmington, experienced poker players, reading Nick's hand as easily as Con had, dropped out, having nothing. Con met Nick and raised him.

Nick Steele moistened his lips, looked at his cards for a long time, threw a quick glance at Con's face, saw nothing, and then hesitantly raised it again. Con met him. He heard Hemmington strike a match and light a cigar. He knew that Hemmington was watching him.

Doggedly, Nick stayed in, raising again, always small amounts, but there was a hundred dollars on the table when Nick finally showed up his three of a kind, aces.

Con looked at the aces, at Nick Steele's already hagard face, and then he threw his cards away. Young Steele blinked happily, and Hemmington slapped his shoulder jovially.

"Don't let him bluff you, Nick," he chuckled.

Hemmington won a small hand, and then Saunders won another small one. Nick Steele drew good cards with Saunders dealing. They were very good cards. A flush was on Nick's face; it showed in his eyes again for all to read.

Con studied the five cards Saunders had dealt him. He held a pair of black queens and a pair of tens. Thoughtfully, he discarded the two queens, retaining the pair of tens and the king of diamonds. He drew two more kings.

His face and eyes expressionless, Con Featherly folded the five pasteboards, closing them like a fan, holding them in his hand. He looked down at the chips on the table and he wondered at this, remembering

those nights when he couldn't draw anything, when the luck was the other way.

Saunders said, "You in, Con?"

Con shook his head. He tossed his cards across the table, face down, and sat back in the chair, smoking his cigar, watching Nick Steele win another nice pot with three jacks.

Hemmington growled, "Luck of the angels. I can't win against that."

At two-thirty in the morning Hemmington dropped out; at three o'clock Saunders quit, about eight hundred dollars out, with Nick Steele the big winner.

Con Featherly had watched his own pile of chips dwindle. He watched Nick Steele's flushed face as the boy drew hand after hand, and he continued to draw his own good cards and discard them, betting on his poor hands, losing steadily to Nick.

Charlie Doyle came over when Saunders got up. Quite a crowd was beginning to gather around the table. Doyle placed a hand on Nick Steele's shoulder, and the younger man didn't even seem to feel it. Doyle frowned at Con and went back to his bar.

A HALF hour later Con Featherly sent the waiter over with another scrawled note for money.

Nick Steele sat behind a large pile of chips, breathing heavily, hands trembling as he dealt the cards. It was a two man game now, with more spectators coming in all the time, and the almost unbelievable rumor spreading through the camp that young Nick Steele was taking over Con Featherly at Featherly's own table.

Smiling Sam Moran came in just as Nick won another large pot with two pair against Con's aces. Smiling Sam looked down at the chips in front of Nick Steele, already over four thousand dollars worth, more than Nick had had when he'd been rolled in the alley.

When Nick Steele's luck started to fail him, Con obligingly dealt him good hands, still throwing away the amazing cards he continued to draw himself. He was thinking placidly,

You'll want a good farm, Nick. You'll want cows and a blooded bull; you'll want sheep and horses. You don't want a big mortgage on your place so that you'll have to spend the rest of your life paying it off.

At four-thirty in the morning Nick Steele had twenty thousand dollars of Con's thirty, and he wanted to get out. He was afraid now, afraid that his luck would change and he would lose all this.

Every other game in the Opal had stopped, and the crowd was around this table, watching, humming with excitement every time Nick Steele turned up a good hand, commenting on his amazing luck.

Con Featherly dealt Nick Steele a red straight, and then bet heavily on his two pairs. He dropped two thousand dollars on this pot, and then he pushed back his chair, smiling blandly. He said,

"Congratulations, Nick. I've had enough."

He was willing to donate it all to the cause, but he was afraid young Steele would faint dead away before it was over.

"I—I hate to do this to you, Mr. Featherly," Nick Steele muttered. "May I buy you a drink, sir?"

"You may," Con said dryly. "I need one, Nick. It isn't every man in this camp who can win and lose a fortune in one evening."

He had his drink under the frowning eye of Charlie Doyle and then he went out. He stood on the porch for a few moments, breathing the night air, listening to the yells inside. Nick Steele was setting up drinks for the house.

The air was clear and cool. Up above the stars were thinning out, growing dim with approaching morning, but it was still dark.

Con Featherly strolled leisurely east along the main street, stepping carefully over the uneven board sidewalk. Passing a vacant lot, he slipped a small derringer from inside his coat pocket, examined the charges, and then put the gun back.

He turned down a small footpath which led down to Elder Creek a hundred feet below, babbling over stones, making another sound which Con Featherly loved to hear.

He passed cabins along here, darkened cabins, and he heard men snoring inside some of them. There were a dozen cabins along the Creek, and then a stretch of about fifty yards through the elders, before Nick Steele's cabin came into sight.

Con Featherly stepped in among the trees immediately after he left the last cabin behind. He stopped a few yards off the footpath through the woods and he leaned

against a tree, listening to the rustling of the leaves over his head, knowing that his good deed was not complete for this night.

He waited for nearly thirty minutes before he heard footsteps coming down the path, then he took the derringer from his pocket and waited. Light was coming into the sky, the certain grayness which preceded the dawn.

Con Featherly saw Nick Steele approaching, and he knew that Nick would be carrying his winnings with him. This day Nick Steele would be riding the stage out of Elder Creek forever. He would want to keep that money with him every moment until he was on the stage. Young Nick carried his whole future in the money belt around his waist, and he would entrust it to no one.

As Nick came into the woods, Con saw two men slip out from behind the last cabin along the Creek, and move after the young man cautiously, making no sounds as they came.

Nick Steele hurried along, undoubtedly aware of the fact that this stretch between the last cabin along the Creek and his own farther up, was the most dangerous portion of his journey from the Opal Gambling House.

He glanced back once, but the two men following him froze behind trees. They came on again when Nick continued along the path, coming up almost abreast of Con who was standing in the shadows.

The two men behind Nick suddenly came forward at a sharp run down the path, and they were within six feet of Nick, the man in the lead holding a short club in his hand, raising it above his head.

Con called sharply, "All right, Moran."

The man with the club stopped suddenly. Con watched the club drop to the path. He heard Smiling Sam Moran's muffled curse, and then he saw the gambler's right hand dart inside his coat.

Con fired when he saw the glint of metal in Moran's hand. Smiling Sam's gun cracked also, just before he collapsed into the path, left hand clutching at his chest where Con's slug had gone through.

Smiling Sam's bullet lifted Con's hat cleanly from his head, depositing it on the ground behind him. The man with Sam Moran turned and fled up the path as the stunned Nick Steele was trying to yank a

He saw the glint of metal in Moran's hand. . . .

gun from his belt and hit the running man.

Con Featherly turned calmly and picked up his hat. He was examining it in the faint light as he walked toward Nick Steele. He studied the two bullet holes where the slug had gone through. An inch or more lower and he'd have had a bullet through the skull. He was thinking that the luck was still with him.

Nick Steele's face was pale. He stood there in the path, feeling the money belt around his waist. He said,

"Is that you, Mr. Featherly?"

"That's right," Con told him. "I was heading over to John Hemsley's cabin across the Creek when I heard you coming up. I waited."

Nick Steele took a deep breath. "It was lucky for me that you waited," he said.

Con Featherly smiled. "I've been lucky all evening," he said softly.

"Now," Nick Steele said, puzzled, "I would think it had been the other way around, Mr. Featherly. You broke Moran's bank and then you lost most of your winnings to me."

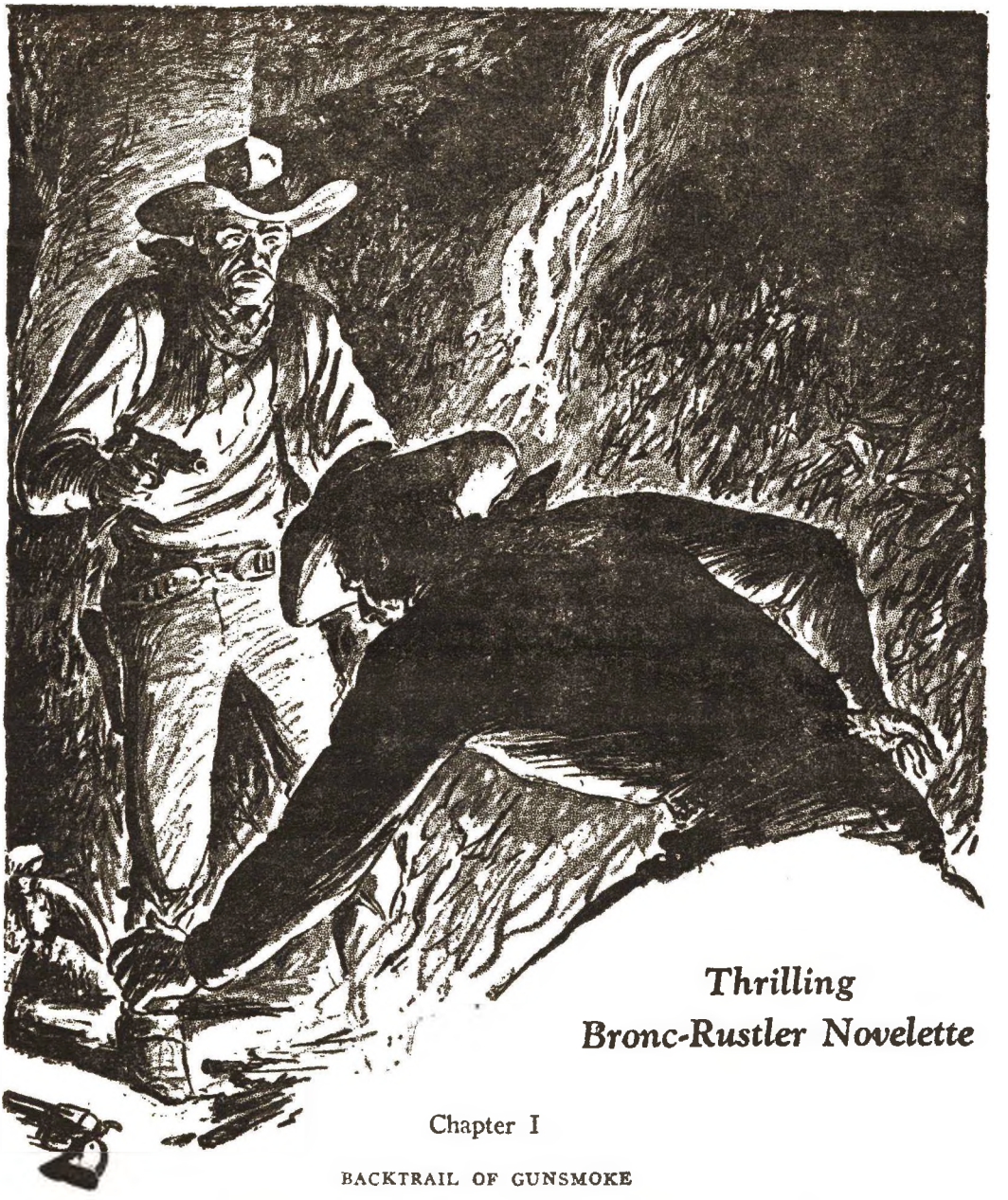
Con shrugged. "I'd have been unlucky all of my life if I'd taken your money, Nick. Believe me."

Nick Steele stared at him in bewilderment. Con Featherly slapped him lightly on his shoulder, smiled, and walked off through the woods. He went down along the Creek, walking through the trees, listening to the sound of moving water. He felt good; he felt happy.

HOSSES DON'T HAVE WINGS!

He hit him in the legs with his shoulders. The man fell sideways and his gun shot. . . .

It was a clean sweep for some smart bunch of horse-thieves when every head of Brett Callender's stock turned up missing . . . with Del Callender, renegade pistol-pilgrim, an odds-on bet to pay for those rustled mounts with a long rope and a very short prayer.



Thrilling Bronc-Rustler Novelette

Chapter I

BACKTRAIL OF GUNSMOKE

THE WILD BRONC was by Thunderbolt out of Satan. It crow-hopped, double-shuffled, crawfished. *Mount the forked lightning, ride the wild wind!*

The bronc squealed—pinwheeling, walking the beam, and then windmilling. It used up all the old tricks in the book, added some highly complicated variations, and even invented some new tricks of its own.

"Goddlemighty, Brett!" yelled Old Man Prentiss, from his perch atop the corral fence. "You aim to get yourself kilt?"

Brett Callender heard the words dimly but he didn't answer, for the very good reason that the world was spinning in

By WALLACE UMPHREY

tight circles and there was no breath left in his lean whang-leather body to make any words come out.

The big horse shrieked a mighty challenge. It clipped its front and hind legs together and lifted clear of the ground, only to hit again with spine-crashing force. It hit—and a split-second later Brett hit. And for the third time Brett ate gravel.

Agony thrust and probed along his spine. Blood trickled from his nose and mouth. The world was a blazing hell of nightmare colors. In a far-off corner of the bucking corral, the black bronc squealed and kicked its heels.

"He ain't worth it, Brett," Old Man Prentiss called out anxiously. "We already got twenty-nine of 'em broke. That's a-plenty!" He leaned too far out and his wire-thin body almost toppled off the fence. He looked at Brett and then shouted, "That hoss—he's mean and no-account like your damned brother!"

Brett sat up, his body one continuous ache. He decided to ignore Old Man Prentiss—the way he always did when the subject of Del Callender came up. He pushed his sandy hair out of his eyes and scowled. Nothing seemed broken—and that went for the spirit of the hoss, too. Brett sleeved the sweat and blood and dust out of his eyes.

"We was reachin' for thirty," he called out to the old man sitting on the fence. "I aim to make it that."

"Goddlemighty, don't be an idjit!"

Brett grinned with stiff lips. "I'll try once more, Hank."

Muttering to himself, Old Man Prentiss subsided, shifting his crippled leg to a more comfortable position. Arguing with a Callender was like trying to reason with a fence post, only worse. Brett's old man, who had been sheriff of Bellarmine until his death, had been the same way—stubborn and sentimental and always leaning over backward trying to be fair and square. Old Man Prentiss watched Brett climb stiffly to his feet and stalk the wild bronc. A fond grin came into his faded old eyes. Young Brett was the spit an' image of Sheriff Curt Callender.

Hank Prentiss figured he ought to know. He'd been Curt's deputy for a long time. Until Curt was killed by Curly Weaver, and he himself crippled for the rest of his natural life by a slug from Del Callender's gun. Brett claimed that folks were all wrong—that Del hadn't had anything to do with the Bellarmine bank robbery. But Old Man Prentiss was sure in his own mind. That mean, no-account brother of Brett's!

Brett hit leather again and the horse warped its backbone and hallelujahed all over the lot. Only grim determination and a case-hardened will kept Brett seated. The horse ran through the whole gamut of tricks again and somehow Brett remained stuck. The punishment was terrible.

And then it was over. Suddenly. Just like that. The bronc had played out its string and lost to the man. Its flat muscles quivering, the horse quieted. Head down, the blast of its nostrils eddied the dust.

Brett dismounted, half-falling out of the saddle. Old Man Prentiss limped over and caught him and helped him out of the pole corral. They went up to the small ranch house.

"A gallon of liniment and I'll be all right," Brett said. And then he added cheerfully, "That's thirty of the beauties for the army remount buyer—all up to specifications and then some." The thirty horses were worth a lot of money. "Hank, you think we ought to hire a couple of Nubians jest to set and scratch our backs while young damsels sing purty songs at us?"

"I think you oughta have your head examined!" shouted Old Man Prentiss. He looked down at the ground and added quietly, "We ain't got no liniment left."

Brett poked a finger into the old man's ribs. "What's eatin' on you, you old buzzard! Ain't thirty enough?"

"It ain't that and you know it!" Old Man Prentiss snapped. "It's jest that Banker Grew wants this ranch, and what he wants he gets. I ain't countin' no money until the aigs is hatched!" He helped Brett up to the porch and then said, "I'll ride into Bellarmine and fetch some liniment."

Brett sat down in the shade of the porch gallery, aware of every single ache and pain. Seemed as though a man just couldn't have so many bones and muscles. He thought about the thirty horses, and the thought should have made him feel

real good, only it didn't. Banker Jonas Grew wasn't a thought that could make anybody feel very happy.

He watched Old Man Prentiss ride out of the barn and he called out to him, "You danged old buzzard! You keep out of the Square Deal! I ain't fetchin' the wagon into Bellarmine to pack you home!"

THIS HORSE RANCH of Brett Callender's was one of the nicest spots in all of Wyoming. Jonas Grew had had his fat squeezed-up eyes on it for a long time. And what the fat banker wanted he usually got, one way or another. Brett was afraid of him and his shrewd, sly tricks. Slyness wasn't in Brett. His own way was straight-forward and honest, and shrewdness in a man left him feeling sort of empty inside. The fat banker held papers on the ranch and all he had to do was sit back on his big plump behind and wait for Brett to miss a payment and then he'd foreclose.

Only that threat didn't worry Brett much right now. Those thirty horses would pay off the note and buy winter feed and leave a small stake left over to boot. It was like going over a fence into a great big patch of clover.

It had been a grueling business but it was worth it. He and Old Man Prentiss had trapped the horses back in the hills, and Brett had uncorked and gentled every single one of them himself, since the old man was too old for such a business now and was crippled up besides. Brett had sworn that he'd gentle Satan himself, if need be, so he would own this ranch free and clear. Owning the ranch was worth it, all right.

A shadow fell across the hard-packed earth, and Brett swung his eyes up to see a man sneaking around the corner of the house. The man was big and broad-shouldered, badly in need of a shave and a haircut. His clothes were in tatters, his boots run down at the heel. Brett hadn't heard a horse, so that meant the man was afoot, and in this country that put a man pretty low. The only presentable thing about him was the six-shooter swinging at his hip.

Then Brett stood up, his aching muscles forgotten, and the breath went out of him for a second.

"Del!" he said, and he stood there telling himself it wasn't true. He said, "Del!" again, shaking his head as if it were a dream from which he'd wake up.

"Hullo, Brett," said the big man cheerfully. His grin was lazy and good-natured. "Seen Hank Prentiss riding away a bit ago." As an after-thought he added, "Damn him!" But the lazy grin still stayed in his eyes.

Brett said stiffly, "You promised never to come back."

"Now Brett!" said the big man. "Ain't that a hell of a way to talk to your own brother?"

"You know why, Del."

"A man gets a wild streak in him when he's young, and purty soon folks lay everything at his door." Del wasn't grinning now. A hurt look had come into his eyes. "Sure, Brett! I've gunned down every man who has got himself kilt in the last couple of years. I've robbed every express coach that's had its box lifted. I've rustled all the stock that's gone over the hill. That's what you believe, ain't it?"

Brett lifted a hand, let it fall, feeling a little helpless. His brother was a little like a dog that wants to be patted. Brett said, "No, Del, that ain't what I believe," and then paused, shading his eyes against the brassy sun and looking out at the horse corral, wanting to get a lift from the sight of those thirty beauties, but not getting it. It was like the sun had gone behind a cloud. A man had fat Jonas Grew to worry about and that was bad enough—but now here was Del turning up like a bad penny.

Brett shook his head and said, "I don't believe half the things folks have laid on you. Maybe I don't believe any of them. But you trailed with a wild bunch in the past and I figger you always will."

"You got me all wrong," Del said aggrieved, spreading his big hands and slowly shaking his blond head. "I got jobbed that time the bank in Bellarmine got robbed, and that's a fact. Just because I had a few drinks now and then with Curly Weaver and then he tried to stick up the bank—well, my Lord, it just looked like I was in with him! But you know damn well I wasn't!"

Brett didn't know damn well Del wasn't—but Brett wasn't sure. It was the

not being sure that was bad. If Del had been in on it, it wasn't because he was really dangerous. Del wasn't mean and no-account, the way Old Man Prentiss claimed. Del was just a might slow in latching onto things.

It was after the attempted bank robbery in which Curly Weaver had been killed that Del had promised to leave Bellarmine for good. In a way Brett was kind of glad that his paw was already dead when it happened—since paw was bound to die anyway from the slug Curly Weaver had put in his belly. Paw always set such a store by Del, who was his eldest son.

Sheriff Curt Callender and Curly Weaver had shot it out. The outlaw had been killed instantly, and the sheriff mortally wounded. And the sheriff died before he had a chance to learn that Del might be implicated.

Because Curly Weaver had had an accomplice. That was for sure—and Old Man Prentiss had a crippled leg to prove it. It wasn't Curly Weaver who had shot Prentiss. A lot of folks thought the accomplice had been Del, but they couldn't prove it. Del had a bad reputation, and that was why Brett had got him to promise to leave Bellarmine for good.

"Hell, Brett!" said Del righteously. "You don't think for a second I'd try to stick up the bank in the same town where Paw was the sheriff, do you?"

Brett said, "I just guess I ain't gonna answer that."

"Well, after that what could I do?" Del asked, self-pity strong in his voice. "Folks pulled down the shutters and barred the doors when they seen me comin'. A man don't like to be treated that-a-way. But the gents who ride the owlhoot—they always treated me real nice. What else could I do? Why wouldn't I string along with 'em?" He paused, his foot on the bottom step, staring up at his younger brother. "Hell, ain't that what you'd done in my place?"

That seemed like a fair question, and Brett guessed he'd maybe do the same. "Maw's dead," he said.

"I heard it, Brett. I kind of felt bad, not being here. Even though she always liked you the best."

Brett winced.

"She tell you anything afore she died?"

Brett felt a catch in his throat but he said, "Nary a thing, Del—that'd interest you."

"All I want is a chance, Brett," Del said, almost pleading.

Brett nodded. "I'll stake you to grub, a change of clothes, and all the money I can spare."

"That ain't what I mean, Brett! Gimme a job here with you. I'll show you!"

"Hank Prentiss would try to kill you if I did that!"

"Not if you put in for me. Folks'll listen to you, Brett. I'm tired of wanderin' around. Just gimme a chance, Brett, and I'll show you!"

Brett hesitated, but he knew he couldn't hold out. Paw had set such a store by Del, and paw judged men pretty well. And besides, Del was his own kin, his own flesh and blood, and a man didn't turn his back on his own brother.

"You can clean up inside, Del," Brett said.

The look of worry went out of Del's eyes, and his boots made tramping noises on the steps. "Thanks, Brett," Del said eagerly. "I'll sure as hell show you!" He headed for the door.

Brett called out suddenly, "Wait a minute, Del! I heard a rumor that you been trailing with Clint Foley's gang. Anything in it?"

Del said, "Not a thing to it, Brett!" And then he added, "You oughta know that!" as he went through the door. Brett sat down again and closed his eyes and tried to make out that everything was just the same as it had been before Del's arrival, only he knew it wasn't.

HE SAT there thinking, only half-hearing the sounds Del was making inside. Del was singing lustily, a song about a pore lonesome cowboy. Paw had always favored Del, while Maw had favored Brett. Del had always been a mite slow and paw was always square, and he leaned over backward trying to be fair with Del. Brett was Maw's favorite, maybe because he was the youngest and quickest, and that was probably why Paw leaned so far backward.

Maw hadn't really told him much before she died. She was sorry Del wasn't with her too, but maybe his going away was for

the best. Then she had asked Brett to make her a promise, and there wasn't anything else for him to do but agree.

"Don't ever live by killing," she had pleaded. "Your Paw was a lawman, living by violence, and he died that way. Don't you do it, Brett! Don't ever figure you have to kill to get along in the world! Just be gentle and kind and you won't be called upon to kill."

And Brett had said softly, "I promise."

He sat there now, thinking about it, and when Del came back outside he opened his eyes. Del's appearance was improved a lot, and Brett began thinking that things might work out.

In the distance a horse and rider was coming toward them and Brett said, "Best go back in the house, Del. I reckon it's Hank Prentiss—and I better break it to him gentle. I'll have to talk fast to ever convince him I'm doin' the right thing!"

Del said, "Whatever you say, Brett!" and disappeared inside the house.

Old Man Prentiss put away his horse and then stamped up to the gallery. "Here's the liniment," he said, handing Brett a package all wrapped up in brown paper. And right away Brett could see that the old man was mad as blazes about something, the way he puffed and hopped around.

"Goddlemighty, Brett!" Old Man Prentiss sputtered. "That damn Jonas Grew!"

"Set down afore you bust a gut," Brett said, grinning. And then he asked, "What's he done now?"

"Huh!" Old Man Prentiss said. "Jonas Grew—he's been writin' letters and such to Major Hennessey. That's what he's done! He even went to talk to him personal once. I figger he's been rubbin' the major's back until Hennessey's purrin' like a kitty!"

"Is that bad?" asked Brett.

"Is that bad!" Prentiss sputtered. "You wait! Jonas Grew has been peddlin' a pack of lies about you in his sly way. 'Bout how you are just a fly-by-night. And your brother is a damn outlaw. And how you don't know beans about uncorking a wild bronc. Says all your hosses are either meaner'n sin or got their spirit broke! I hear it that Major Hennessey ain't even gonna look you up when he hits these parts!"

Brett stood up, his hands clenched and his skin stretching white and tight across his cheekbones. "Jonas Grew can't do that! It'd ruin me!"

Old Man Prentiss laughed in sadistic glee. "Mebbe he can't do it—but he already has! You ketch on, Brett! The army won't take none of your hosses—and Jonas Grew takes the ranch." He stopped chuckling and kicked the roof-post again. "If'n I'd had a gun I'd have marched into the bank and gut-shot Jonas Grew where he sat!"

Brett sat down again, as if all the wind had been kicked out of his belly by a skittish bronc.

"What you aimin' to do?" asked Old Man Prentiss.

"Nothin' now," Brett said. "What can I do? When Hennessey gets to town I'll palaver with him. I reckon he'll listen to reason—"

"You don't know Jonas Grew. Nor Major Hennessey, neither! I'd get me a gun and ride into Bellarmine."

Brett said, "No," but not wanting to say it. Wanting instead to beat the head off the fat banker. "No," he said again, as if trying to convince even himself this

time, but thinking all along of the promise he had made his mother.

And Old Man Prentiss knew about the promise and he said, "You tromp on a sidewinder, don't you? You shoot a mad dog, don't you? This ain't what your Maw was talking against."

But Brett only shook his head. And he was holding his hands tightly in his lap because they were shaking so much. "I'll talk some sense into Major Hennessey's head," he said, then changed the subject. "Hank—Del's here."

"That skunk!" yelled the old man, his face looking like a purple sunset. "I'm gettin' my gun right now! That lily-livered, no-account son!"

Brett grabbed him and held him fast, and the old man was so small and thin that he was no harder to hold than a feather pillow. He had always seemed as close to Brett as Paw had been. Brett told him how he reckoned Del deserved a break and maybe they'd all misjudged him. Old Man Prentiss was hard to convince, but he finally simmered down and listened to reason.

"I figger you're all wrong," said the old man finally. "But that's your business. I won't lay a hand on the skunk." That could have been funny, coming from such a little shrimp of a man, but Hank Prentiss had been a tough gent to buck in his day, and still was. "You got to get things figgered out for yourself, Brett—jest like this busniess with Jonas Grew. And I reckon you're bound to learn the hard way." And then he added darkly, "If you see me goin' around here holdin' my nose, you'll know why!"

Chapter II

BLOOD-RED TAPE!

THE NEXT couple of days weren't too bad. Some of the stiffness went out of Brett's muscles, even though the bruises were still there, and he spent most of his time throwing a saddle on his thirty horses, or just leading them around, or brushing them until they shone. And Del was a big help. He was anxious to please and he knew horses and he had a way with them. It surprised Brett some, how gentle his elder brother could be.

Old Man Prentiss sat there on the corral fence, chewing a straw and glowering in silence. The old man didn't have a forgiving nature. He remembered that time the Bellarmine bank was almost robbed, and it seemed like it happened just last night. If he were sure in his own mind that it had been Del who had shot him—well, he'd start foggin' right now!

He'd taken to packing his old Frontier Colt again, and finally Brett began packing iron too. Brett kept his eyes peeled for trouble and his fingers crossed. But nothing happened.

Early the third day, just at breakast, Old Man Prentiss came out of the kitchen and announced, "We got pixies in the root cellar." That didn't make sense and Brett looked surprised, but Del flushed and stared down at his empty plate. The old man grinned without much humor and said, "Food is jest plumb disappearin' into thin air."

"Del ain't been eatin' too well for a long time," Brett told him. "Mebbeso he's hongry."

"That's it, Brett!" Del gulped. "I'm jest like an old black b'ar coming outa his cave come spring."

Old Man Prentiss said, "Even Del can't eat enough for four gents," and went back into the kitchen again, giving Brett a knowing look.

Brett worried about it for the rest of the day. That night he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to keep awake. Time passed and all was quiet, and he relaxed a little, thinking maybe he had figured things out wrong. That made him feel better.

Then he heard stealthy movement and he knew Del was creeping outside. Brett threw off his blanket and followed.

Del sneaked into the root cellar and came out with a bundle of canned goods and stuff, tied up in a piece of tarp. He saddled a horse and rode away in the moonlight toward the hills. It was easy for Brett to follow. After a while Del stopped beside a big jagged stump which had been left when a tree got struck by lightning, and put the bundle inside the stump and then turned and rode back to the ranch. When he passed Brett's hiding place, Brett could hear him whistling.

Some ways Del was like a child. Not that he was dull-witted or anything. He just wasn't able to look ahead very far, and so there was never anything to worry him much.

After Del was out of sight, Brett came out into the open and rode up to the stump. The bundle of food was inside, all right. He left it there and dismounted and cut for signs. Finally he found the remains of two recent campfires. The signs told him that at least two, and maybe three men had paused here to eat. Brett returned to his horse and stepped across the saddle and circled back to the ranch.

Both Del and Old Man Prentiss were snoring when he slipped quietly back to bed. He wasn't sleepy now, and he twisted and turned, wondering what in hell to do about Del now. Maybe it was Clint Foley and his gang hid out there in the brush. If so, it was Brett's duty to notify the law. But if he did that, Del would be involved. He had promised Del a chance, and all this was only guess-work anyway.

And besides Del was his kin, and a man didn't turn his own brother over to the law unless he were dead sure in his own mind of all the answers. Maybe it wasn't Clint Foley's gang at all. Del always had had a lot of run-down friends.

The next morning Brett learned that Major Hennessey was in Bellarmine buying remounts for the army. It was Dan Lackman who told him, stopping in for a spell on his way home from town. Dan Lackman was pretty friendly like always, until he caught sight of Del. Then Lackman clammed up and left in a powerful hurry. And instead of going home, he headed back toward town again.

"Folks ain't gonna like it," said Old Man Prentiss, "when they hear you're puttin' up Del."

"It ain't none of their business," Brett told him.

"There's some might think so, Brett."

"It ain't all Del's fault!" Brett yelled in exasperation, a little surprised at the defense of his brother. "Del picked himself up a bad rep, and folks just kept addin' to it. None of it's true."

Old Man Prentiss said, "That's what he'd likely tell you."

Brett knew it wasn't any use arguing. He decided to ride into Bellarmine himself and try to undo some of the damaging lies fat Jonas Grew had planted in the major's head. He was saddling up when Del ambled over.

"Reckon I'll ride into town with you," Del said.

Brett shook his head and said quietly, "So it's Clint Foley up in the hills."

Del looked shocked and said, "Huh?" and all the time he was twisting his fingers together.

"How many men with him?"

"Don't get you, Brett."

"Three of 'em altogether, I reckon," Brett told him.

Del said, "huh" a couple of more times, not looking at Brett. He acted like a small boy trying to worm out of something. Then he said in a too-loud tone, "What in hell you talkin' about? Lordy, Brett, you must be tetched by the sun!"

Old Man Prentiss had hobbled over and he was looking hard at Del. "Yeah, Brett's tetched. I always claimed he was an idjit."

"I'm bringin' Hennessey out here if I have to hogtie him and swing for kidnapping!" Brett sounded pretty mad. "He's gonna look at my hosses if it's the last thing he ever does!" He swung up and then leaned over and said, "You, Hank and Del! Take care of them thirty beauties like they are made of gold!"

BRETT rode away. He was a quarter of a mile down the road, when he heard the sound of a horse galloping behind him. He reined in and waited for Del to catch up.

Del was grinning. "Hey, Brett! Thought I told you I was ridin' into town with you."

"You ain't," Brett said firmly. "Dan Lackman has already spread the news you're back in the valley. You want a lynch mob to string you up?"

"Now Brett!" Del said, grinning. "You know folks wouldn't do that to me. Once they learn you're giving me a chance, they'll let me be."

"You just high-tail it back to the ranch, Del! I got business in Bellarmine and I don't want you messing it up."

"I'll keep out of your way, Brett."

"Hank'll need some help at the ranch."

"Can't you think of no better reasons?" Del asked. "He don't need no help. Not him! Brett, lemme go with you!"

"Why are you so all-fired anxious to get into town?" Brett asked.

Del was still grinning, but only with his lips now. His eyes were pleading in earnest, and there was a look in them that Brett couldn't quite make out. Del's eyes were like the sad brown eyes of an old hound dog. It had always been hard to say no to him.

"Look at it my way, Brett," Del said earnestly. "I got a mighty sorry rep around here. Folks may expect me to hide in the shadow of your coat-tail. Now if they see me out on my own, not scared and devil-be-damned they'll change their ideas about me. You know how they've hung so much on me that ain't true!"

Brett hesitated. There was a lot of truth in what Del had just told him. Brett didn't want the prospect of any additional trouble in Bellarmine—not when he had both Jonas Grew and Major Hennessey to worry about. But maybe Del was right. Hank could take care of things at the ranch all right.

Del watched Brett out of his shadowed eyes, and Brett still couldn't make out the look but he forgot about it.

"Now you stay out of trouble!" he warned.

And Del said cheerfully, "You bet, Brett!"

Brett left Del at the edge of town, with another warning about keeping out of trouble, and then rode on to the Traveller's Rest. He tied his horse at the chewed hitch rack and went inside. The major was in town all right, but not at the hotel now. Brett went down to the Square Deal and pushed inside, and Major Hennessey was at the bar having a drink.

The sight of the major's stiff, military back made Brett recall the lies Jonas Grew had slyly peddled and which Hennessey had believed. Worry about the fat banker and the major and Del—it was more than a man could stand. Brett forgot how he'd figured on winning over the major with cold facts and honest forthrightness.

"You, Hennessey!" Brett yelled.

His face cold, Major Hennessey turned slowly. "Do I know you, sir?" he asked. He was a tall, spare, beak-nosed man, a firm believer in the eternal verities and the sanctity of the United States Army.

"I'm Brett Callender," Brett told him. "Don't you believe all them lies Jonas Grew has been pumpin' into you, because they ain't true! I got me thirty of the nicest hosses in all Wyoming!"

"I'm afraid I'm not interested," said the major coolly. "I'm a busy man and I trust Jonas Grew."

"You need good hosses, don't you?"

"Good horses—yes. But I'm afraid you don't have them."

Brett yelled, "Jonas Grew is a lyin' snake!"

Major Hennessey said, "I'm not interested in Mister Grew's antecedents." His eyes still cold and remote, he turned back to the bar. Brett angrily grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. The major, without lifting his voice, said, "Rutkowski, Jones."

Brett felt himself jerked backward by two troopers who had been drinking nearby. For a second he raged, helpless in the grip of the two men. Then he heard Del's voice saying, "Shall we take 'em apart, Brett? Just give the word."

The anger washed out of Brett as swiftly as it had come. He turned his head to look at Del. Del was standing a few feet away, grinning. Brett began feeling a little ashamed of his anger. That would be the way Del reacted to a situation, and it wasn't Brett's way.

Brett said, "Skip it, Del. Go have another drink." Del returned to the end of the bar and Brett said soberly to the major, "I'm sorry, sir. Mebbe my approach was wrong. But I figger you're a square-shooter. The least you can do is come out to my ranch and look over what I got."

"Jones, Rutkowski—at ease." Brett felt his arms freed. A faint smile touched the major's lips, but then the stiffness came back again. "I'm a busy man, Callender. My itinerary has already been laid out. I leave Bellarmine in an hour for a swing south—not enough time to look over your stuff." He shook his head, and all the red-tape from Bellarmine to Washington, D. C. waved gently in the breeze.

Brett felt helpless, not knowing what to do or say now. The major's indifference was like a wall against him. The voice of the bartender lifted in the silence.

"You, Del Callender!" the bartender howled. "I ain't servin' no more drinks to an outlaw! Clint Foley's gang is in these

parts, and I'm bettin' you're one of 'em!"

Brett turned, but Del shook his head. Del was grinning. "It's all right, Brett," Del said. "I got business elsewhere, anyway." He went past, winking, and out to the street.

"But can't you see? Brett turned back to Major Hennessey. "If you don't buy my hosses—Jonas Grew'll take my ranch!"

"I'm sorry," the major said. "What you fail to realize is the bigness of the army. Everything must be done on schedule. People are unimportant compared to the army."

Brett felt all the red-tape of Major Hennessey's army tangled around him. But he was damned if he'd see his ranch lost like this! Maybe a man had to fight for some of the things he wanted in life. Hell, even Del's way was better than this! Bright anger again leaped into his eyes.

The two troopers alerted again, but Brett shook his head at them.

"All right! So you won't come out to look at my hosses," Brett said to the major. "Will you walk down to the bank with me and listen to me talk to Jonas Grew to his face?"

"Do you expect him to admit he lied about you?"

Brett yelled, "I'll beat in his head if he don't!"

Major Hennessey's eyes frosted. He said obliquely, "I make a swing through Bellarmine every year buying remounts." That was supposed to tell Brett something, but it didn't. The major's whole face was ice-caked now.

"I'll lay my gun between Jonas Grew's ears until he hollers calf-rope!" Brett raged.

"That's enough of a word-picture," said the major dryly. He consulted a big engraved watch. "I can give you a few minutes, Callender." He put his watch away and added, "This may prove interesting." He spoke to the two troopers and then he and Brett went out.

THEY walked down the street together in silence. Brett felt his anger slipping away again, and he tried to snub it with the thought of fat Jonas Grew sitting in his groaning swivel chair like a spider waiting for its prey. But his anger went out of him in direct proportion to their nearness to the bank. But he walked on ahead anyway.

He tried to forget his promise to maw, but he couldn't. She was right. A man had to fight for what he wanted, but maybe there were ways other than violence. Brett was a simple man, no match for the wily Jonas Grew, but just the same he couldn't go in and beat up the fat banker and expect any good to come of it.

They had reached the bank now, and Brett paused. His shoulders drooped. Then he shrugged and turned to Major Hennessey, who was watching him thoughtfully, the ice still in his face.

"Can't do it," Brett said.

"What do you mean?"

"It ain't my way. I can't beat up a man like Jonas Grew, just because he spread lies about me."

Major Hennessey thawed a little. "Have you ever thought of just talking to him?"

"He's too slick. Got me beat every way from Sunday."

The major said, "Maybe you're right, Callender. I was curious to see how this would come out."

There was a sudden commotion inside the bank, and both Brett and the major jerked up their heads. The fat banker's scared voice rushed out at them.

"You let me be, Del Callender!" Jonas Grew was yelling. "You are an outlaw and I'll have the law on you for this!"

Brett rushed inside. Del had Jonas Grew's arm and the banker was down on his knees, blubbering a little, and Del was leaning over him and giving the arm a little extra twist.

"Lissen to him yell," Del said to Brett.

Brett plowed through the knee-high wooden gate and pulled Dell off and said, "Now that ain't no way to do, Del. Now what did I tell you about keepin' your nose outa my business?"

"Well, hell," said Del in an injured tone. "You was having some trouble down at the Square Deal convincin' the major here, and I was just tryin' to help you out."

Fat Jonas Grew heaved his vast bulk upward and fell into his swivel chair. "Major Hennessey!" he called out, looking past Brett and Del. "Del Callender is a dangerous outlaw. I guess his brother is just as ornery. Peas out of the same pod!"

Del strained forward, but Brett held him.

He led Del outside and fat Jonas Grew screamed imprecations after them. Major Hennessey joined them on the walk.

"You know, Callender," the major said to Brett, "I wouldn't be surprised if your horses were just what I want." He was looking at Brett, and all the frost was gone from his face.

"But Jonas Grew didn't admit nothin'!" Brett said.

"I feel I can judge a man as well as the next, Callender. And I feel a gentle horse doesn't come from the hands of a violent man." Automatically he reached for his watch, then changed his mind. "To hell with my schedule! The army needs good horses. I'll stay in Bellarmine another day, and come out and look at what you've got first thing in the morning."

Coming from the major, all tied up with red-tape, that was something. It was like Major Hennessey had offered Brett his right arm from the elbow down.

Brett thanked him, and then walked back to the Traveller's Rest, knowing that when the major saw those thirty beauties he'd really be sold on them. Then he remembered what the major had said about making a swing through Bellarmine every year, and Brett sweated a little. He'd come pretty close to getting the major so down on him that he'd never have been able to sell a horse to the army so long as the major was alive.

Feeling pretty lucky all around, Brett got his horse from the chewed hitch rack and met Del at the edge of town.

"It went good, Brett," Del said. "Except for the bartender at the Square Deal, folks treated me mighty nice. When they saw I wasn't scared, nor trying to hide, nor nothin', they were all right. I'll pick me up a good rep yet."

They rode on to the ranch. When they got fairly close, Del started holding back and Brett had to urge him forward. And Brett could see that the big shadow in Del's eyes was back now, stronger than ever.

Chapter III

JACKPOT PLAY

RIGHT AWAY, when they turned into the ranch, Brett knew something was wrong. Everything was too quiet. Brett looked toward the ranch house and could see no movement. Then he glanced toward the horse corral and he almost came unstuck. The corral was empty!

"They're gone," Brett whispered, choking.

Del said, "Huh?" like an idiot, and Brett turned on him.

"You ain't that much of an idjit!" he yelled.

Del flushed, but didn't say anything more right then, and he rode over to inspect the corral. "They musta just busted out," Del said. "See how the poles are all broken to hell?"

"They was stolen and you know it," Brett got out, his voice low now because of the anger that knotted his stomach and put a big ache in his throat. Major Hennessey would be out first thing in the morning, and the major would sure be mad when Brett had nothing to show him. Then Brett yelled, "Hank!" and there was no answer, and he slid to the ground and sprinted toward the house like a crazy man, bellowing, "Hank! Where you at?" at the top of his lungs.

And there beside the porch he almost stumbled over the body of Old Man Prentiss. The old man was lying on his back, his eyes shut, an angry-looking wound on the side of his head. His gun was still in his right hand, flung out against the ground, and Brett could see it had been fired a couple of times. Brett cradled the old man's head in his arm and said, "Hank, you ain't dead! Tell me you ain't!"

The first time he said it like a prayer, and then he found the old man's pulse, felt it beating strongly, and so he repeated it, this time with gladness in his tone.

Brett still cradled the old man's head and he called out, "Del, come here," and Del didn't seem to want to, but edged a little closer.

"You lied to me, Del!" Brett shouted. "You never figgered on goin' straight! Clint Foley's on the dodge and he needed a place to lay low at. You fetched him and his gang food. You brought him here because you knew I'd take you in, and that way you could steal food for Foley and his men!" Brett felt all beat inside. "You even chanced gettin' Hank kilt, to say nothing of plannin' with 'em to rustle my hosses!"

There was a misery in Del's eyes. There were deep lines in his face, and sweat on his forehead. He said, "Brett, I wasn't in with 'em."

"Can't you see what them hosses meant to me?"

"Mebbe Jonas Grew had 'em stole," Del said, almost hopefully.

"You know that ain't so!" Brett felt all drained inside. "Fat old Jonas Grew is shrewd, but he ain't no outlaw. Without them hosses I lose the ranch." Brett turned away slowly.

"I aimed to go straight, Brett!" Del choked out. "Before God I did! But Clint Foley is my friend. A man don't go back on his friends, Brett. I didn't help him rustle them hosses."

Brett said, "But you didn't try to stop 'em. You rode into town with me so you wouldn't have to be here when it happened."

"I still aim to go straight. Brett, you got to believe me! It was hard, trying to figger out what to do. But all I could think was that Clint Foley's been my friend!"

"So you ride into town," Brett said bitterly, "and leave old Hank here alone, knowin' he might be kilt."

"They told me there wouldn't be no trouble," Del said desperately.

"Del, you can sure trust them friends of yours!"

"Brett, I didn't know what to do! They told me what they was goin' to pull, and I asked 'em not to. I guess I knew they'd do it anyway. But Clint Foley kept me from starvin' for nigh onto two years, and I owed him something." Del's whole face was wet with sweat now. "After this I'd be shed of 'em. I wouldn't owe 'em nothing. I just figgered I could maybe make it up to you some way."

"You got enough money to buy this ranch for me?" Brett asked.

Del said, "No. I ain't got a dime," and he wiped the sweat off his face.

Brett said, "That'd be the only way to make it up. That or gettin' Clint Foley to bring them hosses back!"

Old Man Prentiss stirred and opened his eyes. He blinked a couple of times and then he saw Del and he sat up straight. "You dirty, low-down skunk!" he yelled, and hoisted up his gun.

Del went pale and backed away. He was wearing a gun, but he didn't try to go for it. Old Man Prentiss said, "You shot me in the laig when the Bellarmine bank was stuck up, and now you let your outlaw pards damn near finish me off!" The old man choked and then shouted, "Goddlemighty, Del, I'm gonna shoot you here and now!"

Brett knocked up the gun and the shot punctured a cloud. Del turned and ran for his horse. Del leaped into the saddle and galloped away toward the distant hills.

"You oughta let me plugged him," Old Man Prentiss said.

Brett knew the old man had plenty of cause, just as he himself maybe did, but he couldn't bring himself to see it happen. Paw had set such a store by Del. Maybe it was about, and Brett relaxed a little. "Del killed.

Brett said, "Mebbe he'll talk Clint Foley into bringing back them hosses."

"You figure Foley'd do a thing like that?"

"Well—no. Mebbe Del will try to whip the gang." That was a nice idea to think about, and Brett relaxed a little. "Del, ain't so bad, Hank."

"He's a lily-livered skunk," Old Man Prentiss said. "A fat chance him takin' on the whole gang. Hell, he'll joke with 'em about how he put one over on you!" Brett kept quiet and the old man said, "Your Paw favored him, Del. That was because your Paw knew Del had bad blood in him."

"Del's got the same blood as me."

"It ain't that simple. Blooded horses sometimes breed an outlaw." Old Man Prentiss glared at Brett. "How long's it take for you to learn your lesson?"

Brett shook his head. "It ain't blood that counts anyway. It's a man's bringin'-up that's important. Del and me, we got the same kind of bringin' up from Paw and Maw."

Old Man Prentiss said sadly, "So Jonas Grew gets the ranch on a silver platter." He struggled to his feet and added, "I always did claim you was an idjit, Brett. Now I know it. Del's been trailing with a bad bunch only because he's bad himself. He done all this to you and you're standin' here takin' it."

Brett felt kind of ashamed, but he didn't know what to do. In his head was his promise to his Maw. That seemed impor-

tant now, and he wasn't sure what to do.

"You tromp on a snake, Brett," said Old Man Prentiss. "I know what your Maw had in mind. But this is different. Sometimes a gent has to fight to keep what he's already got. That's a heap different from fighting to take what's somebody else's."

Something turned over inside Brett and he snapped, "I'll get them hosses back! I don't care what else happens!" His lean body was all steel and whang-leather again. "Let's get you in the house and doctored up," he told the old man.

Old Man Prentiss shook off his arm. "Hell, it ain't nothing! I hurt myself worse'n this just shaving! You go after 'em, Brett, and don't let nothin' stand in your way!" He paused and then asked more quietly, "You want me along?"

Brett said, "I got to do this by myself."

The old man said softly, "I reckoned that."

NOW DUSK was only spitting distance away. The trail of the horses wasn't hard to follow, leading away toward the distant hills. Brett rode steadily, part of his mind intent on the trail and the rest of it thinking about Del. It was too bad about Del. Paw must have known what was in his eldest son, and so leaned over backward trying to be fair so he wouldn't hurt Del.

The trail grew steep and rugged. Twilight was closing its big fist over the valley and hills when Brett spotted the outlaw's camp ahead. He was surprised to find them camped so close. You'd think Del's warning would have driven them forward.

Brett dismounted, tied a rawhide reata to the end of the reins and then ground-tied the horse so it could graze. He then proceeded on foot, skirting the camp and climbing a small rise to cut for signs.

In the gathering darkness he could see the small gulley where a hastily erected brush corral held his thirty horses. A short distance away a small campfire glowed, four men around it. One of them was Del.

Figuring that was all of them, Brett edged closer.

He could hear them talking. Del was saying, "Don't get your dander up, Clint! I tell you my brother is a broke man! He won't go to the law on account of I'm his brother and his heart is softer'n a custard pudding! He won't set the law on us—and what can he do by himself? That old man Prentiss ain't no use to nobody. We got all the time in the world. Why not just take it easy and ride after the moon comes up?"

Brett felt the muscles of his face pull tight, dragging down his lips and freezing them that way. A trickle of sweat ran down the middle of his spine—sweat due to frustration at the way life turned out sometimes.

Another man, not Clint Foley, said, "I don't like it! You sure, Del, you're with us all the way?"

Del laughed. "Ain't I brung you food? Didn't I look after your hosses and stuff for a couple of years? You know you can trust me, gents." Del laughed again and then spoke to the man who had doubted him. "If you're so all-fired worried, why don't you walk out there a ways and stand guard?"

The man grumbled. Clint Foley said, "That's a good idea, Patches. You stand guard till the moon comes up. Then we'll push on." His voice took on an edge and he added, "Del, I sure as hell hope you're with us all the way!"

" 'Course I am," Del said stoutly.

Still grumbling, the man called Patches left the fire. He got a rifle and then moved out beyond the fire's edge and squatted down, an indistinct shadow in the gathering night. Brett considered jumping him, but gave up the idea. He'd just get himself jumped in return.

Four men were down there and that was pretty big odds. Too big. Brett didn't know how he was going to handle it. He'd have to watch and wait for some opportunity to make his play.

The guard was still squatting there, and then Brett saw what looked like a shadow creeping up behind the man. Brett swung his gaze back to the fire and saw that only two men were sitting in front of it now. Quickly he brought his gaze back to the guard.

He didn't hear the blow. All he heard was Del's voice yelling, "Hey, Clint! Somebody beat in Patches' head!" Turmoil ensued, and Brett slipped down the small rise closer to the fire. And his lips were no longer grim and he knew that old Hank Prentiss was off the beam about Del.

Brett heard the men shouting and then

Clint Foley snarling, "By hell, I'll bet you did that, Del!" Del protested and Foley said, "Well, there ain't nobody else around here—and if there was, how'd he get away so quick?" Del protested again, trying to sooth down Clint Foley. All three voices rose in argument. Somebody else sang out, "Del wasn't by the fire, Clint, when it happened." The three voices argued some more and Brett heard Del say finally, "He'll be gettin' plumb away while we stand here and argue."

They quieted down and began beating the brush for Patches' assailant.

Brett crouched, waiting for somebody to get close enough for him to jump. But things worked out just the opposite.

A gun poked Brett in the back and pushed him toward the fire. Clint Foley stood across from him, his face thin and mean in the firelight. He peered at Brett and then said, "It's Brett Callender, all right. Nice work, Sam." A hand reached around and snaked away Brett's gun and dropped it on the ground.

Clint Foley said, "I still ain't sure I trust you, Del." And then cruelty came into his tone and he added, "Mebbe you get the chance to really prove it in a minute."

Brett managed a grin, trying to tell Del that everything was all right and not to worry. Then he grinned again, and this time his lips felt less stiff and cold. He kicked the blazing embers of the fire straight at Clint Foley.

And as if it had all been planned beforehand, Del hit the man named Sam, who was behind Brett. Hit him in the legs with his big broad shoulders. The man fell sideways and his gun banged harmlessly away.

Clint Foley snarled something and snapped a shot at Brett and Brett felt his arm go numb. He reached down for his gun on the ground with his other hand, and again Foley's gun banged and Del gasped out a horrible croak and clutched at his chest. Then Brett had his fingers around his own gun and he brought it up and shot Clint Foley through the head.

In the brush corral the horses were kicking up a fuss. Brett looked at them and decided they were all right, all those thirty proud beauties. He talked low to them a second and then knelt beside Del.

"Mebbe I'm dyin', Brett," Del gasped. "I—"

"Lay off the talk," Brett snapped, "and let me stanch that wound."

He knew what Del was trying to say. That Del had really wanted to go straight. Del had ridden here, argued the gang into believing there was no danger—knowing all the time that Brett would be riding up.

"I helped Curly Weaver that night," Del whispered. "I didn't know what I was gettin' into. It was me shot Hank Prentiss, all right. But before God, I swear I ain't done nothin' bad since!"

Old Man Prentiss slid down and bent over Del and allowed as how Del would probably live to be ninety. The old man considered himself quite a medico. Then he began sputtering and said, "What am I doing? Goddlemighty! The skunk ain't finished so I aim to do the job!"

Brett said, "Now Hank!" and grabbed the old man to keep him from reaching for his gun. "Now Hank!" Brett told him. "Don't bust a gut and I'll tell you about Del and I think that'll change your tune."

THE END

RIGGED OUT TO KILL

"Give a dog a bad name and he'll live up to it," said Chalk Gap when it branded beaten-down Jud Bailey as a red-handed killer. That was when Jud got into his coffin clothes—and set out to turn a lynch lie into truth!

By WILL C. BROWN

JUD BAILEY sidled into the undertaker's house, ill at ease in his tight and wrinkled dress-up suit of clothes, and feeling the spiteful glances of the men already crowded into the room. He knew what a lot of them were thinking—that Jud Bailey himself was the man who had killed Big Ed Lucas. Jud hated the ordeal of the funeral and wished now that he had not come. But Big Ed had been his best friend.

He clutched his hat with nervous fingers and edged himself inconspicuously against the faded wallpaper of the front room like

"Get them hands high!"

a withered leaf settling anonymously to earth.

The hum of the summer crickets and the dry, hot breeze in the dusty street outside matched the monotonous drone of the preacher's words. Jud noticed that even dapper Enos Black, who dominated the gathering, was for the moment still and subdued.

Old Lady Fortune was a dame hard to understand. Jud speculated numbly, while the parson's words droned on, that it was beyond comprehension how he and Big Ed and Enos Black were all here together now, winding up this way. Thirty years before they had been young, reckless, their futures before them. The three had landed in the Chalk Gap country about the same time, worked as hands on the same ranch outfit for a while, courted their girls, set out to make their fortunes, all together in that dim and distant past, unknowing what the years ahead would hold.

Now here they were together under the same roof again. Big Ed, in a coffin in the next room, dead from a hold-up man's .45 slug in the heart. Enos Black, whiskered now and heavier with the years, but still reckless, still domineering, owner of about half the town. And here he was, Jud Bailey, defeated and lonely and working as a lowly hired hand in Big Ed's wagonyard. No, you just couldn't figure out Lady Luck.

Jud shifted uncomfortably. His eyes, set in webs of friendly crow's feet, flicked here and there, ready to jerk a nod of his leathery face to any neighborly notice, but there was none.

There were men in the room who had come recently from the Chalk Gap Saloon, primed with whiskey and the fired-up gossip that Jud had killed Big Ed in the night and made up that bandit story.

Jud slipped out at the conclusion of the service feeling muscle-bound in the frayed, out-of-style suit he had dug out to wear to Big Ed's funeral. Enos Black had taken no notice of him inside, but in the yard Jud found himself standing under Enos' towering bulk.

"I don't know why you keep hanging around," Enos said in a low, bitter tone. His big, bearded face and suspicious eyes looked down resentfully at the smaller man. "I told you before, you better high-tail it while I got the sheriff in the notion to let you go. Hell, Jud, ain't you had enough trouble already in Chalk Gap?"

"I haven't got anywhere to run to, Enos," Jud said doggedly, repeating what he had said last night to some of the men who had been his friends in this town. "It wasn't me that shot Big Ed. I got nothing to run from."

"Some folks think different," Enos retorted.

The funeral crowd was pressing about now, and Jud felt their resentment like the hot blast of the mid-afternoon sun. The muttering was plain to understand. Confusing, too, and a terrible thing to hear to a man who had lived so long among them. Confusing to him because he couldn't get it through his head why they were stirred up this way, unless somebody had been deliberately plying them with whiskey and malicious insinuations.

He tried to return their stares defiantly, but inside him was a bitter hopelessness. After all these years, the town had finally beaten him down into the dust of total failure and now was grinding the heel of its collective boots into his neck. Maybe it would be better to ride off and disappear, like Enos had told him. What was the use of bucking it any longer? His heart had been buried, years ago, up there in the hillside cemetery where they were about to take Big Ed. When Lucy had died, it had seemed to Jud that his heart and ambition and all the fight in him had died with her. Nothing was left for him in Chalk Gap after that. If he had any gumption, he thought, he would know that he was at the end of his rope.

Sheriff Rice, a big, methodical man, loomed up. Jud moved away. Big Ed's coffin was being carried from the house and the crowd moved back grudgingly as Jud headed for the street.

He drifted away with dead legs and unseeing eyes, on past the fringes of the business district, across the alley back of the hotel, past Enos Black's Chalk Saloon and over the vacant lot toward Big Ed's livery and wagonyard. That place had been his haven in the few years after Big Ed had good-heartedly given him a job and a place to sleep.

Jud opened the door of Big Ed's little office, lost in sober thought. Then he jerked his head up and blinked in surprise. Across

the dim room as if he had been waiting, lounged a slit-eyed stranger. The man's shirt collar was turned high, his hat pulled low. And the gaping hole in the barrel of the sixgun in his hand was trained square on Jud's middle with a tight trigger finger.

"Shut the door and get them hands high!" The words lashed out across the room.

JUD'S EYES were not seeing good, coming into the shade-drawn room from the glaring sun outside, but he could see the man was leaning against the steel safe. It was the safe that had stood open the night Big Ed was shot, when a bandit had been surprised by Big Ed in the midst of trying to open the locked, inside safe door. That was the night Jud had rushed in after hearing the shot—rushed in to see Big Ed bloodying the floor, and the figure disappearing out the window in the dark, dropping his gun as he fled. That was how they had found Jud, dazed with grief, standing in the room with a gun in his hand, one chamber empty, and Big Ed dead on the floor.

Now, as then, the safe stood open, but the inner door was still locked. The stranger with the gun spoke sharply.

"Where'd Lucas keep the key to that lock?"

Jud tried to freeze his eyes away from the old hat hanging on the door facing. But the flicker of his glance was a give-away.

"I—I don't know where he kept it," he mumbled.

"You're lyin'!" the stranger said softly. He advanced on Jud.

"Turn around, you old fool."

Jud wondered if he was going to get a .45 slug now, like Big Ed. An explosion of pain burst in his head.

When he drifted to semi-consciousness, the memories of the years seemed to roll back and forth across his numbed brain like an angry and revealing tide. He saw fragments of the dismal things that had dragged him down, the setbacks that had taken all the starch out of his guts until he was a limp and beaten man. How his first venture into business, the new and struggling harness shop, had gone on the rocks during the long drouth of the early days, when the whole region was paralyzed by adversity. He had labored and sacrificed to pay off his creditors, but his own destitute customers had somehow never got around to paying him. Enos Black had wound up owning the business, with Jud working for him. Then one night the store had been robbed, and Enos had said pointedly it looked like an inside job and suggested that Jud better drag from town.

Jud had already married Lucy McCall—the belle of the community, the girl Enos Black had courted without success. And Big Ed Lucas had married the popular Betty Masters. But everybody who had watched the courtships of the three dashing young men in Chalk Gap's early, lusty days, had agreed that Jud Bailey got the pick of the lot. But it had been no time after Jud lost the business that Lucy took sick, lingered a while, and died. He hadn't been able, financially, to take her East to good doctors and hospitals.

With Lucy gone, all meaning of life seemed to drain out of Jud. From one menial job to another he had drifted through the years, here and there about town and on neighboring ranches. Enos had seemed to take a vicious pleasure in Jud's toboggan down the greased skids of failure. Only Big Ed Lucas and his kindly wife, Betty, had been sympathetic. And while Enos extended his holdings, seeming to prosper in one daring business venture after another, Big Ed had made a comfortable living with his wagonyard, and Jud had wound up as Big Ed's handy man, sleeping over a stall in a little boxed-in room.

These thoughts separated themselves and faded out in a rush of conscious pain that made Jud feel sick at his stomach. He groaned and tried to sit up, fingering the back of his head where the gunman had clubbed him.

He was still groggy and confused, leaning against the safe, when Enos Black and Sheriff Rice walked in. Betty Lucas was with them, eyes grief-stricken, but her composure resolutely brave. She went on to her room as Enos and the sheriff moved into the office and saw Jud eyeing them blankly.

Enos shot a look at the jumbled strongbox on the floor in front of the safe. The sheriff's eyes narrowed.

Jud told them about it. As he talked he noticed the growing sneer of doubt spread

on Enos' hard face. The sheriff looked uncomfortably at the floor, occasionally at Enos.

"You seem to be a mighty handy man for being around when things happen to Big Ed." Enos spoke viciously, through set teeth. He looked ominously at Jud. "Just what the hell kind of a windy you tryin' to give us, Jud?"

"That's just the way it happened!" Jud cried. "You don't think I'm lyin', do you?" He turned anxiously to Sheriff Rice.

Rice evaded his eyes and looked at Enos. Enos was a powerful man in the town and in the Buffalo hills where he owned the isolated Box B spread in the badlands.

"First he's found standing over Big Ed's body with a gun in his hand," Enos grunted. "Empty chamber in the gun. Claims he slung a shot at whoever ambushed Big Ed. Now Ed's valuable papers and records are stolen—and he says it was a hold-up!"

Jud felt a hot wave of resentment. Then he had another slow, glimmering thought. How did Enos know what was stolen? They hadn't even examined the safe yet!

It came to him, as he stood miserably before the two men in Big Ed's office, that he distrusted this man Enos Black, had always distrusted him. That something inside Enos was mean and dangerous and despicable. That for all his surface friendliness in the early years, Enos had hated him from the day Lucy McCall had picked Jud Bailey over Enos Black and half a dozen other suitors. Jud let his anger be replaced by sudden craftiness. The pain in his head was clearing a little.

"What you think I ought to do, Enos?" From the corner of his eye Jud got a glimpse of the ugly bulge under Enos' fine, tailor-made coat. Enos had packed his gun even to the funeral.

"Get out of town!" Enos spat the words.

"Yeah." Sheriff Rice nodded slow agreement. "Looks like it might be the healthiest thing to do." He had known Jud for twenty years.

"All right," Jud mumbled dully. "Reckon you're right, Enos . . . Give me a little time to pack my gear. Then I'll ride."

Enos grunted approval. The sheriff looked blank-faced from one to the other.

THAT NIGHT Jud packed his meager belongings. He went in to tell Big Ed's widow that he was going away.

"You don't have to go, Jud," she said kindly. "Ed trusted you. So do I."

"I guess it's for the best, Betty," he murmured.

In his room he took off the blue suit and pulled on the more familiar old work clothes. The once dapper suit had hung on the wall of the little room a long time, and there had been no occasion to wear it, in years, until Big Ed's funeral. As he folded the coat, preparing to stuff it into his valise, Jud heard a paper crackle inside. He had not noticed it before. With curious fingers, he explored the inside pocket and drew out an envelope. It had Jud's name on the front and he recognized Big Ed's handwriting. Inside was a note, scrawled in hurried strokes by Big Ed's hand, and a legal-looking document.

> I'm sticking this note in your coat pocket, Jud. I figure you'll never see it unless you put this suit on for something special, such as my funeral, for instance. Don't know where else to hide it. Jud, I got a worry that something might happen to me. I've been loaning money to Enos Black. Got his notes in my safe. Nobody knows it but us. Now Enos has over-stepped himself.
>
> His investments ain't panning out and I got a mortgage on Box B ranch. Looks like I'm going to be forced to foreclose. Just wanted somebody to know this in case anything happened to me. I ain't scared, but last time I talked to Enos about it he was rough and nasty. He's got some bad ones working for him on Box B.
>
> One of them, I've heard, is a convict from Montana prison. If anything ever happens to me, just wanted somebody to know the facts. I don't want to worry Betty. You were always a man I would trust, Jud.

Big Ed's signature was scrawled across the bottom of the page.

Jud sat motionless in the dusk. He thought about Big Ed and Enos and all of the years back of them.

When he got up, he carefully replaced the note and the mortgage in the envelope and put them back into the coat pocket. He took off his work clothes and shaved and put on the old dress-up suit again. Somehow, if anything happened to him, he wanted it to happen to him dressed up, maybe looking a little bit like a successful businessman. Not a smelly flunky in a wagon-yard. The suit was too short now in the sleeves and pants legs, and it was many

years out of style. But it was a sort of symbol, Jud thought. It might have been the garb once of the successful man he had wanted to be. It would be better to die in, if a man had to die, than the faded old levis and patched brown shirt.

He dug back into his gear and took out his little short-nosed revolver. It was about as out-of-date as the suit. He poked a moment at the corroded oil and rust traces with a spit-dampened bandanna. He didn't even know if the old cartridges in it would explode. But he stuck it in his side pocket and tiptoed out of the building.

He moved purposely down the street in the twilight.

"Where's Sheriff Rice?" he asked the jailer in the sheriff's office.

"I dunno, Jud." Old Andy Sellers changed sides with his tobacco cud and eyed Jud evasively. "Gone out on a little business. You want to sleep in the jail tonight, Jud?" Andy asked it sympathetically. Jud knew he had heard the talk. He shook his head and went out on the street.

The customers inside the Chalk Bar were not used to seeing Jud taking a drink—especially not in that shiny-bottomed, mail-order suit.

Some of the eyes that turned on him were hard and resentful. A delegation of hands from Enos Black's Box B spread mumbled hard words among themselves. Jud felt the atmosphere in the room turn cold and unfriendly.

"You know where Sheriff Rice might be?" he asked in a low voice of Tim O'Boyle, the bartender.

Tim shook his head and chewed nervously on a dead cigar. "Ain't seen him since the funeral," he mumbled. Then, "Jud—if you don't mind, would you sorta mosey on outa here?" He jerked his head significantly toward the Box B hands. He looked Jud in the eye, and Jud put down his half-finished drink and started toward the door.

A coarse voice called out, mockingly: "You're mighty dressed up, Jud Bailey! You look fit to kill!" Low laughter crackled, but there was no humor in it.

"He oughta be swingin' in them duds from a rope necktie," somebody shouted with a curse. "He killed Big Ed Lucas and made up that bull about a bandit!"

Jud felt the back of his neck redden and his heart pound. He moved out the door without looking back. The rumble of the voices inside drifted out after him.

Men on the street looked at him curiously. Some spoke, some did not. Those who did not, looked at him with hard, challenging eyes.

Jud picked the best looking horse he could find along the main street hitchrails. It didn't matter to him whose it was or whether he hanged for it. He wasn't worried about that. He figured he wouldn't live to hang. He was riding for the Box B ranch and Enos Black. And he didn't have much expectations of riding back alive.

OUT OF town and on the dry, dusty Buffalo Gap Trail, he breathed deeply. Traces of alkali dust seemed to hang in the air. Horses had been over this route not long before. Their dust was still stirred up. Several horses. Must have been Enos and some of his hands riding for the ranch.

Jud knew a short cut. He pulled off the trail at Two Fork Rock and headed the big, distance-eating roan across the rough ridges and gulleys of Antelope Creek, forded over and headed through the scrub mesquites on the other side. The big horse took the rough country with a sure foot and at a good gait. Jud thought he might beat Enos and his men to the ranch house.

But a lamp was burning when he topped a rise and saw the forms of the building in the little valley. Enos had gotten in. So there would be no chance to surprise him.

Jud had no plan. About all he had was a cold, flinty hatred in his heart—and the memory of Big Ed Lucas being shot down. That, and the reminder from crisp folds of paper rubbing against his chest from inside that tight coat. All he wanted to do was to face Enos Black.

He dismounted at the house, not trying to muffle the sounds of his arrival. The bunkhouse, a hundred paces away, was dark. Enos must have thought it was one of his riders coming in. He sat there in the lamp-lighted parlor of the ranch house talking with a slender man with slit eyes who lolled in an easy chair across the desk from Enos.

They did not look up until Jud was standing in the doorway. The slender man with the gray-white face made an instinctive move to his hip, grunting in surprise. Enos Black looked blank for a second;

then his eyes narrowed to two hard black gashes in his whiskered face.

"What are you doing here, Jud?"

Jud leaned a moment against the door frame. He may have appeared ludicrous, standing there in his brush-ripped, alkali-powdered, too-tight dress-up clothes. But the face above the out-of-style clothes was serene now—serene with the light of certain knowledge. Enos could read it. Jud could tell by his expression that Enos Black was reading the decision in his face and knew that Jud had come to kill.

"You killed him, didn't you?" Jud said through dry, tight lips. He didn't need the admission that flashed to Enos' eyes. "You couldn't pay him, so you killed him." He jerked his head toward the slim, pale stranger. "You've been hiding out this man—a killer, escaped from a Montana prison—haven't you? And you got him to try to rob the safe, and he killed Big Ed. You're responsible for that, Enos." Jud wet his lips. His breath was coming hard. Enos was pushing back. Without looking, Jud could see the convict's hand was back to his hip.

"You did that, and then you started the rumors against me, tried to get me to disappear so you'd never be suspected." Jud was standing erect in the door now. Cold hatred possessed him. He felt good, almost, because he was going to kill Enos Black. Somehow he was going to do it before the convict brought that sixgun around.

"You'll never live to tell it!" Enos' face was twisted in hatred.

Jud knew it was slow and clumsy, the way he was fumbling inside that tight coat pocket. But somehow the little snub-nosed revolver was out.

The sixgun in the hands of the convict was out, too. Out and coming up, leveling on Jud's stomach. And Enos was cursing, his teeth bared in panic, his big hand tearing swiftly to the pearl-handled Colt in the drawer of the desk.

It sounded to Jud as if the whole house exploded in his ears. The shots came almost like one—the shot from the window and the shot from the chair. The convict was hit first. His gun hand jerked and his slug only plowed through the flesh of Jud's thigh. Then the convict was dead, his head a bloody mess, and there were shouts outside and booted feet running across the porch.

Jud squeezed the little gun in his sweaty palm, hoping it would fire, hoping it would beat the big pearl-handled six-shooter. After the sixguns, the snub-nosed revolver's spat sounded weak and ineffective. He was wondering when Enos would shoot, and he kept squeezing the little gun, the spats sounding hollow in the room. Then the rage and snarl were passing off Enos Black's face—and he was looking at Jud with blank eyes.

Sheriff Rice told him gently, "He's dead now, Jud. Might as well quit triggerin'—your gun's empty."

In town, while they bandaged his wound in Big Ed's office in the early morning hours, Rice reprimanded him again: "You ought never to have faced him with that puny little gun, Jud. The dang thing might have failed you. When I got the tip that Dagger Howard was holin' up at Box B, after breaking Montana prison, things began to smell. I took a full posse along with me last night when I rode out there. I dern sure wouldn't of depended on a two-bit gun like that!"

Jud tried to grin.

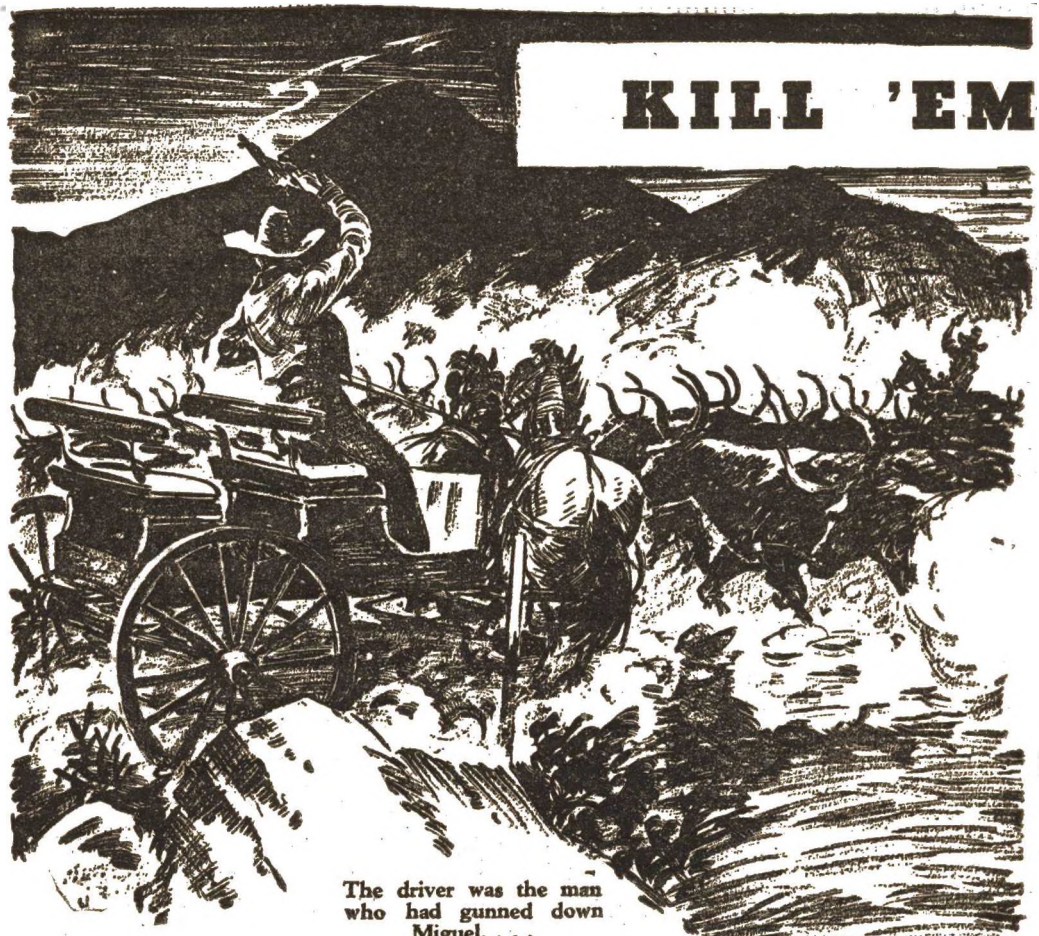
"It was all I had. That and the note from Big Ed. Didn't know that was you and your boys that raised the dust on the alkali trail, but I'm sure lucky you pulled in when you did and took in the situation from the window. I'm a lucky man, Sheriff. Mighty lucky."

Big Ed's widow came in with hot coffee. She smiled at them all, saving her best, most comforting smile for Jud Bailey who sat there in his bloody, mail-order pants, looking at his weathered hands, hearing the warmth and respect in the words that came from the men who had crowded into the room.

"Now everybody clear out of here," Betty Lucas said briskly. "He's got to get some sleep and rest. And I've got to get those funny-looking pants off him and get the blood washed out and that bullet rip darned. No telling when he'll need to wear that good suit again—he's going to be the manager of this business, if he'll stay."

"I'll stay." Jud whispered. He was weak and sleepy, but he felt strong again in his heart.

KILL 'EM



The driver was the man who had gunned down Miguel. . . .

Chapter I

THE KING AND THE KILLER

A SHORT THIRTY miles from Edgeville the plain was level and grassy and the long-legged, cross-bred Texas cattle could graze and grow fat in the few days before they were run into the chutes for counting. Ben Burke rode into camp and made a running dismount from the bay of his string of work cayuses, bringing up athwart the chuck wagon, his tanned, lean face split with a grin.

Jake, the old cook, grunted, "Mighty pert, aincha?"

"Slip me the java," said Burke. He was twenty-four and he had carried four men

By WILLIAM R. COX

IN KANSAS!

Powdersmoke Feud Novel

Checker Gray and his gun-wise murderers cursed the devil for picking Ben Burke's bullet-riddled body off the blood-stained Kansas grass and nursing him slowly back to life. . . . For who but the devil himself would revive a quick-trigger hombre whose life was dedicated to the proposition that all killers were born to be killed?

and four thousand head of cattle from Texas to Kansas on his own, and he was proud. "They weigh ten pounds more'n I ever thought they would. I betch King's got 'em sold at top price, too."

"We ain't got 'em in yet," said Jake gloomily. The coffee was as black as the old man's disreputable ancient hat, but its strength comforted Ben Burke's tautened nervous system. "Been too lucky. An' Cross J right behind us, with Checker Gray honin' fer our blood."

"Chingo and the Cross J tried us at Red River," said Burke grimly. "We larned them there."

"I been with Queen Ranch thutty year, son," said Jake gloomily. "I seen King Dexter start his war with Cross J an' Checker Gray. I knowed Checker Gray when he come in from the wild bunch an' got big, and started killin' and robbin' an' plunderin' to git his start. King fit him then and he had t' fight him ever sence. I seen Checker Gray buy sheriffs an' now he's buyin' politicians. Jest 'cause ye ran off Chingo and the Cross J bunch oncet, ye needn't think ye're through."

"We're almost in sight of Edgeville," said Burke impatiently. "This drive will break Gray's back. His cattle are poor, ours are fat. The money we get for this herd'll buy that range we need back home. Gray's been too busy with his politickin' to mend his fences. He's through when this herd is sold and we get the Chinaman's Range. King and me went through all this."

Jake said, "Ye better keep a double watch, Ben."

"The Cross J herd is a hundred miles behind us. Chingo and the wild boys are tough in barrooms, but they can't drive cattle," said Burke. He was, he realized, talking to allay his own misgivings.

"I seen 'em go afore," Jake insisted. "They're killers. Ye know it."

Burke shook out his blanket impatiently, but he knew it was the truth. Cross J and all connected with it was evil. It represented the worst of the West. Checker Gray was a big man, now, who walked in legislative halls, but in his heart he was the guerrilla rascal who had preyed always on the weaker for his gain.

King Dexter was the exact antithesis. While King walked with the big white men of the Trail, dealing fairly with all, Checker Gray sneaked about undoing the good of greater men. King met his enemies face to face and fought them on the level. Gray shot in the dark, stabbed in the back.

The entire Western country watched the feud. It was a symbolic war between good and evil to them, and the victory for either side would have a profound effect on the progress of the country in these years of swift history made by hard-riding, hard-working men. All this bore in upon young Ben Burke as he made a pillow of his saddle and prepared to get a short sleep.

His own part was not inconsiderable. He was more than a foreman of Queen Ranch —he was King Dexter's foster-son and heir. He had been found by the King on this very trail, lying in the brush, four years old. There had been a burned-out wagon, two unrecognizable corpses in the ruins— and the little brown-haired boy weeping in the relentless sun.

Dexter, a lean figther then, widower, childless, had accepted the boy as an omen —and had gone on to fight an even battle against Checker Gray. Burke had grown up in this tradition, grown up on the Trail and in boom-towns and on the home ranch down south. His name had been sewed into the collar of his little shirt when Dexter picked him up—and that was all he knew about himself, except that he was King Dexter's boy, and tremendously grateful for that fact.

For there was only one King. He could have been a richer man, he could have owned more than this herd and the small, growing ones back home. He could have garnered more wealth—but never could he have wielded more influence through forbearance, good deeds and kindness to all men. Ben Burke closed his eyes, smiling at the thoughts of his foster father.

He was a lucky young fellow. Once King had the money for this herd—sixty thousand dollars, perhaps—and acquired Chinaman Range to run his improved stock upon, Checker Gray would be driven from the cattle business into his other nefarious enterprises and all would be well. Then Ben could pay attention to his courting of May Dorn.

There was a cloud over that delicate affair and a scowl replaced the smile on Ben Burke's face. He turned impatiently

in his blanket—and all hell broke loose.

It was astounding. He sat bolt upright, stunned by the sheer power of the guns. The rifle fire was a wall almost solid in the night. Jake, bending over his fire, making coffee for the night herders, straightened, jumped for the rifle he kept always at hand. Ben scrambled out of the blanket. Jake was turning, peering near-sightedly for the enemy. The fanfarrade of noise sounded again.

Jake spun and went down. Ben stared, disbelieving. Jake had been a fixture in his life—the balance wheel of his young optimism, the fireside philosopher of all camps. Now Jake's black hat lay forlorn and Jake bled into his fire.

Ben's gun was in his hands, and his belt was buckled, the revolver hanging in place. He kept his head down, fighting back horror at Jake's death.. He crawled toward the remuda, hoping to get his saddled bay. He saw that the fire ringed the herd. How many men were there, he didn't know. Dozens, for sure, dozens of attackers.

A rider thundered in and he hoisted a gun, but he recognized Miguel, his Mexican stalwart. Miguel was bleeding in the chest, swaying in the saddle. He flung himself down and lay, barely able to speak.

"Gone. All gone. Jumped. Could not fight. Jumped. Red, One-Eye, Pasquale—dead!" He turned and his liquid brown eyes glazed. "Cows . . . stampede . . . dead . . . all . . . dead."

It was incredible. Ben Burke watched Miguel die. He had played with the Mexican when he was a button. The utter horror bit deeper. He stumbled, running low for the horses, stunned by the magnitude of the attack. A rifle crackled. It was close at hand.

He knelt, staring. There was a carriage, and a man in it, giving directions, ordering the fire on the camp. Ben Burke caressed the stock of his Winchester, kneeling. His teeth chattered with impotent rage. He aimed with great deliberation. He touched the trigger.

The man in the carriage flung up his arms, toppled over. The team leaped, bolted. A rider came, seizing their heads. Ben Burke shot the rider from the saddle.

They were closing in. The herd was gone, the riders dead. Jake was dead. Unreasoning rage blade Ben Burke hole up and kill—kill as many of them as he could.

But King Dexter had coached him all his life. King had said, "You can raise with deuces, boy, but you can't call with 'em. When you got to run—run hard and fast."

King was in Edgeville. He had to get to town. He had to organize, to copper this terrible loss. Ben Burke would have to help, somehow. He crawled to the remuda.

The line had been cut. The cayuses were gone. He lay there, nursing his rifle, cursing in a monotonous undertone. He glared right and left. Bullets thudded about him. One tore his shirt. He moved again, Injun fashion, snaking his way in the opposite direction from the camp where they sought him. They must have been watching, waiting for him to hit the blankets.

He saw a dim figure and fired again. The man slumped. A horse ran. Ben took a chance. He leaped to his feet and sought to catch the bridle of the wild animal.

A dozen spots of fire showed where the guns had let loose. He felt the impact of lead against his skull. He pitched sideways, hit the dirt still fighting for consciousness, biting his lips until they bled, tearing at the grass with his hands, the grass which he had hoped would fatten King Dexter's herd for market.

The blackness would not be denied. He bit the turf at last, but the veil dropped mercifully, ending his agony. He went down, down.

The carriage had been turned by another rider. It came in now, as someone shouted, "Where's Breach? There's the carriage. Where is he?"

The man who led the harnessed horses said calmly, "Gone back t' town. It's over. Burke's downed. Git goin', afore someone sees yawl. Hurry!"

The man bawled, "Okay, okay! All over. Scat, ye tarriers! Back t' town."

The carriage was naturally slower. The slim man who led it dismounted, waiting. The wild riders, uttering Comanche yells, Rebel yells, swept back toward Edgeville.

A fitful moon peered down at the scene of death. The waiting man, skull-faced, thin to emaciation, knelt beside Ben Burke. His fingers felt of the bleeding scalp. He ripped cloth from Ben's back, bandaged the head with skilful, miraculously deft hands.

Bending, the thin man got hold of Ben beneath the arms. It was a titanic struggle

for him to lift the solid foreman of Queen Ranch, but he managed it. Staggering to the carriage, he levered the unconscious form into the back.

He sighed, shaking his head. "That's for May," he muttered. "Them hosses know their way home." He turned the team, slapped them with the reins, watched them jog toward town and the livery stable which was their home. "Wisht I dared go on. There'll be all hell now. Checker Gray has got t' go with this." He mounted his black cayuse.

He sat there, staring at the shadows of bodies on the plains, at the bulk of dead fat steers. He started the horse westward, toward the mountains. After a hundred yards he turned and came back. There was silence louder than the previous noise of gunfire.

He said to himself aloud, "I got t' go back. It's my last chance. Mebbe it'll kill me, but I gotta." He turned toward Edgeville, studying a way to come in without being observed. He was a young man familiar with the devious ways of life.

THREE MEN sat in the largest room of the Edgeville Hotel. There were bottles of whiskey, boxes of cigars and the remains of a sumptuous repast on a table. The men were waiting—expectant, replete with food and liquor, solid men knowing their business was going well.

Checker Gray had lived so many years on the verge of trouble that his face showed nothing—except the slight sign of his past, the thinness of a rat-trap mouth, the lines running downward from his eyes in short dashes, the pouches either side of his beak nose. His eyes were snapping black, alive in the parchment of his countenance. His hair was growing thin, but vanity caused him to comb it back over the bald spot; it was black, and straight, lending weight to the whispered yarns of his Indian blood. He was a tall man, growing slightly paunchy in the middle, but powerful still from his days—and nights—of riding.

Slab Moran, Marshal of Edgeville was a gun-slinger, and looked it. He had drooping mustaches stained with tobacco juice, nervous hands always in motion, a haunted eye. He was stoop-shouldered and silent and always he walked under a cloud, because of the numberless men he had killed.

Crane Lister was fat. His face was round as a moon, he was bald as an eagle, his tummy extended between his short, fat legs. He was cold, all the way through. He was dressed in the latest Eastern clothing of austere design, with white-edged vest, an innovation. Lister was a banker.

Checker Gray said, "It cost almost ten thousand dollars. It better be good."

Crane Lister said, "You have courage, Gray. And imagination. If it goes as you plan, I'll back you all the way."

"For an interest in my ranch, you'll back me," said Gray. He laughed shortly. "It's worth it. You buy Chinaman Range for me, you're in. I almost slipped, there. Busy at the capital, y'know." He winked.

Lister said, "I expect my cut, of course. But it will be worth anything, as you say. If you control the range down there and I control the cattle buying here, to a certain extent—"

Checker said carelessly, "Sure pardner. Say, Slab, it oughta be over. Where's thet man Breach you recommended? I hope Chinook got up there in time. I don't trust this town riff-raff."

"Sent nigh onto a hunderd men," droned the marshal. "Wust gang of toughs Edgeville—or Dodge or Abilene—ever seed. Breach had his orders."

"Breach was in jail, accused of murder," said Lister drily. "He should be just the man for this—er—enterprise."

"He hadda get Burke, the whelp," said Gray. "If Burke lives t' tell the story, there'll be men t' believe it was us."

"You, my dear Gray, not us," said Lister suavely.

The lean man with the paunch snorted. "You think so?"

"I know so," said Lister politely but firmly. "Your reputation, after all, my dear—"

"Stop 'my dearin' me," snapped Gray. "You'll see who's in this. If anything goes wrong—"

"Breach is a good man," said Moran. "They was only four of 'em. And Burke. Thet bunch'll take 'em."

Lister said, shifting his bulk in the big chair, "Er—saw you with Miss May Dorn today, Checker. How do you fare with the lady now?"

Checker Gray's teeth were slightly yel-

low, but strong and wolf-like when he smiled. "I saw to it her damned outlaw brother went with the crowd tonight. Breach had orders, all right—to get Burke—and John Dorn. When Dorn's found dead out there, one of the bunch that jumped up Cross J's trail herd, she'll be down to my style."

"Clever," said Lister calmly. "You are always clever, my dear boy." He stopped at the glare from Gray. He went on in a moment, "You like to break people. Well, it is a way of living. Some are born to prey—others to be preyed upon. That is life."

"Exactly," nodded Gray. "Dorn was always a no-good. May protected him. Now she won't dare say anything good about him. Burke dead—Cross J ruined—her brother one of them that did it. I figger it'll bring her to her knees."

"Or yours," smiled Lister thinly.

Moran said, "Breach should be back, for sure. I paid him two hunderd dollars t' run this show."

"Dorn is better off dead," said Gray insistently, as though he were proving something to himself. "He was a born maverick. He has been in on plenty of capers, rustlin' an' worse, I hear. He hated everybody—him an' that skull face of his'n, starin' starin'."

Lister said, "You had some trouble with his father, I hear?"

"That's a damn lie," shouted Gray. His face was mottled, his black eyes snake-like. His hand clawed at his hip, where once a revolver had always ridden.

The two men stared at him. Moran said, "Shucks, Checker, Mr. Lister didn't mean nothin'."

"I assure you, it was merely idle gossip," stammered Lister. "Pray, forget it, my d—Checker."

The color ebbed from Gray's face. He would have to remember where he toted his gun now, he thought—under his armpit. Not that he needed a fast draw—he never allowed himself to come to a shoot-out these days. Better to hire men such as Breach. Or Slab Morgan, the quickest slinger in the trail towns.

He said, "Jack Dorn was murdered. Right here in Edgeville, afore the railroad come. A man named Hoskin done it and hung fer it. I oughta know. I was marshal myself then. Owned the Aces Up. I helped hang the jasper."

Moran said, "Is that somethin'? Inna street?"

A horseman came in, very fast. There were steps in the hall, on the stairs. A knock came at the door. Checker Gray's smile returned, his hand went over his Indian hair, he leaned back in his chair. "Come in, Breach."

The door opened. A short, very wide man, bow-legged, stained from hard riding stepped in and closed the portal behind him.

"Chingo! Yuh made it!" said Gray. "Well, blast my hide!"

The foreman of Cross J was ugly as a bronc, and one ear was chewed where a better man had found him vulnerable. He snarled, "I rid up, all right. I was jest a mite too late."

Moran said, "Where's Breach?"

"Deader'n hell," said Chingo. "The damn fool. Stood up in a kerridge and yelped his big mouth. Burke shot 'im. I was comin' in an' took a shot at Burke. Downed 'im, too. So I went to chivvyin'

the cattle. Thet herd is scattered, Checker, and I mean plumb gone."

"Good! The hell with Breach," said Gray enthusiastically.

"Yeah," said Chingo. He reached for the whiskey bottle, cocked an eyebrow at his boss. When Gray nodded, he drained an amazing amount of the liquid in a gulp. Then he said, "I come back, lookin' fer Burke's body. It was gone."

"Huh? Gone?" Gray's mouth resumed its dour sharpness. "You missed?"

"He went down. I hit 'im," said Chingo steadily. "Maybe he wasn't kilt—it was dark, remember. There was one of your gang. He was shot offen his hoss, by Burke. He was dyin'. He said a very thin jasper come and picked up Burke. Put him in the kerridge—who the hell ever heard of a body ridin' a kerridge to a jump-up, now I ask ye?"

Gray said impatiently, "What became of Burke?"

"The man died," said Chingo flatly. "There was this very skinny hombre, and the kerridge—and Burke was gone. I been busy, Checker. I done rode a hunderd miles without sleep to git in on this—and found it botched."

Checker turned on Moran like a tiger. "So Breach was a good man! He got hisself killed and he let Burke get away. Burke! King Dexter's boy. Now it'll be King and Burke, with guns. You know what that means?"

"Uh-huh," said Moran. His smouldering gaze was steady upon Gray. "It means we got to git 'em."

"And let everybody in the West know? We'd be hounded to death," snarled Gray. He leaped to his feet and paced the room. "If we only knew where—a skinny man, you said? Why dammit, then Breach did not get John Dorn, neither! It must have been Dorn. He's the skinniest man in Kansas! It would be one of his contrary tricks! That makes another! Dexter, Burke and Dorn! And Breach was supposed to be a good man! Moran, damn you—"

The marshal arose and faced the standing owner of Cross J. He said in his monotonous voice, "No call to curse me, Checker. You allus had it t' do. Take a word from me. Git King Dexter. Nemmine them other young squirts. It's been you or Dexter fer years. End it!"

Gray turned to look at the fat banker. Lister pursed his lips and said, "Moran's right."

"He's got friends. No man's got more friends," said Checker Gray thoughtfully. "It couldn't be a shoot-out. It couldn't be straight."

"If Dorn and Burke are alive, Dexter will be searching for you," said the banker slowly. "Then Burke. Then every friend they have."

"It has got to be on the q.t.," Gray insisted. His narrow face grew pinched and pallid. "I got to think."

Chingo drank again from the bottle. "I'll git Dexter. The damned ole fool. He oughta know better'n t' buck us. I'll git him fer yuh."

"No. That would be like me doin' it,' said Gray. "Besides, you're a quick man, Chingo. But Dexter is hell. I don't want to lose you—"

"That ole fool get me?" Chingo flushed with rage. "Yuh cain't say that, Boss."

"There's got t' be a way. The three of us—somehow or other," said Gray. "Then Slab stirs up a riot with his scum. Somehow or other—" His eyes lit with a strange fire. He relaxed in a chair. He said, "Sometimes I plumb scare myself, gents. I got brilliance. Rushes of brains to the skull. It's simple as a.b.c. I forgot Slab was the law here. That was what slowed me down. I ain't exactly used, even yet, t' runnin' with the law."

Lister said, "Ah? You have a plan, so swiftly? You are a genius, my dear—Checker, I mean."

"We down Dexter. Secret. Then we get witnesses. They heard Dexter slangin' Burke somethin' fearful. We plant Dexter's body where Burke coulda got up an' shot him. Moran grabs Burke, slings him in the pokey. A mob takes Burke away. He gits strung up—an' some of Dexter's hot-headed Texian friends'll help haul on the reata!"

There was silence as the men in the room turned it over. Then Lister said cautiously, "It will take some planning. We must locate Burke. Dorn must be—er—taken care of. Dexter must be trapped—"

"Slab's got fifty scumballs," said Gray impatiently. "That part's easy as rollin' of a log. Chingo, you go down t' the newspaper and tell that joke editor we are

shocked an' grieved at Dexter's loss, at the lawlessness of the mob that jumped up the Queen Ranch herd. Lay it on thick—you rode up an' tried to help—all that stuff. Tell 'em we demand to know who done it an' Cross J will help wipe out every rascal that was on the raid. That'll git us some friends. Slab, you find out where Burke is, an' dammit, try May Dorn's first!" The eyes gleamed again, with an awful fire. Gray seemed to grow as he talked, driving at his cohorts until he actually filled the room with his presence, sending them out, one by one, on their errands. Lister went last, *tchk-tchking* in admiration.

At the door, the banker said, "With your —er—brains and my money, Gray, we shall rule an empire. An empire, my d— Checker!"

The portal closed. Gray sat staring into the distance. He had fought King Dexter for too many years. It was desperate—but it looked like the end. He took out the gun from beneath his arm. It was not a .45, it was smaller, but it was smooth-working and lethal enough.

Gray muttered, "My dear banker, you'll rule, when I get what I want. A spot in hell, you fat, snivellin' damn tenderfoot!"

Chapter II

HOT LEAD CHECKMATE

WHEN Ben Burke opened his eyes King Dexter was there. He was standing alongside the girl, his face lined and anxious. His white hair was long and curling, his mustaches were matching white and carefully combed. He had been waiting for hours, and when Ben's eyes opened, without fever brightness, the worry fled, the brown, sensitive features ironed out. He said in his booming, hearty voice, "Waal, now. Come alive, huh? You'll be okay, son. Everything's all right now."

"The herd," said Ben, choking, weak. He tried to rise, but promptly fell back on feather pillows. He was undressed and his hands were shaky. He lay there, hating himself. "The boys—all killed."

"We lost herds afore," said Dexter gently. "I seen fifty boys die on the trail in my time. Don't fret, son. I got somethin' up my sleeve. Jest git well, thassall. Yuh got a mighty pretty nurse—an' it was her brother sent yuh, remember. I seen John and I talked to him. I'm goin' to the Gov'nor, this time. But nemmine thet. Git well, thassall."

Ben said, "Cross J was a hundred miles behind us—"

"But Checker's in town," said Dexter softly, without losing his smile. "An' he's bought Slab Moran. There's a slick Eastern banker name o' Lister. Remember them, Ben. But don't try t' fight 'em, because they got the law on their side an' they got a hundred coyotes from Edgeville's slums at their beck an' call. I'll be back, son. Take it easy." He was in a hurry, going out the back way.

He was in back of the shop where May sold notions and women's hats, he realized. He was in May's bed. He saw a pallet made up on the floor and knew she had been sleeping there. He looked up at her where she stood silent while King Dexter left the room.

He said, "How long I been here, May?"

"A night and a day. It's nine o'clock at night now," she said. She was a dark girl, tall, full-bosomed, full of a suppressed fire. He had known her for years, knew the bitterness and courage of her. "The doctor said you might have a concussion, but you seem all right."

"I'll be up in a few hours," he said, more to assure himself than to reassure her. She needed no reassurance, he knew. She was strong—almost too strong. That was because of John, her wild, reckless brother. He said, "John brought me in?"

"He put you in Breach's carriage. You shot Breach. He was the leader. John knows the whole set-up. Gray had Moran send the scum of Edgeville after you. Moran rules Edgeville. Gray bought him." The girl's voice was matter-of-fact, without emotion. She had known too many devious things to be affected by this latest, Ben knew.

He said, "Then John's turned to our side?"

"John is against Gray," she said. "He always had been. John believes Gray killed father. He says Hoskin was just a wild boy and Gray made him the goat, sending the lynch mob after him, joining them to show his spirit. Gray made himself popular, hanging Hoskins. John say Gray murdered father over an argument at cards.

Father was a gambler, you know that."

He said, "May, you hadn't ought to fret about such things." He was repeating King's phrases, as usual—"Don't fret," King always said. "John's been wild, sure. He always hated me."

"John always hates anyone who looks twice at me," she said flatly.

"Lotta good it does me," he murmured. The weakness came on, and his eyes closed. His voice trailed on, "You're so bitter. Like you ate somethin' that turned yuh. You're so purty and sweet sometimes, then yuh git bitter again. Cain't seem t' make you stay sweet. May."

When he was asleep the tears came, running down her face. She sat abruptly on a stool at his side, weeping. She had fought for so long, she was exhausted. She knew about John, knew what he had done, she had kept it from the world. It was too much.

The terrible part was that John was not naturally wild. He never debauched, never swam in the seas of drunken wildness which the others of the wild bunch lived only to enjoy. John was deliberately bad. It was because of their father, and what had happened. John had been old enough to get onto the streets to see Hoskin hung—he had seen his father's body, riddled with bullets. He had heard things which could not be proven—and he had believed them. So John had taken his revenge on a world without justice, a small revenge, perhaps, and never enough to satisfy his dark spirit.

She had often wondered what John did with the money he had won at cards, stolen from banks and trains, gained from the sale of rustled cattle. He never spent much, except on guns, boots and hats. He gave her what she needed, but she made enough from the shop for her simple wants.

What she wanted John could not give her. She could not go among the people north of the tracks, she could not mingle with other girls. She was the daughter of a murdered gambler, the sister of a wild one. She kept a store. The wild ones came in and tried to make love to her, the rakes sailed in and out of her orbit and she never gave them a glance—but they came and the "good" people knew it.

And then Ben came, young, innocent, a cattle man. And for his own sake she could never let him know how he stirred her, because there was John. The straightforward young heir to Queen Ranch would have a brother-in-law who might any day be caught red-handed and decorate a tree limb, dancing on air. Or worse, John might involve Ben in a fight in John's defense—on the wrong side of the law.

Outdoors somewhere there were shots. They pounded with an insistence which sent May Dorn's pulse pounding. There was a law against carrying firearms in Edgeville, but it was enforced by Marshal Moran in his own interests. Still, it had prevented simple, drunken cowboys from shooting up the town. This was not a wild fusillade directed at the moon, she thought.

The young man on the bed started up. His eyes were glazed now and his brow glistened with sweat. The fever had come, after all.

"Jake," he said hoarsely. "Jake, your hat. It's on the ground, Jake. There's a hole in your old hat, Jake!" He laughed horribly. He cried, "King! They got them all, King. Miguel—remember Miguel, King? Killed him. They got them all!"

She ran across the room for a towel, then flung herself upon him as he attempted to struggle from under the covers. She was strong, and the fever did not seem to give him vigor. She was able to push him back, but she had to remain there, holding him, mopping his fevered brow.

"King," he repeated again and again. "Got to get t' King."

KING DEXTER left the rear of May Dorn's place and walked in deepest shadow. He slipped past the Aces Up Saloon, across lots from May's. He paused a moment, irresolutely, imagining that he had glimpsed a skulking form behind him. The lines had returned to his smooth face and his mind was clicking with machine-like rapidity.

He had to hire someone to guard Ben Burke, he knew. He must get out of Edgeville himself, fast. The story John Dorn had whispered earlier that night—in a corner of the stable behind the hotel—was hot and potent. King knew the Governor was honest enough, knew that the tale of corrupted legislators would bring down the wrath of that dignitary. If he could get to the capital, convince the Governor of Gray's nefarious activities, get martial law in Edge-

ville until the town could be cleaned up, he might come to a head and head settlement with Checker Gray.

He knew better than to try conclusions now. As he had always taught Ben, there was no use butting your head against a stone wall. You climbed over, dug under, or went around such obstructions. Checker Gray had bought the law hereabouts—it was necessary to bring in superior law.

He thought he could do it. He had letters, written secretly, from every reputable businessman in Edgeville. He had John Dorn, strangely come over to the side of law and order in these last days.

He wondered about the thin man. Dorn had long been an annoyance which King had not wished to eliminate because of his sister. King had seen the way it was between Ben Burke and the girl—and had longed for the day when Ben would marry and restore the dignity to Queen Ranch which only a woman could give. Now the lanky young man was divulging all he knew—of the raid on the herd, of Gray's activities throughout the State. Almost as though Dorn had been an undercover detective.

But that was it, of course. Dexter's keen mind leaped back, then down through the years. He remembered Jack Dorn, the dark gambler, and his death. Dexter had been in Texas then, but he had heard the rumors of double-crossing, of Gray's promptness in having the unfortunate Hoskin hung.

So John Dorn had taken to the dark ways to learn things, Dexter thought triumphantly. On the witness stand he could ruin Checker Gray with his inside knowledge. Had he been working to that end through the years?

Whatever the reason, Dorn was the key to it all. He had inspired this trip. Dexter looked at his large silver watch. The evening train would pull out in half an hour. His bag was at the station. He had only to remain out of sight until train time—a situation he detested, but was willing to accept for the general good—and he might have a chance to come back at Gray, despite the loss of his herd.

The man following him had disappeared. Dexter paused to roll and light a straw paper cigarette. He was behind the Aces Up and he could see the light of May Dorn's place across the lot. He hoped Ben would be able to move around tomorrow—Gray might do anything desperate now, and soon.

They came at him from three directions. Chingo was closest, having slipped out of the rear door of the Aces Up. He recognized the lean stoop of Gray's figure and knew at once what it was. He had not thought they would dare do it so openly, but he knew they would do it.

His gun was in the holster but the skirt of his black travelling coat was slightly in the way. His hand went down, nabbed the butt of the old Colt. He had it out, ready for use.

But Chingo was not drawing. The squat foreman of Cross J hurled himself forward. His taloned clutch fastened upon King Dexter's gun arm.

At the same time Chingo swung away, putting Dexter between him and the two who came in from the sides. Gray took two running steps, got close. He said, "Goodbye, King, damn yuh. Fry in hell!" He fired twice.

Moran was on the other side. He carefully aimed at King's head, putting the gun close as Chingo stepped away and King fell silently to earth. He also sent two shots into the bones of the skull.

Chingo said, "An' that does it."

They walked rapidly into the alley next to the Aces Up. A curious head or two poked out, but no one bothered to investigate. Moran slid through to the street and resumed his patrol. Gray gripped Chingo's arm. His features were pinched, taut. He said, "In about an hour, you find the body. Holler fer Moran. You know where to put it."

Chingo said, "Yeah. Ain't nobody come. I'll be safe as a silver dollar. Don't worry, Checker."

"I ain't worried!" snapped Gray. "I only want thet damn Dorn. He and Slab got to find 'im. Pack that corpse over yonder and look fer 'im."

"Don't worry," repeated Chingo. He felt as though a boulder had been removed from his shoulders, a load he had been carrying for years. He stared at the body of King Dexter. He had never realized how afraid he had been of the tall, quiet man until now, when it was over, over for good.

Chapter III

HERE'S MUD IN YOUR GRAVE

THE DOOR to May Dorn's place opened and shut on an instant. She turned from the bed. She said, "John, what is it?"

The bony, skull-like face gleamed whitely in the lamp. John Dorn's glittering teeth showed in a grimace. He was tall and almost ghost-like in his thinness. He was clad, as always, in jet black from head to foot.

He said tensely, "They got Dexter. I hadda run fer it. There's the carriage out front. Git him up."

"He's sick—his fever." She stared at her brother. "King? Dead?"

"I seen it." He exhaled slowly, holding onto himself. "Git Burke outa here. They'll be after him next, somehow or other. Come on!"

His lean hands plucked her out of her stupor. She moved aside, and he brought Ben's clothing. She walked into the store and leaned against the notion counter. Her head spun around.

Then her mind was clear. She reached behind a hanging curtain and brought out a carpetbag. She began to pack, bandages, linen, the medicine the doctor had left. She threw in some riding clothes she had not worn in years, a pair of beaded moccasins.

John called, "Help me, sister." She went to the door and looked up and down the street. It was mouse-quiet. She put the carpet-bag into the carriage.

She went back inside and John had Ben on his feet. Ben was muttering, stumbling. She got on his other side. They went swiftly through the darkened store, onto the street. She helped John put Ben into the carriage which had once before saved his life. John started to climb over the wheel to the front seat.

She caught him, swung him away. She said, "Get your horse. You know this is too dangerous for you. I have his guns. Where do I take him?"

"You can't go," said her brother. "You'll be ruint, May. It'll git to be known. Marshal Moran's got the town in his hip pocket. This will mean we're outlaws—and King's friends'll think we deserted."

"Don't be a fool, John," she said. "I can do it, if you won't be a fool. Where to?"

"It's a man's business," he said. His large eyes in the great hollow sockets stared at her. "It's the owl hoot for us, until this settles down."

"John," she said softly. "John, can't you see? I love him."

"You can't!" He cried. "I won't have it, I tell yuh. You can't do it. No man is good enough."

She said, "Isn't that Moran? Down the street? With Chingo?"

John groaned, "Damn it, sister. Hurry, then. To Devil's Pass—I'm scared you can't make it. The defile, into the canyon, then up the side hill. You know the place."

"Thieves' Nest," she said steadily. "I brought you in from there, wounded, before they cleaned out the Jackson gang."

"They're all dead," he said. "No one knows it now. Hurry, Sis."

She leaped over the wheel, holding her skirts high. She gathered the reins and spoke softly to the horses. She drove steadily out of town, in case she was seen. On the rear seat Ben lay and babbled of King Dexter.

She did not know then whether he would live. But she had to drive, across the plain, onto the rocky road where the tracks would be lost. She had to drive all night, trying to jolt as little as possible, into the pass, up the hill, resting the horses from time to time on the grade. She turned off, went through the tricky entrance, and was on the high clearing where a shanty stood, relic of the notorious—and demised—Jackson gang.

Then she had to get him out of the carriage and into bed, fully dressed, except for his boots, which John had thrown in the carriage. She wondered where John was, what he was doing.

Then she sat on a cracker box and stared at the log wall of the cabin. She had cut the last string, now. Womanlike, she had to pause and consider. In a moment she could throw it off, she could remember that she had left nothing behind except a few hats and a counter of notions, that her life in Edgeville had been a shadowy mockery of a woman's existence. But for that little while she had to mourn the monotonous days which she could never know again.

Then Ben Burke was awake again. He was sitting up, staring at her, at the un-

familiar surroundings. She said calmly, "We had to bring you up here. Something bad has-happened."

His voice was steady enough, "I had a nightmare, I reckon. King. It's King, ain't it?"

She said, "Yes, Ben, it's King."

"They had to get him, because I lived," he said. He put his head down on the pillow for a moment, but she knew he had not lost consciousness again. The fever was broken. She marvelled at his physical strength. When he again sat up his face was hard, and it was older.

She said, "John saw it. He got you out and I drove up here. He'll be here soon."

"John," he said. "John got me out. Twice now—but he hates my insides, May. How come?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I've never really known John."

"Nor anyone else," muttered Ben. His eyes came straight at her. "You got to git outa here, May."

She shook her head. The moment had long since passed. "I'm staying. We're outlaws. Moran is the law. Gray owns Moran. Lister is money. Gray is in with Lister. It'll be known we helped you. John will bring horses—then we'll decide what to do."

"You don't understand," said Ben. He put a hand to the bandage on his skull, steadied himself. "I ain't leavin'. John knows who killed King. The Queen Ranch is bust, anyhow. There's only one thing now."

She said, "I know. You'll go after whoever downed King."

"You cain't stay," he repeated. He had to lie down again, but he was gaining strength, and the urge within him would feed him.

She said, "Someone's coming." She picked up one of Ben's two revolvers and walked quickly to the door. He stared at her, scrambling to get up. But she turned and motioned that it was all right. She said, "It is John. He has three horses, saddled. He'll have provisions. You must be kind to him, Ben. He—you'll have to make up your mind about him."

Ben nodded. He waited, tense, scarcely knowing why. The door opened and the thin man entered, laden with sacks. May moved to the corner where a rusted stove sagged on three legs and propped a piece of wood to straighten it. John Dorn turned slowly and surveyed Ben. His great eyes held a low, steady light.

Ben said huskily, "Thanks fer what yuh did, John. I got to know about King."

John's clawlike hand dismissed the thanks. "Didn't do it fer you, Burke. This is somethin' personal with me—about King. They come in on him, the three of them. Chingo grabbed his gun hand."

Ben rasped, "Chingo—Gray—was it Slab Moran?"

"The three fastest guns in Kansas right now," said Dorn coolly.

"You seen it—and you didn't go in?" Ben's face was hot.

"I was too close. I'd been gunned fast," said John, shrugged. "I ain't no hero, Burke. I got to live—awhile."

Ben said, "You saw a good man go down." He stopped. He tried to put himself in Dorn's place. His head spun again and he could not think. He muttered, "All right, Dorn. Yuh got me out. I'll handle it."

John Dorn shrugged. "Yuh stick yer nose in Edgeville and yuh'll be lynched. They dragged King's body over behind May's place. Two rats belongin' t' Moran put out a yarn you an' King had words over the jump up of the herd. Said King was givin' yuh what-fer. Then King come out, an' yuh staggered t' the door, called him, an' shot him a[illegible] he could git out his gun. The rats is willin' t' swear it happened thataway. Moran claims I was in on it, fired a couple extry shots inta King." He paused and looked at the stunned Ben Burke, at his sister. His voice became hard, "King was no friend o' mine. I rustled Queen steers, all right. But I tipped him off on the jump-up. I tole him plenty about Gray. He was bound fer the capital when they got him."

May said, "Then you two can ride to the Governor, when Ben's able. Tell him what you know. He'll help."

"Me? The Governor'd listen t' me?" John Dorn laughed harshly. "I'm an outlaw. My reputation ain't exactly lily white. With King Dexter behind me it was different. Now—I'm not testifyin' to nothin'."

"John!" cried his sister. "You must. We're helpless."

Ben interrupted, "What you plannin' to

do, John? Moran'll have them after you, too."

The thin young man stared at the door of the cabin. "My plans ain't made."

"Neither are mine," said Ben. "But I ain't ridin' to the capital."

John Dorn wheeled slowly. "I ain't one to be takin' a pardner, yuh understan'."

"I don't need one," said Burke hotly.

May said, "Ben, you'll need all the help you can get. Gray is clever, he is a ruthless murderer."

"He never gave King a chance."

"Moran's got a hundred thieves and killers under him," said Dorn coldly. "If you wanta buck them alone, go to it."

The girl came from the stove, standing between them. The forcefulness of her dark beauty struck across the room, filling it with a power which dimmed their sullenness and distrust. She said, "You two will work together. Maybe not in friendship, but because you have a common cause. Maybe your methods may be different—but you both want to ruin Checker Gray. It's a good thing for the country for Gray to be finished. Right now honest men are quaking in their boots because of him. You will work together because you must—and because it is right."

Ben Burke held his head in both hands. She was right, as May was usually right about things not pertaining to her personal business. He knew it. He gathered all his strength and arose [illegible]g. He held out his hand. He said, with effort, "All right, John."

The thin man stared at the proffered hand. Then he gripped it with amazing strength, even as he supported Ben's elbow with his free hand. He mumbled, "Siddown, Ben. You gotta get back strength. This is goin' to be the hiyu-est war two men ever started in this country."

The stove was warming up. May went back to it, a woman again, rustling up a make-shift meal for her men. The men moved out of doors, and now their voices mingled. John Dorn eased Ben upon a bench near the door.

It was hard, it was all bitterness. She wondered if there would ever be surcease from it, if her world would ever stop shaking on its foundations and bring her the things she craved with all her might.

John Dorn was saying earnestly, "I been watchin' him fer years. Moran sent me along on the jump-up—and I went because I wanted to peg it down to him. I got me two of them that night, and I'd of got Breach, only you did first."

Ben said "I see you hadda do it thataway bein' alone." He was aware that John had dealt in treachery but it seemed like spy work in wartime to him now.

"He kilt my father," said Dorn passionately. "I know it. An ole gambler tole me, years ago, when he was dyin'. I shot the son when he threw me a short cyard—an' he whispered it t' me as he was peggin' out. Others know it—Moran knowed it when it happened. That's how Moran got t' be marshal. Now it's Lister, Moran an' Gray, with Chingo t' do the secret dirty work Moran can't handle."

Ben said slowly, "There is only one way—git 'em separate. Each in his time."

John Dorn said, his big eyes glistening, "You an' me, Ben, is goin' to git along. There, May's callin' us t' eat. Now you lay down, I'll bring yuh somethin'. Yuh ain't sich a bad jasper, after all."

CHECKER GRAY said, "It's been a damn month. Next week the biddin' starts down in Texas and I gotta go and git Chinaman Range. And we still ain't found them two."

"Nor the girl," added Crane Lister. His fat rump nestled in the biggest chair in Edgeville. Chingo leaned against the wall, Moran strode a straight chair in the private office of the banker. "It is amazing that we cannot locate them for the girl must be with her brother. And Burke." He permitted himself a slight smirk, glorying in Gray's instant anger.

Gray shouted, "Moran, this is your damn job."

"Combed the country," shrugged Moran. "I say go down and git yore land. Them three have made a long pasear."

"Ain't heard a word of 'em," agreed Chingo. "They lit a shuck and ain't stopped. Mebbe they are down tryin' t' run Queen."

"Yes, you may find them in your home territory," nodded Lister. "If Burke and the girl are married, for instance, she will want a home—"

Gray said, "Shut up, you fat fool!"

Lister's jowls quivered. His small mouth opened, then shut tightly. He said, "You

will be needing how much cash, Mr. Gray?"

The lean man said in an ugly voice, "All you can spare, fat man."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the banker. "You cannot speak to me in those accents."

"No? I'll speak to you of conspiracy to murder then," said Gray. "In connection with the takin' off of one King Dexter."

"And hang yourself?" Lister sneered. "I've stood enough of your confounded insolence, Gray. I do not like the way things have gone. You have been unable to turn up two men who can harm you. I doubt if my bank will consider you a good risk."

Chingo came away from the wall. Moran lifted his yellowish eyes in a single pitying glance, then dropped them again to his boots. Checker Gray was smiling, and it was an unpleasant sight.

Gray said softly, "Y'see, Lister, I got to have Chinaman Range. My affairs is a mite confused. It means everything t' me, jist now. And you got to gimme the money."

"I will consider." Lister's glance happened to run full-tilt into Gray's. The fat man gulped. He was shrewd, he had dealt with hard men. But never had he seen flaming murder so close to a calm surface. And the terrible part of it was the control Gray was exercising, the cold, ferocious reserve which he exhibited.

He looked at Chingo, and the squat foreman was crouched, his hands resting near his gun belt. Moran still did not move. Lister said, "Er—you can't mean you would go to the gallows—"

"No, Lister. You'll go to Boot Hill," said Gray softly.

It was true. He knew it. The beginnings of panic caught at the tissue of the fat man's heart. His breathing became swifter. He said, "Yes. I see. Very well, Gray. Tomorrow you shall have the cash."

"Good," said Gray. "I knew yuh'd see it our way. Well, *hasta luego,* Senor Lister. Tomorrow." He nodded at the other two. They went out.

Lister gagged, the color leaving his face. From a lower drawer of the desk he took a bottle of fine brandy. He polished a tumbler, half-filled it, drained it. He arose and waddled to the door, locking it.

At dark that night the carriage which had mysteriously turned up, empty, at the livery stable, was standing in darkness behind the hotel. In the Aces Up Saloon, Crane Lister drank with Gray and Chingo and Moran. A poker game was proposed and the three Westerners, true to the breed, declared themselves in. Lister watched for awhile, then drifted away.

Five moments later he arrived behind the hotel, puffing and panting. In his hands were two bags. He gave the colored boy ten dollars in silver. He climbed into the rig and set off eastward. The train would leave Edgeville in an hour—he would catch it at the way station, flag it down. He eased a pair of duelling pistols of large caliber onto the seat beside him. He whipped the horses, chuckling a little at the thought of Gray, confident in the belief that a fat man could not move fast, playing poker for comparatively small stakes while Lister got away with the big pot.

He drank from the brandy bottle. It was getting pretty low and his heart pounded a little, but he was conscious only of the blessed relief. He had been frightened for months—and only now did he realize it. These unpredictable, wild Westerners.

IN EDGEVILLE there had been a phantom in black. It moved silently, swiftly and her a humble peon whispered half fearfully the news that Gray was playing poker, and there a drunken sot muttered that the fat man had slipped from the Aces Up Bar.

The black horse stood motionless, waiting until the rider came, slipping through the night, mounting without the rattle of spurs, riding westward. At the cottonwood copse another black stood with rider silent, waiting. The phantom rode close and said, "Like Manuel said, pardner. Lister flew the coop. You was smart t' figger thet, Ben."

"He's a tenderfoot. Gray's too salty fer 'im," said Ben. "Do we ride, pardner?"

"East," nodded John Dorn. The two horses were matched perfectly in size and stride—they had been carefully selected by John. They fled through the night and the stars made a faint light to mark their passage. They rode clean around Edgeville, they came back to a level plain through which the shining rail ran true as a die to the Eastern marts. On those rails the Queen Ranch fat cattle should be riding

to the slaughter pens now, Ben thought. They had been slaughtered, many of them, on the flats outside of Edgeville. But not all, he thought gratefully, not all. John Dorn and a vaquero John had once saved from hanging had been busy. It had been a terrific task to round up the frightened steers, and a worse one to hide them, moving from time to time as Slab Moran's deputies searched the country for the fugitives.

But it was all a pattern which Ben Burke saw clearly. It was amazing how he had grown during these weeks. His mind had formulated certain ideas, chiselled them into hard facts, he believed. He had analyzed the enemy from the teachings of King Dexter. He found he could remember every warning his foster father had given him, every little detail King had imparted which had to do with Gray and his ilk.

The first was laziness. In rounding up the Queen cattle he had counted heavily on the fact that whiskey-sodden deputies would not prolong a hot, thirsty hunt. He had been proven correct. The swift movement of which John was master, the hard work which both had put forth had paid off. The Queen herd was slowly regaining some strength, the beeves were fattening on the green hills.

Now it was Lister. King had said that fat-bottomed Easterners could not yet run the Western land. He had said that some day the capitalists would buy the ranch—but the country then would be tame. It was still too woolly for them, King had said. Ben had counted on this, and John Dorn had put his carefully cultivated, humble spies on the stout banker.

The black horses fled beneath the touch of heel without spur, proud horses, of good sound blood. The night ride was thrilling, exhilarating. The two young men came to the crossroads where the rails ran and there was a lone pine, tall as a mountain, stately as a Spanish don. There was a low limb, outstretching an ominous arm westward.

John Dorn uncoiled his rope. "Might as well have it ready."

Ben said uneasily, "This fat jasper didn't actually have no hand in murder, John. Mebbe we oughta jest thrash him an' put him on the train."

"He's carryin' two bags. If one of 'em ain't full of cowmen's money, we won't hang him," offered Dorn. "Sometimes, Ben, I suspect you are a bit squeamish. This man was a party t' the conspiracy agin King Dexter. Before *and* after the fact, like they say."

Ben climbed down from his horse. He stood in the shadow of the tree, glumly awaiting the carriage they knew would come. He was, he supposed, soft. John Dorn was not soft. He was as hard as a steel rod—and not much thicker. Lately, as their plans matured, there was a glint in his eye, a feverish jerkiness to his movements which disturbed Ben deeply. It almost seemed that Dorn was not quite of this world.

May had noticed it too, and Ben knew she was worried. As their plans matured, John Dorn softened toward his partner and his sister, but longer and longer he stayed by himself, that gleam in his large, round eyes. And his resolution never flagged. He was a man with a mission, Ben knew, and within him burned a consuming fire. It was yet undecided whether the fire would eat the man who carried it.

The carriage was coming. The squeak of the left hind wheel was a memory Ben had carried from his painful rides. The two riders waited, their clothing and horses black invisible in the darkness beneath the cottonwood.

They were suddenly aware of song. They stared. The faint starlight illuminated the trotting horses, the swaying fat figure on the seat. Lister was yodeling, "Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair."

The carriage drew abreast of the tree. John Dorn's horse suddenly sprang forward. The lean man came alongside the seat and his voice was a cutting sword across the song. "Just a minute, Lister! You got a debt t' pay." The rope snaked out. The loop settled neatly around the neck of the fat banker.

Ben was at the heads of the team. He held them there, steady, fearful of John Dorn and his rasping, strange voice. For a moment there was silence.

Then Crane Lister's whiskey courage deserted him and he babbled. "I didn't do it. Gray did it. Gray and Moran and Chingo killed him. I was nowheres near. I'll give you money. I only want to take the train.

I'll give you lots of money—here in this bag." One hand was at the rope around his neck, the other reached trembling for the bag.

John Dorn said, "We know. Why should we take part o' your money?"

The low limb threw a faint shadow across the fat man's face. His pop eyes went up, staring. He said, "You—you can't hang me! You can't. I never shot a man in my life. Never. I'm a businessman. You can't do it!"

He started to rise in the seat. His hands clutched at his throat. He gurgled once, twice. He fell back, inert.

John Dorn's voice went back to its normal tone. "Hey. They is somethin' wrong with this jasper. Y' know what? I think he's daid!"

The horses stood, heads drooping. Ben left them and mounted the carriage wheel. He lifted the noose from about the fat neck. He bent and listened at the banker's chest.

He said, "He smells of brandy—sour. Yep, there's the bottle. King useta say a fat man should never drink brandy. Bad for the heart."

"Well, whaddaya know?" said John Dorn interestedly. "Never heard that in m' life. Let's git him outa there an' string him up any old how. Let Gray find him. Good for Gray's soul."

"No," said Ben. "Leave him. Those hosses will go home, we know that. Turn 'em around. Let Gray wonder."

John Dorn said, "He'd sure strain a rope, at that. But we ain't sendin' thet bag o' money back t' Gray. That'll buy us a hell of a lotta power we could use. That'll break Gray."

Ben handed down the black bag. He turned the team around. The fat man sagged over to one side and the springs gave to accommodate the dead weight. The horses started patiently back on another journey homeward.

Ben said, "Uh-huh. Reckon thet bag would buy Chinaman Range. But you remember what you said? About cowman's money?"

"I don't give a hang whose money—" Dorn stopped, surveying the tall, solid figure of his companion. He said cautiously, "We'll take it to the cabin an' hide it. Cain't turn it in now nohow."

"Okay," agreed Ben. He let Dorn handle the treasure. He knew the starved light in Dorn's eye. There would be trouble over that money, in the end, he decided reluctantly. He mounted and followed his strange partner over the back trail.

Down the main road the pounding pursuit drew up as the driverless carriage moseyed along. The three riders converged, their guns drawn. Chingo held the team. Gray flung himself onto the seat, grabbing for Lister's throat. His hands fell away, his eyeballs bulged.

He searched frantically for the black bag. His pulses were pounding. This was uncanny—like the complete disappearance of the trio he had sent his minions to find.

Chapter IV

LAST COACH TO BOOTHILL

MAY DORN wore the riding clothes and the moccasins all the time, now. Not that she did not possess other clothing. John appropriated what he thought she needed with blithe indifference to ownership upon his nocturnal expeditions into Edgeville. But she washed the shirt and short skirt in the stream and wore it constantly, doing the tasks of the household. Her legs were bare and tanned, but she was no longer conscious of them, nor of Ben's sidelong, half-frightened stares.

The amazing part was that she had enjoyed it while they were hiding and rallying their forces. Now she was not so sure. She said, "But there will be a hundred of them. Slab Moran has the underworld of the town at his beck and call."

"Wait and see," Ben counseled. He had come to take the lead in the long-range planning. John was the natural born skulker and guerilla, but Ben made the large plans. John was also worried now. Ben said stubbornly, "King taught me to play a man's weaknesses and let him work out his own ruin. If I'm wrong, King was wrong."

"King walked into it," John pointed out. "In the end they got him."

"But they didn't get us," Ben said grimly. "That was the weakness. They put their faith in Breach an' Breach didn't come through."

"I dunno," said John. "I was fer slippin'

inta town and gunnin' Moran from thet dark spot behind the smithy."

Ben said, "Then the hue and cry would be on for sure. This'll work. You wait—and not too long, neither." He watched May preparing their evening meal. She was growing lovelier by the day, he thought. It was a struggle to keep his mind on the stern plans at hand.

John said, "I'm goin' to make a last pasear. Be back in a minute." He slipped into the gathering twilight.

Ben said, "May!" Then he stopped, throttling himself to silence. When the girl turned he said, "You sure kin cook!"

In Edgeville that afternoon a certain Manuel Garcia had slid up to Slab Moran where that gentleman was picking his teeth outside the restaurant. He had grunted, "Many cow in hills. Thieves' Roost. You go, huh?"

Moran bit the toothpick in two. He said, "Thieves' Roost? We been up there."

"Too many in posse," winked Manuel. "I see John Dorn with black bag and he plenty excitement, you bet."

Moran looked down the street. Gray was in the poker game, trying to make a killing. He was frantic for money now. The three remaining conspirators had remained late the previous night, trying to formulate a plan. Gray was almost ready to loot the town—from under cover, of course, to get the wherewithal to bid in Chinaman Range the following week.

Slab Moran said, "You're loco, Manuel. Jest don't mention this, you hear? Jest keep quiet—or I'll be lookin' you up."

"Si, si," nodded the Mexican. "I plenty quiet, you bet, Marshal."

The peace officer drifted down to his office and planted his feet on a battered desk. Hat tipped low over his nose, he gave himself up to thought.

The black bag contained thousands. Once Gray had it in his hands he would be off to Texas to buy grazing land—for the Cross J. Slab Moran would get his cut, sure.

But Slab Moran had possessed money before. A couple of thousand dollars had a way of melting. When he had been a dashing young frontier marshal with long hair he had bucked the faro banks of Dodge and Abilene and Denver and Hays City and it had been a hiyu good time but he always wound up broke. His weakness was faro—and he knew it.

He had heard there were faro banks East. He had heard the Easterners did not play poker as well as their brothers west of the Mississippi. There were sixteen Boot Hill graves which his guns had filled and Slab Moran was no fool. He knew the fate of gunmen—he had been forced to shoot three men who were perfect strangers trying to gain a reputation by downing a notorious cowtown figure.

That bag of money—it would take a man a far piece, he ruminated. 'Specially if he did not have to split with pardners. He figured out the angles one by one. He knew Thieves' Roost. He knew the land about it. If Dorn was holed up there alone—

Even if Burke was with the thin man, he thought, there were ways. And if the girl was there—

He had long eyed the girl from afar. He knew Gray wanted her, and he was not fool enough to buck Gray. But he had yearnings of his own. It was his thought of the girl that decided him.

He waited until nightfall. Then he saddled up a horse behind the hotel—when Lister had departed. But Slab Moran carried a Sharps buffalo gun, two revolvers, a Bowie in his boot and a soft reata, and his destination was westward.

He thought of the past as he rode, of the women and the smoke-filled saloons and the noise and the tinny music of the dance halls and the shots which ever punctuated the nights. It was peaceful and quiet as he rode to Thieves' Roost. That was what he sought, he told himself, peace and quiet, away from such deep-dyed scoundrels as Checker Gray. He had been the whip for Gray too long. Edgeville was filled with tinhorns, cutthroats, robbers and cheap gunmen because Gray had demanded that they be imported. It had been a strain to keep this hodge-podge in line.

It would be plumb nice, he thought, to grab that bag, force the girl, make for the big Eastern cities. He would change his name, dress the part, claim he had made his money mining. It was a fine prospect. He rode very quickly, going around the grassy approach to Thieves' Roost and up the slope of the hill beyond the hideout.

He rode carefully past the natural basin

and saw that Manuel had not lied. He could even distinguish in the moonlight a Queen brand on a straying steer. His heart beat a little faster. The black bag loomed large in his consciousness.

JOHN DORN said passionately, "He's mine. It was him climbed inta Gray's job after father was killed and Gray got rich."

"All right, John," said Ben quietly. "I'll ride on his back trail and make sure he's alone. Although I knew he'd come alone."

"Yuh sure did," said John admiringly. "Yuh even knew whichaway he would ride. I gotta hand it to yuh, pardner." He was gay tonight, for the first time since Ben had known him. He wore one black-butted gun, tied low on his thin flank. He walked in low-heeled boots over the rocks. The invisible horse and rider above them stopped.

Ben rode his unshod chestnut, a second string mount, to the east. He had figured this out, and he had been correct, as he said. He dismounted and walked along the path leading upward. He heard nothing, saw no one. He located the natural ambush which a rocky ledge provided, overlooking the cabin below. May had orders to stay indoors—all should be ready.

He came in close, certain now that the invader was alone. It was an easy capture. He wanted to talk with Moran—after the marshal was reduced to captivity. He wanted to know something of Gray's immediate plans. He had to figure a way to get Gray. He knew the wiliness of his enemy, and King Dexter had always warned him about underestimating the opposition.

In the end, he thought bitterly, King had done just that. He had not counted on plain murder. It was not in King's lexicon that a man could trap a fellowman and shoot him down without a chance—not even Gray.

Above there was another sound. Ben crawled forward. He could see the ledge now. He stared as the moon came out from behind a cloud.

There were two men on the shelf of rock. He heard John Dorn's voice. It echoed hollowly among the rocks.

"So you're the fastest draw in Kansas? Then make your draw, Moran!"

They were facing each other, not ten feet between them. The Marshal of Edgeville snarled, "I call upon yuh t' surrender, John Dorn."

"Make yer damn draw," John said. "I aim t' see thet, oncet."

They were like two back alley cats, crouching, spitting at one another. He should have known better, Ben thought. He should have known John Dorn would not be satisfied with holding this hated enemy for later disposal. He tried to run up the slope. He slipped on a rock and almost fell.

He was on his hands and knees. He stared upward. Not fifty feet away the moon threw a brilliant glow upon the two adversaries. Moran said warningly, "Yuh asked fer it, Dorn!"

Neither had moved. It was the code duello of the west to perfection. The two bowed figures, hands held slightly apart from the waist, elbows bent, hands dangling faced each other. Now it was Moran who moved, his hand sliding in, with that darting, almost birdlike motion of the practised gun-thrower. He could boast of sixteen notches in square fights against the desperadoes who lived by Colt law. He was the epitome of the frontier town gun-thrower. Ben's heart was somewhere near his mouth, his own hand went instinctively to his gun. He was no expert of this caliber—either of those two could kill him, he knew.

Moran's gun seemed far ahead of John Dorn's. It came hip level, it spoke, the sound of it pounding among the recesses of rocky hill.

But John Dorn had turned sideways. His lean legs had uncoiled in a tremendous leap. It carried him to the wall of the cliff. His right hand plucked the weapon from its open holster. He moved again, and it seemed to Ben that he would never shoot.

Once more the marshal's gun crashed. Then there was a single report, almost blending with Moran's second shot. John Dorn stood, leaning against the rock, his white teeth gleaming like a tombstone in a cemetery, his eyes gleaming in the hollows of the cavernous sockets. Ben recovered his balance and raced to the ledge.

Slab Moran was down. The smoking gun had fallen from his hand. He was holding himself at the belt and a thin trickle of blood was oozing between his fingers. He said, "Damn! Slick . . . trick . . . shot too . . . durn fast. . . ."

"You're goin' to make a good end, I see," Dorn mocked him. "Like my father, huh?"

But Ben was leaning over the dying man. He said sharply, "Who killed Jack Dorn? You're goin' out, Moran. You might as well say."

The marshal looked up. "Hullo, Burke. Jack Dorn? Gray kilt him, o'course. John knowed thet fer years."

"I wanted to be dead sure," said Ben. "What's Gray plannin' now?"

"Loot. Anythin'. Gotta have money. You reckon they is really gamblin' hells East where the drinks is free an' women . . . wear dresses . . . cut 'way down to here?"

"So I've heard tell," said Ben.

"Black bag," said the Marshal of Edgeville. "Money . . . lots o' money. . . ." He sighed. "T'ain't scarcely wuth it," he muttered.

John Dorn said, "Ain't thet buzzard dead yet?"

Ben stood up. He said, "Yeah. He's dead. Damn you, John!"

"He was in it," said John Dorn dully. "I allus knew I'd get him with thet trick. Practised it fer years. Knew he threw the first shot too damn fast. Seen him many a time." He came away from the cliff, lurched. He sat down and smiled foolishly. "But he was hell with the second, huh, pardner?"

"You're hit!"

"Yeah. Knew he'd nick me," said Dorn.

Ben shook his head. Despair settled upon him. It had been a good fight until now. He leaned over Dorn.

The hole was in his thigh. It was a big hole, and the danger of infection from the soft-nosed .45 slug was great, with no doctor around. Ben picked up the thin man. He weighed very little.

MANUEL was an undersized rascal with a scar on his left eyelid. He waved his hands and said, "Gray take over Edgeville. He boss now. Moran gone, Gray got all *cochino* like dees!" He held up a dirty fist.

John Dorn lay on the bunk, his legs swathed in bandages. May Dorn sat quietly in a corner. Ben paced the floor.

Manuel said, "Mucho robbing, stealing. Ha! Is fine!"

Ben said, "Yeah, yeah. Very fine."

"We never thought o' thet," John Dorn frowned. "He kin rob the bank, hold up a train, order a killin'—and never show hisself."

"Gray, he vamos soon," nodded Manuel. "He pack. Cheengo, he watch, always watch. Beeg gun, ha!"

"I figgered Moran would come alone because he would want the money," said Ben dully. "He'd been gettin' the short end. He wouldn't trust nobody, and he wouldnt' wanta share. But Gray would bring all Edgeville—then run off with the money. Gray is smarter than sixty Morans."

"Yuh got to go an' git him," groaned Dorn. "Yuh was right, Ben. I shoulda played safe with Moran. If I hadn't got this hole in me—"

"The two of us against Edgeville?" Ben smiled without humor. "Nope. We couldn't pull it. King allus said Gray was the biggest conniver in the West. He knew Gray better'n anybody."

"Then how did he expect t' win agin him?"

"King said if yuh gave men like Gray enough rope they'd hang theirselves," said Ben. "Trouble is, if we give 'im rope now he'll get holt of Chinaman Range and hang Queen Ranch, too."

They sat, each wrapped in his own thoughts. May Dorn was silent these hours, leaving the talk to the men. Manuel composed himself for a siesta—he was merely an errand boy, undependable for any action. Ben went outdoors and walked up and down the clearing. Lately he found it hard to think at all when in the same room with May. Things were coming to a head in many places. He was earning his manhood the hard way, he thought.

It was impossible that they should allow Gray to get away. If the underworld looted the town and Gray got enough money, the game would be lost. Ben meant to be on the stage himself, aiming south for the land sale. He walked west of the clearing and stared toward the grazing ground of the cattle they had reclaimed in their weeks of riding. There were mavericks, strays of every brand, much of the Queen herd. It had been hard to throw them into the hollow and hold them there.

His bowed head jerked up. He walked

back to the cabin, went within. He said, "Manuel, were you ever a vaquero?"

The Mexican's head bobbed. "Si, señor. Too moch work. Ha!"

Ben said, "The connecting stage for Texas leaves tomorrow night. Late. If Gray's goin' to make it, he'll have to pull his big stunt quick."

Dorn sat up on the cot. He said, "Say! That's right. Manuel, you go down and find out. It's bound t'be known. Then git back here fast."

Ben said, "And bring a man who can herd cattle. A Texas cowboy. Anyone—so he's halfway honest."

"Honest?" Manuel's eyes popped. "But señor—"

"You heard him," roared Dorn. "Git!"

Manuel scurried from the cabin. Ben said, "If I can time it right, and if them cutthroats act like they should—"

May Dorn's eyes widened. Then she arose and slipped from the shanty. John Dorn fretted, "If I could set a hoss. Ben, you cain't pull it alone. I know yuh are a-goin' to try it, but it ain't in the cyards."

Ben said, "What can we do?" King Dexter had given him no formula for this. He could only act, to the best of his ability. He could only go down after Checker Gray and hope to get the lean man in his sights. Nothing else mattered now, not for this time, not even May. The thought of Gray slipping away laden with plunder to buy Chinaman Range, leaving Edgeville in chaos, leaving the honest folk robbed and helpless, was more than he could bear.

John Dorn said, "I see what yuh plan, okay. I got so I know yer mind, pardner. But they'll git ya."

"Moran nearly got you," Ben said. "You've got to stay still, John. If infection sets in, you'll be in a bad way."

"If it wasn't fer May—" John stared at Ben. "What about her?"

"What you mean?" Ben said feebly.

"Yuh know dang well what I mean. What's goin' t' happen to her?"

Ben said, "I dunno. I dunno, John. But I got to go down. They killed King. I got to do it."

"Yeah," John admitted. His face was more than ever like a skull, the skin drawn tight to bursting over his high cheekbones, his eyes sunken deep into his skull. "You got to do it. I kin see thet."

There was silence in the cabin. May came back inside, her eyes bright. No one spoke.

Chapter V

KILLER'S LAST KILL

CHECKER GRAY stood in the center of the room behind the Aces Up. There was a ruffian blocking the door, another outside to see that no one listened. Chingo scowled at the motley crew. There were six of them, appointed lieutenants for the night.

Gray said, "This'll be the biggest caper ever pulled in the West. You men kin be proud of this un." He showed his strong yellow teeth. He went on, "We start a fight out in the bar yonder, see? It's almost eleven o'clock. One of you is in each joint in town. When yuh hear the racket, yuh come out inta the street, boilin'. More fake fights start. At the bank we slam in an' grab the dough. The stores have safes full of it. Cohen's Emporium has got jewels, diamonds. We hit every damn place in town that's got a two-bit piece in it. Me an' Chingo, we'll have sacks. Jam everything into the sacks—that's so we all get an equal share. You get that?" His eye went around the room. He wondered how much would be held out by these consummate thieves, decided it didn't matter. There must be a hundred thousand in town—he could use half of that—and let them fight over the rest. Chingo would see to it that they coughed up enough.

He said, "If we fill the street with confusion, it's a dead cinch. Jam it, make a lotta noise. Don't let none of them crooks inside the bank or the stores—just yawl that can be trusted." He almost believed they could be trusted when he said it. They all tried to look noble.

Chingo said coldly, "I'll shoot the fust one makes a bad move."

The cutthroats shifted uneasily. They were afraid of Chingo's big guns, his sharp eye. It would go well, Checker Gray thought happily. He dismissed them with a wave of the hand. "Eleven o'clock, on the dot."

It was a crude, hasty plan, but he had to make that stage. Moran's disappearance had hastened his decision, but had been

lucky at that, he considered. Moran was dangerous and would have insisted upon a split. Chingo may not have been able to catch the marshal unprepared.

He would make sure he was seen trying to quell the disturbance, as a last semi-official act before leaving Edgeville. He had announced that he was taking the stage south. Everyone knew it. It would therefore not seem too strange that he should leave on the heels of the riot. He thought the looting could be completed and that he might even take credit for stopping the rioting before twelve. It all depended upon timing.

He went into the bar and ordered a drink for the house, beaming upon one and all.

Inside the back room a shallow cabinet opened. From among winter clothing hung on hooks a small figure emerged. Blinking, Manuel rubbed the scar over his eye. It was very tempting—an hour of plundering with the restraint all off. He hesitated.

Then he remembered the terrible, sunken eyes of John Dorn, the commanding voice. He shivered. There was something uncanny about Dorn. Manuel went into the street and found the Texas cowboy half drunk, but willing to visit other Texans who might need a favor. Then he attended to one more errand before setting out for Thieve's Nest.

AT PRECISELY eleven the lid blew off. From the Aces Up the mob poured into the street. From the other hells similar crowds emerged, shouting, yelling, brandishing weapons. Guns clattered impatiently, driving the decent citizens behind their shutters.

The lieutenants began working their way to their destination. Chingo stood at the corner of the bank, his guns out. Checker Gray was mounted, riding among the milling scum of Edgeville, shouting, laying about him with a quirt, to the disconcert of minor hirelings.

The window of the bank crashed. A chair went into Cohen's Emporium. Cohen, behind the safe, lifted a sawed-off shotgun, the first surprise of the evening. The blast sent two thieves into a heap, cut almost in two, blocking the door of the store.

Checker Gray had a fondness for jewelry. He shouted, "Get Cohen!"

Chingo left the bank and started across the street. The crowd swallowed him for a moment. Gray rode the horse over behind the bank building. His man was inside, a hulking fellow with a beard, a man Gray had decided not to trust very far.

At the western end of the street there was a cry. It gained in volume. Its accent was pure terror. Gray listened, one eye upon the man with the sack into which he was stuffing greenbacks with a leisurely hand.

The shout grew louder, swept down the street outside the bank. There was a thundering, pounding sound like surf upon sand. Gray leaped to the front of the bank, peering out, trying not to allow himself to be seen. He saw Chingo fire a revolver, saw Cohen drop the shotgun and fall.

Then he saw men running. The cutthroats and tinhorns and gunmen were racing with all their might eastward out of town. There was a clatter of horns. A steer branded Queen tossed a long horn at a fleeing monte dealer and bolted for the bank.

Gray took it all in with one glance. He made a funnel of his hands, bawling, "Chingo! Lay fer the riders!"

The foreman waved his hand and stood inside the door to the store, weighing his guns, waiting. Gray drew the weapon under his arm. The bearded man called, "Got it all, Boss."

"Good," said Gray. He turned and fired off-hand. The man holding the sack stared in disbelief, wheeled halfway around, threw the plunder away from him and fell over a desk. Gray turned indifferently back to the scene in the street.

The cattle filled the entire avenue. As they reached the eastern end they stopped. They began milling, crushing anyone who happened to get underfoot. Gray saw two of his lieutenants killed in that manner. In a few moments the street was a sea of longhorns—bellowing, restless, frightened.

There remained, of course, the back way. Gray thought of Chingo, isolated, waiting for riders Gray now knew would not come through. The cattle had been thrown into the street and bottled there. It was a shrewd touch, Gray admitted.

There remained only the kill. Gray picked up the sack of money in his left hand, blew out the lamp the bearded man had lit. He walked to the back door, set

it carefully ajar. Then he held the gun in his hand, waiting. They would come for him, of course. He was almost bored at the prospect.

They would expect him to lunge out the back and attempt to escape. After awhile, being young, they would come for him. Well, he'd be waiting. He was a patient man. There was a half hour—and the stage would be delayed, of course. Not likely they would leave without an important man like Checker Gray, what with the excuse of this shivaree.

He had travelled a long way on his wits and his ready guns and his lack of nerves. He was easy enough now, waiting to finish the job he had started, to kill Burke or Dorn—or both. It would clean it all up, he thought comfortably. There was enough money in the bag and he could not be held responsible for its loss, with half the bandits in the country loose on the town. He hefted the sack with satisfaction.

Minutes passed. No one came. There were shots outdoors. He wanted to go to the front and see what happened to Chingo. He depended upon the loyal foreman a great deal, he recognized now. There was nothing like loyalty, he decided. He would have to give Chingo a nice funeral.

The time grew long. He lifted the sack and there was sweat on his forehead. He wiped it, somewhat amazed at himself. His hand shook a little. This was drawing it too fine. They would come, because they were young, they were fools. He knew it. He took a step toward the door, then stopped. If he went out there and they were lying in wait—Dorn would kill him. He thought Burke would give him a chance, because Burke was a real fool. But Dorn was different. Rash, impulsive, but no sentimental fool.

He heard Chingo shout once. He gritted his teeth and crouched behind the desk over which the dead man hung. He made himself stay there, motionless, the gun in his sweating hand. The first doubts stirred in his brain.

The Texas cowboy held the herd at the west end of the street. Manuel was at the other. Ben Burke dropped from his horse. He slid behind the hotel, the tallest building in town. He ran inside, mounted the sill of an upstairs window, shinnied up a drain pipe to the roof.

The cattle had routed the band of robbers. He saw the shattered glass of Cohen's Emporium. He saw Chingo, clearly outlined for a moment, then shrinking into darkness. He did not see Gray. He went back down to the ground.

He rode the black horse around the town, behind the store where he had located Chingo. He found the rear door open where Cohen had left a retreat he never made. He slipped in. Chingo was watching

the bank across the way and didn't see him.

Ben saw Cohen, then, on the floor at the safe. He saw the open door of the safe, the plundered trays. Rage filled him, but he said clearly, "Chingo!"

The squat foreman came around. His gun was drawn. He fired.

Ben felt the wind of the bullet. His own gun spoke angrily, spitting fire into the dimness. Chingo slammed back into the doorway. His voice rose above the sounds of the cattle, "Checker! Git goin'. They got me."

The Cross J foreman fell off the porch. The cattle surged, their hoofs spurning his body.

Ben went out through the back like a shot. He had seen the shattered glass of the bank. Chingo had shouted as though Gray were in hearing. If Gray got out of the bank and on a horse there would be a long chase.

He rode like the wind, again circling the town. Manuel and the cowboy held the cattle well. The mob had disappeared. At the back of the bank, Ben made a running dismount, gun in hand. He started for the half-opened door he could make out in the semi-darkness.

A voice called softly, "Ben! No!"

Sheer astonishment stopped him. He whirled and there was the carriage from the livery stable, battered, leaning still to port, but sound. The girl was at the heads of the team. She said, "He's in there. He's waiting."

From the seat of the carriage, John Dorn's voice said coolly, "Me, I'm waitin' too. With 'at Sharps Moran kindly brought us."

Ben said, "You oughta be in bed, John."

The thin man laughed softly. "An' him bottled in a trap?"

Ben said, "I'll smoke him out."

"You wait," said John Dorn. "He knows we're out here. How you think he feels? Let him suffer."

Ben said, "We can't hold the cattle there all night. They're wreckin' the town."

"Better'n leavin' Gray wreck it," said John calmly. "You make talk with May. She had Manuel bring up the ole carriage. It was her idee we should come down an' lend a hand."

He said, "May, you—you're *great.*"

"Shhh." Her hand was firm on his left arm. They stood in the shadow of the carriage, very close together. "You made all the plans. You were wonderful, Ben."

He said, suddenly bold, "You still love me, May?"

"Wha-what?"

"I heard yuh. When yuh told John, that time. I wasn't asleep. It's been awful, holdin' it in all this while. But I hadda make sure of Gray. It was so important, May, darling'."

"I know. I learned, up there, going through it with you," she whispered. He gripped her with his left arm, holding the gun ready in case Gray came out.

John said from the carriage. "Past twelve. He's missed the stage. Thet driver always takes her out, come what may. Hear her?" Far away they heard the snapping of whip, the sound of the stagecoach leaving for the south. John said, "Waal, might as well hurry the devil a leetle." He lifted the Sharps and fired a shot through the half open door. He shouted, "Come on, Gray. We're waitin' for yuh."

There was a complete silence for a moment.

Into that silence the shot burst like a thunderclap, and bedlam broke loose. The steers lowed and shook their horns and stomped, horses neighed and pawed, men shouted from their houses, demanding to know what had happened.

Ben Burke knew what had happened. Releasing himself gently from May's grasp he approached the door of the bank. He reached out a foot and kicked it, leaping aside, gun ready, staring within. Then he relaxed, replacing the revolver in its holster.

"Shot hisself," said John Dorn.

Ben said in awed accents. "Like King said. Give him rope—he'd hang himself."

John said, "Pardner, is there a soft job on thet ranch down in Texas? I almost feel like I'm goin' t' live agin."

Ben said, "Job? Sure, pardner. Seein' thet I don't mistreat your sister!"

The cattle were being sent into the waiting pens near the railroad station. Manuel's piping voice cheerily yippied them along. John Dorn said dreamily, "Father kin rest easy, now. Yuh know, I b'lieve I'll take Manuel to Texas. In case they is anything needs doin'—he kin do it."

THE END

FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS

Marcel Beauvais, French Canadian trapper of the Little Rockies, was the poorest man in the West. Born with a natural aversion to work, he seemed to prefer near-starvation. Without even a penny in his pouch, he begged and bummed his way from one camp to another. Then, in the short space of twenty-four hours, Lady Luck did a handspring: Beauvais collected a five dollar reward for identifying a much-wanted criminal, won a three thousand dollar lottery held in Denver, inherited twelve thousand dollars from a Toronto uncle and struck it rich at the Burnett Creek diggings to the tune of seventeen thousand dollars in gold nuggets!

When gallant Major Jonas Emerson returned home from Gettysburg minus both legs, his home town of Brattleboro, Vt., took up a collection and prepared to support him in charity for the rest of his life. But he fooled them. Sitting in an armchair, he chopped down an elm that stood on the town square then, using only a kitchen knife, he whittled himself a pair of wooden legs. In four months, he was back at his old job as a Yankee peddler. Pack on back, he traversed three thousand miles of frontier wilderness during the next seven years—on foot.

Travelers on the Virginia City-Carson City stage line blinked their eyes in surprise when they pulled into the little town of Dakon and saw, hard by the dirt highway, a restaurant called "Wong T'sai and O'Toole's" that featured jointly, on the menu, "breath of Erin Mulligan stew" and "Dublin style Chop Suey". The mystery was all cleared up, however, when they caught sight of the owners' ten year old son—the red-haired, freckle-faced, almond-eyed Clancey Wong.

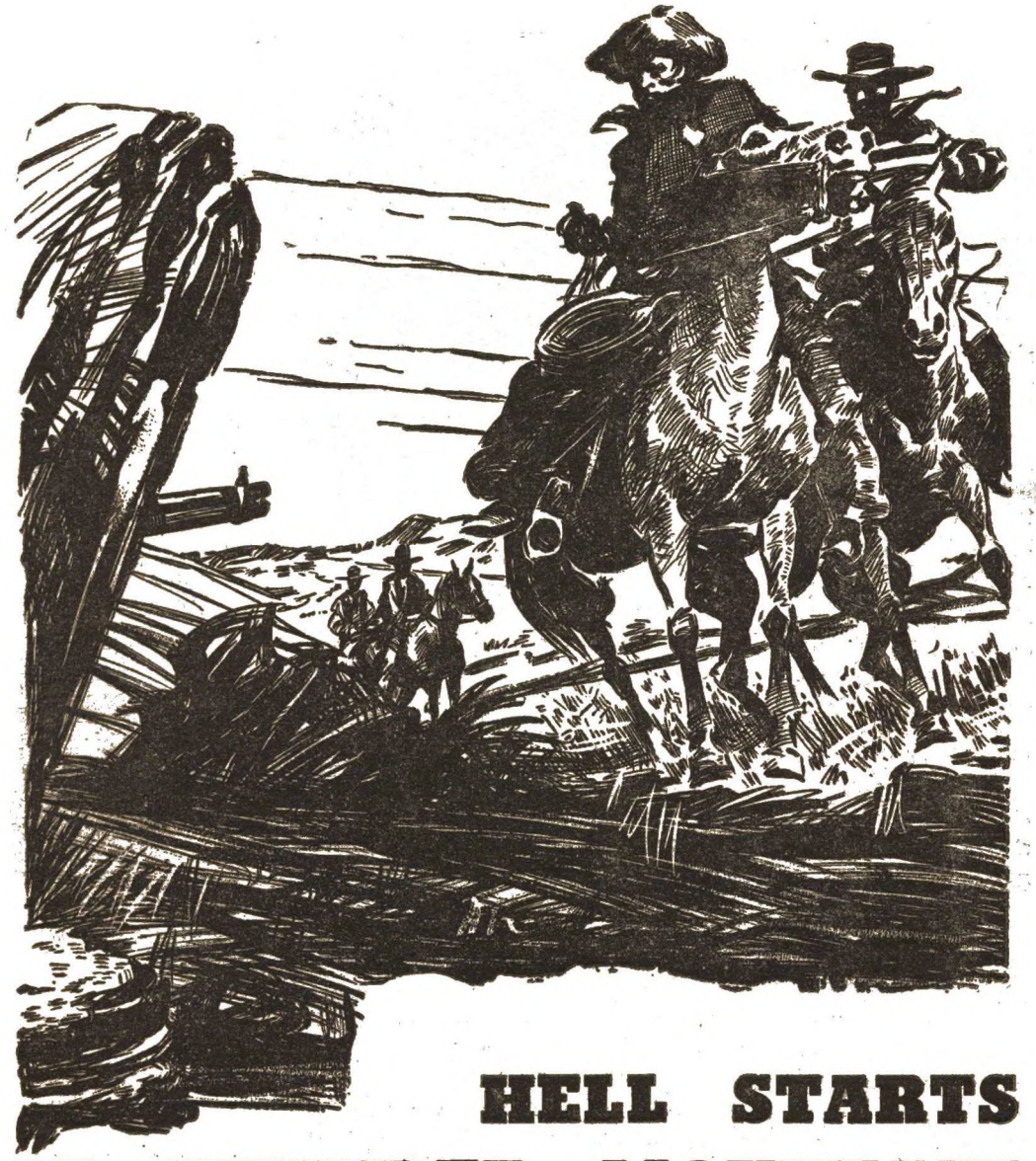
That every cat has nine lives is a feline attribute firmly rooted in tradition if not in fact. A pinto pony named Breeze, however, not only had nine lives, but used up every one of them. Born in the midst of a prairie fire, he was saved by a miraculous downpour of rain. When just a colt, he broke his leg but, unattended, it mended perfectly. On four occasions he and his owner, a canny half-breed scout named George Legs, were the sole survivors of redskin attacks on wagon trains. Later, the pony fell over a hundred-foot cliff, was carried over a ten-foot waterfall in the fierce Colorado River and, finally, perished under the wheels of a Union Pacific engine just outside of Ogden, Utah, in 1869.

Gripping Boom-Town Novelette

By JAMES SHAFFER

"Hold it!" Pete yelled. It was Slim Joliet in the lead.

It cost Pete Hawkins one third what he had in silver to enter the rimrock boom-town of Rockville—and twice what he had in blood to leave. So he settled payment in dynamite—a hundred times more than enough to blow him forever out of sight or sound of Thunder Mountain. . . .



HELL STARTS AT THUNDER MOUNTAIN

Chapter I

LAUGH 'EM TO HELL!

PETE HAWKINS was mad as a hornet when he rode into Rockville. What kind of town was this, that they charged you a dollar to ride across a rickety bridge?

Certainly the sight of Rockville wasn't worth the price of admission to see it; a miserable collection of peeled log cabins, tent houses and a few unpainted pine board buildings. The whole collection was dumped haphazardly along a ravine between two mountains.

Pete was still fuming when he turned his horse over to the surly livery man and

started up the street in search of something to eat. And his anger boiled over when he came upon the first cafe. For a sign out front proclaimed: "Steak and potatoes. $5.00."

He stood there a moment, letting the anger build up in him, and jingling the two lone silver dollars in his pocket. He didn't even have enough money to buy a meal!

Then he sighed. Maybe his pop was right. Maybe it was time he got himself a steady job and settled down. He was twenty-four and not getting any younger. Twenty-four years old and not enough money in his pocket to buy a meal.

Of course, Rockville was a gold boom-town, which made the prices sky-high. But that fact didn't ease the gnawing hunger in Pete's lean stomach. It was almost dark. He peered up and down the street and his eyes lit on a general merchandise store down the street.

Well, he'd make a supper from sardines and crackers tonight, he guessed. He swung down the street. A wiry old man came bobbing out of the store as Slim neared it.

"Howdy, bub!" the old man sang out cheerfully and started down the street with a spry and springy step. Pete returned the greeting, warming to this first show of friendship.

The old man was passing an alleyway when the shot came. Pete saw the muzzle flash in the gathering darkness, heard the bullet smack into solid flesh and the old man's groan of pain. The oldster dropped the packages he'd been carrying and grabbed his side.

He stumbled for a moment, then steadied himself and started back for the store porch. A harsh, rasping curse came out of the alleyway. Sound of that profanity snapped Pete out of his momentary paralysis.

"Hey!" he yelled and started running toward the staggering wounded man. The man in the alley came into sight then, still cursing, and lifting his gun. *Cold blooded!* Pete thought. *Aims to put the killing slug into the old man.*

Pete yelled again and snatched desperately at his own gun. He didn't have a chance of getting it out in time, but the sight of him, and the yell he'd made, seemed to spook the would-be killer. The killer ripped out another curse and wheeled back up the alley. Pete was undecided whether to give chase or not, but a groan from the oldster decided him. Pete whirled in time to see the game old man slump to the sidewalk.

Sound of the shot drew a crowd like a magnet. In a few seconds, there was a dense crowd around the old man. A harried looking gent with a little black bag pushed his way through the crowd and knelt over the wounded man. The storekeeper, still wearing his apron, was shouting out the story of the shooting. Everybody else was talking at once, and no one was listening to anybody else. Then suddenly the crowd fell silent, and a lane opened for a girl to come racing through.

"Grandpaw! Grandpaw!"

"Take it easy, Lucy," the tired looking doctor said soothingly. "It don't look too bad. In the side, and the slug went clean through."

"What the devil's happened?" a strident voice broke in. The crowd fell back sullenly as a heavy-chested man with a sweeping black moustache shoved carelessly through them. Pete saw the star glint on his chest.

"Cal Baker had just left my store," the storekeeper broke in. "I heard a shot and ran out. Cal was down, and this gent," he pointed at Pete, "was bending over him."

The lawman whirled around to face Pete, and even in the dim light that splashed out from the store, Pete could see the wolf-mean glitter in the man's eyes.

"Caught before you could rob the old man and get away, huh?" the lawman rapped out. "Hand over your gun!"

Pete's anger boiled over. The lawman was leisurely reaching for his own gun—like a man who is very sure of himself. Pete wasn't leisurely; his palm snaked solidly against his gunbutt and it leaped from leather.

"There!" Pete yelled. "There's my gun. Smell the muzzle, lawman. Has it been fired recent?"

The lawman fell back a step, his face turning red with anger. He started to sputter something, when the girl broke in heatedly.

"Don't try to pin it on that stranger, Jake Durand! You know who did the shooting—all of you know who did it!"

"Now, Miss Baker—" the sheriff started to bluster. But the girl cut him off scornfully.

"Slim Joliet shot grandpaw and you know it! And Slim shot him because Adam King ordered it!"

The crowd shuffled its feet nervously, and a few men drifted quietly away. But the girl was far from through. She was still talking when a man wearing a black frock coat stalked up. The girl pointed a finger at him.

"There's the man to arrest for shooting Grandpaw, Mister Sheriff Durand!" she said hotly. "Why don't you throw him in your jail? Or are you afraid he'll quit paying you blood money?"

The crowd was definitely embarrassed now. They shot sidelong glances at the black-coated man, and kept a respectful silence. More and more of the crowd was drifting away now. The black-coated man was staring at the girl, and the agitated movement of the cigar between his teeth was the only sign of his anger.

PETE looked around, and then his gaze settled on one man. That same sloppy hat, the same insolent droop of the man's shoulders. It was the man who'd shot from the alley. Pete had gotten only one glimpse of him, and that only a glance at the man's silhouette. But it was the same man, all right.

"I'm a stranger in this town, myself," Pete said, "and I don't know nobody's name. But that gent there," he pointed, "is the man that done the shooting."

A dead, tight silence settled over the crowd. A shuffling of feet behind Pete told him that some discreet persons were already getting out of range. But Pete kept pointing at the tall, skinny bushwhacker. He kept pointing until the bushwhacker walked over to him and shoved his pointing finger aside.

"Take a better look. I think you're mistaken, stranger."

Pete shook his head doggedly. "It was your voice that was cussing, mister. Cussing 'cause you missed your kill with the first shot."

"Just a minute!" Sheriff Durand blustered. "You can't come into this town and start accusing its citizens!"

"That's right, Jake Durand!" the girl broke in. "Earn that blood money King pays you!" She was close to tears.

"I can settle this whole thing," Adam King said. He lifted the cigar carefully and pointed it at the bushwhacker. "Slim Joliet couldn't have done the shooting. He was playing cards with me when we heard the shot." He looked around. "That right, boys?"

Three or four men nodded. Pete took a good look at them. They were all of the same stripe as Slim Joliet.

"That's good enough for me," Sheriff Durand said pompously, and for the first time, a thin chill tickled Pete's spine. He pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. What a setup! It was unbeatable. Only the girl had objections, and the doctor quieted her.

Some one had brought a crude stretcher and they placed the wounded oldster on it.

"Take him home," the doctor ordered, then turned and grabbed Pete's arm. "You come along, too."

The little procession moved silently down the street, turned a corner and headed toward a small cabin. Even from the outside, Pete thought, you could see a woman's touch to this place; once inside, the evidence was abundant. They carried the wounded man into one of the bedrooms, and the doctor got some hot water and laid out his bandages.

"You try to eat something, Lucy," the medico said. "It's a clean wound and I won't need any help."

Pete had been sniffing the air. Was that the smell of steak and onions? He decided instantly that it was, and his nose began to twitch. For the first time, the girl smiled and took Pete's arm.

"Come along, we'll eat."

"I don't think he'd better take time to eat," the doctor said worriedly.

"Don't worry, it ain't going to take me long," Pete told him. It was steak and onions all right. With fried potatoes, biscuits, and a pie cooling on the window sill. It wasn't until he'd finished the main part of the meal, that he thought to ask:

"What'd the doc mean—that I hadn't time to eat?"

"I'll answer that," the doctor said, coming into the kitchen and rolling his sleeves down. "Your grandpaw's sleeping, Lucy. He's all right." Then he turned to Pete.

"You'd better get out of town before Adam King sics Slim Joliet—or one of his other hired killers—on you," he said positively.

Pete had been more or less expecting that answer, but stated in bald words it sent a chill down his spine. In his driftings, he'd seen other towns that were ruled by a small deadly group of gunslingers. And evidently, he'd ridden into just such a town.

"This King—he's the big augur here in Rockville, huh?" He turned his eyes to the girl. "What did your Grandpaw do to cross him?"

"He tried to make an honest living hauling freight into Rockville!" the girl said swiftly. "We have a right to make an honest living!"

"Of course," the doctor said wearily, "but Cal ought to go to some other town, Lucy. He can't buck a setup like King has."

"If folks in this town would stand up for their rights—" the girl started, but the medical man waved her silent.

"The folks in this town are too busy digging gold to take up your fight, Lucy. No, as soon as Cal is ready to ride, you and him leave Rockville."

"What did your gran'paw do to King?" Pete asked.

"He built his own road out of Rockville," the girl said listlessly. "He built a road up Thunder Mountain and put a bridge across Mile High Gorge."

"And this King don't like that? How come?"

"Because it would ruin King's toll road. Didn't you pay toll for the privilege of riding into Rockville?"

"Toll!" Pete cried. "So that's it. Why, the cheap chiseler!"

"King is a chiseler, all right," the doctor said, "but he's anything but cheap."

And then the whole story came out. King had arrived in Rockville during the first few days of the gold strike, and set up the town's first saloon and gambling hall. He had Slim Joliet with him, and it wasn't long before he'd become undisputed boss of the town. No one seemed to care right then, they were all too busy digging the precious yellow stuff out of the ground. And when the town finally did wake up, they discovered that Adam King had a finger in every pie in town.

Every saloon in town was his, the livery, the hotel, and the freight and stage line. His freight rates were sky high, and a number of people had tried to start a freight line in opposition to him.

Some of the opposition became pretty tough, until a landslide blotted out a mile of road on the steep mountain side. That left only the road with Adam King's toll bridge on it as a means of reaching Rockville. He would allow no other freight company to use the road.

"What about that landslide—?" Pete started to ask.

"Dynamite," the doctor said wearily. "But try and prove it."

No one had tried to build a road after that until Cal Baker had come along. Cal had experience building roads, and he'd found a trail up Thunder Mountain that could be made into a road with a minimum of work.

There'd been only one drawback. A deep, narrow gorge slicked down Thunder Mountain up near the summit. But Cal had built a bridge over the gorge.

"The bridge was dynamited this morning," Lucy went on. "And grandpaw openly accused King of doing it. That's why he was shot."

Pete frowned, remembering that Cal Baker had seemed in good spirits just before he was shot.

"Whoever dynamited the bridge did a bum job of it. They only knocked out a couple of the big timber supports. A few men could repair it in an hour or two. Grandpaw expected to have it back in shape within a few days."

"And now you'd better be leaving," the doctor said. "I'll walk up and tell Adam King that you're riding out of town tonight. I'll tell him it's best not to bother you, if you'll leave quietly. I think he'll listen to me. After all, a town like Rockville won't take too much raw stuff like shooting down Cal Baker."

Pete was thinking of that gun toughie who'd shoved a sixgun in his face and extracted a dollar toll charge for riding into Rockville.

"I was halfway across the bridge," he mused half aloud, "and he wouldn't even let me turn back and save my dollar. Said I'd used the bridge, and I'd have to pay for it."

"What are you mumbling about?" the doctor asked.

"Just thinking."

"You'll have time for that when you're clear of Rockville. I'll go up and see King."

Pete looked at the girl. She had freckles. But they didn't detract from her beauty. Added to it, as a matter of fact. He stared at his empty plate, remembering the steak and potatoes, and that pie.

He didn't have enough money to buy a greasy dinner in a cafe, and yet he'd been fed food fit for a king.

"That freight line your gran'paw was going to run. Would it make any money?"

"Plenty." The sparkle came back into the girl's eyes for a moment. "We've got all the equipment."

"But nobody to work it," the doctor put in testily.

"Sam Mayberry still works for us," the girl said quickly. "And he's a good driver."

"When he's sober," the doctor put in. "And his drinking is the only reason he's still with you. Nobody else will hire him."

Pete's pulse was beginning to quicken. He was remembering that his pop had argued that it was high time he found a good steady job. And here was one for the asking. Maybe at first he'd have to take his pay out in food. But, he stared at his plate—that sure wouldn't be hard to do.

"Quit thinking what you're thinking!" the doctor said sharply. "In the first place, you couldn't even hire men to repair the bridge!"

"The bridge ain't hurt bad," Pete countered.

"Sure, it isn't. That's because King ordered it that way. When Cal pulls out, he'll take over that road too. But you couldn't get the bridge fixed yourself."

Pete grinned. "So King just damaged the bridge enough to keep traffic from using it, *because he aims to fix it himself!*"

"That's the size of it."

"Then," said Pete with a laugh. "Let's give him the chance."

"It won't work!" Doc exploded five minutes later. "It's just a fancy scheme to get yourself planted in boothill!"

"Quit worrying, Doc," Pete told him. "You just go find Sam Mayberry. I'll meet him down at the Baker freight yard right away."

The doctor argued some more, but finally and reluctantly, he gave in. With a shake of his head he picked up his bag and opened the door.

"I'll have Sam down at the yard in fifteen minutes."

When he had gone, Lucy came over and laid her hand on his arm.

"Are you sure it'll work?" Lucy asked. Pete noticed that her eyes were brown, and that they were very, very soft. He kept looking into them and Lucy had to repeat her question.

"Sure it'll work," he said positively. How could anything fail to work, he thought? He'd just put away the best meal he'd ever eaten, and now he was looking into the nicest pair of eyes he'd ever seen. Why, nothing was impossible. Right now, he felt that he could move a mountain no matter what size it was.

"Sure it'll work," he repeated. "Once a town starts laughing at a big tough gunboss, folks will realize that they ain't scared of that tough gent no longer. Folks will realize he's only human, like the rest. And when folks quit figuring that the boss ain't no little tin god—they'll run him out on a rail. And Rockville will be laughing its head off at Adam King by tomorrow. You just wait."

She pulled his head down and kissed him then. And that kiss removed all doubt of success from his mind. Lordy, who could fail after that!

Chapter II

BUILD A BETTER BRIDGE

THE BAKER freight yard was far down at the end of town, a fact that Pete had figured on in making his play. A wagon could ease right out of the yard and onto the Thunder Mountain road without anyone in Rockville knowing it.

"But they'll know it in the morning," Sam Mayberry objected. "They'll know we've pulled out—come daylight. Then King'll send his men after us. They'll come a lot faster than we can travel, and they'll overtake us before we get to Mile High Gorge."

Sam Mayberry had showed up sober, for the simple reason that he didn't have any money to spend on whiskey. The Baker freight lines had been skipping paydays for quite some time.

So Sam was sober, and he bore out the Doc's boast that he was a good man when sober. He didn't need to light a lantern to harness up his team and hitch it to the big

freight wagon. He moved briskly about in the dark. And while Sam was busy at that, Pete loaded the supplies he'd need into the big freighter.

"Ready to roll," Sam reported. Pete climbed up on the seat beside him, and cocked an ear to the sound of Rockville's carousing.

"Don't think anybody is going to notice us leaving," he said. "Let 'em roll!"

"It's a fool trick," Sam grumbled. "We won't have time to repair that bridge before King's men overtake us. And if we did—he'd blow it up before we got back with our freight."

"Tend to your driving, Sam. I'm going to stretch out in the back and catch forty winks. Wake me up the first crack of dawn."

"If King's guns don't wake you up before," Sam said pessimistically.

But there was no pursuit that night. King and his men, Pete had figured, would be too busy fleecing the miners at night to bother with riding the dark trails. He yawned prodigiously as Sam shook him awake.

They were on a narrow, winding road, and seemed to be rolling upward through a sea of mist. Below them, the floor of the valley was hidden by the mist, and ahead, the top of the mountain was shrouded.

"How long does this fog stay?"

"Durn near noon sometimes," Sam told him. "We ain't far from Mile High Gorge."

"Whip up the team and let's get there fast," Pete ordered and Sam sent his blacksnake hissing over the backs of his horses. Pete watched the road carefully. Then they rounded a turn and saw where Cal Baker had blasted solid rock to put through his road. Huge masses of rock stood on either side of the road, with a narrow opening, just wagon-wide, through the granite outcropping.

"This is the spot," Pete said. Sam stopped and Pete dropped to the ground with his bundle. "Now you go on up to the bridge and start chopping down a tree."

"What the hell for?" Sam grunted.

"Because I like the sound of chopping."

Sam grumbled, but whipped up his team. Pete found his spot. He could lay full length on his stomach, and be protected by tons of granite. Yet there was a small split in the rock, through which he could poke a weapon. And then he untied his bundle.

Twenty minutes later, the sound of chopping drifted down clearly from higher up on the mountain, and ten minutes after that, he heard the clop of shod hoofs coming up the road. He stretched out and waited. The mist had cleared a little, giving him a clear view of the road down to the next turn.

A few moments later, horsemen began to materialize through the drifts. Riding in the lead was the tall, slouchy Slim Joliet. He had four men with him. Joliet called a halt and cocked an ear to listen to the sound of chopping. He grinned flatly at his companions.

"Industrious as hell," he said contemptuously.

"At least that tells us they ain't bushed up along the trail," another man broke in. "Let's git this over with."

"You're wrong, fella," Pete yelled. "I *am* bushed up along the trail—hold it—all right! You asked for it!"

The man who had spoken had gone for his gun. He tilted it toward Pete's rock fort and blasted a shot. The slug chipped off rock splinters not three inches from Pete's head. Pete squeezed the trigger. The double blast of the shotguns thundered in the mist.

Pete had deliberately shot high, but now he snatched his second shotgun.

"I got two more loaded shotguns," he bellowed. "The next man shoots at me gits both barrels right in his guts."

Silence. The five hardcases shot nervous glances at each other. Their hands relaxed and fell away from their guns.

"That's better," Pete called. "Now start shucking that hardware. One at a time. You first, Joliet."

"You won't get away with this," Slim Joliet said thickly.

"Have so far," Pete chuckled. "Now git off them cayuses and start walking—no, not back toward town—up to the bridge!"

"What the hell!" Joliet exploded.

"Ain't you heard?" Pete laughed. "You and your friends are going to repair Cal Baker's bridge. Git moving!"

It took three hours for the sweating, cursing and fuming hardcases to repair the bridge. It had been an artistic bit of blasting, just knocking the main supports from under the structure. It was still mid-morning when Sam Mayberry climbed onto the

driver's seat, ready to drive in to town.

"How long will it take you to pick up your load and get back here, Sam?" Pete asked.

"Three days," Sam told him, and let his eyes rove over the five gunmen. When he spoke, his voice was pleading. "You shore ain't going to try and hold the bridge against King's rannies till I'm back, are you? Let's call the whole thing off."

"I'll hold it," Pete told him grimly, and then he grinned. "I just got a hunch that maybe Adam King won't even be in Rockville when you get back."

"You're talking like I do—after the tenth drink," Sam said gloomily and sent his wagon rumbling across the bridge.

"And what makes you think we won't be around when Sam gets back?" Slim Joliet leered.

"I just got a hunch," Pete grinned, and waggled his shotgun. "You boys can ride on back to town now. I'll keep your guns."

"Guns ain't hard to get," Slim Joliet growled. "I'll get one and come looking for you, mister."

"Come ahead, Slim," Pete invited cordially. "But be careful you don't step on any dynamite coming up the road—or taking a short cut straight up the side of the mountain."

"Dynamite?"

Pete nodded. "Got me a couple dozen sticks. I'm scattering a half stick here—a half stick there—all over the place. Be pretty bad if your horse stepped on a cap."

The arrogant look faded from the gunmen's eyes. They'd been thinking how easy it would be to injun up on Pete during his three-day vigil and fill him full of lead. But tramping around over ground strewn with dynamite was something to think about.

"So think about it," Pete told them, "and tell Adam King about it, too. Now git!"

Pete watched them out of sight around the bend in the road, and listened to their hoofbeats until they faded away into silence. From the sound, he knew that all of the men were riding on into Rockville. None of them were hanging back to try a sneak play.

He went back down to his rock fort and stretched out in the shade of a pine. He looked up at the blue sky above. Only it wasn't blue to him, it was a deep soft brown —like a pair of eyes he knew.

It was late afternoon when he heard the horse toiling up the steep mountain road. He hurried to his niche and examined his shotguns and pistols. But his eyes grew soft and dreamy at the sight of the rider. It was Lucy.

"We did it!" he yelled happily, getting to his feet as the girl rode up. "Them jiggers fixed the bridge as good as new. Is the town laughing at Adam King yet?"

There was no answering smile on Lucy's face. Instead, there were traces of recent tears. She slid out of the saddle and ran to him, and he folded her to his breast.

"Oh, Pete, you tried! You did wonderfully—but it didn't work!"

Pete stared at her. "You mean—the town is still scared of Adam King—after he's been made a fool of?"

"The town doesn't know that you got the best of King," Lucy said dejectedly. "They don't know how you forced King's men to repair the bridge they had blown up."

"I—I thought you and Doc and a few more were going to pass the word—to tell how I made King's men fix up that bridge. It would have turned him into a laughing stock—"

"We were afraid," Lucy said simply. "King guessed what you were up to. He guessed that you were trying to make him look cheap to Rockville—and he—well—"

"What did he do?"

"He talked to Doc—he told Doc that if a word of what had happened leaked out—that he would—finish the job of k-k-killing Grandpaw!"

"Why, the dirty—" Pete's jaw clamped so tight it hurt his teeth. His knuckles were white as his fists tightened into hard knots. He sat down, suddenly weak from the rage that possessed him.

"Looks like I underestimated just how low-down that skunk is," he muttered.

"King passed the word that Joliet and his men ran you out of town. That you left Rockville at a fast lope and Joliet was out trying to catch you. That's what Rockville thinks, and King's grip is tighter than ever."

Pete got to his feet. He gripped the girl's shoulder.

"Rockville will think different—three days from now," he said harshly. "When I bring that wagon load of freight into town!"

"Pete—you couldn't—they'd shoot you down—"

"Oh, couldn't I!" he rasped. "Listen, Lucy. Go on back to town and say nothing. Don't give King an excuse to kill your grandpop. But three days from now, I'll be coming back to Rockville with that wagon."

"They'll never let you get to town alive, Pete!"

"They won't be able to help themselves," Pete said grimly. "Listen, remember there's diggings at least two miles this side of town. That means, when we return to town, we'll meet miners two miles before we get there. I'll take a chance that those miners will back our play, when they hear the story. As we bring the loaded wagon in, we'll tell our story to every miner we pass. And I got a hunch that when that wagon reaches town, there'll be an army of miners siding us!"

Chapter III

BLOW 'EM TO THUNDER MOUNTAIN!

"WE OUGHTA be hitting the first diggings soon," Sam Mayberry said nervously. "Fact is," he said pointing off to their left, "I thought somebody was working that claim, but there ain't nobody there."

"There'll be plenty more before we get to town," Pete said confidently. "You said there was at least forty claims from here to the edge of town, didn't you?"

"That's right," Sam agreed.

"Forty miners that'll be interested in seeing cheaper freight come over Thunder Mountain," Pete mused. "Cheaper freight means that they'll get to keep more of their gold. They won't have to pay so much for supplies. They'll side us all right," Sam grunted. "Miners is sure hell on justice, once they git started. Up till now, they jist ain't got riled up against King. Now there—sa-ay—ain't nobody at that claim neither!"

Pete looked. Up ahead was a big claim, with a nice tent and permanent camp around it. But it was empty of miners.

"You sure that claim was being worked?" Pete asked nervously. Doubt was gnawing at his nerve.

"Hell! That's one of the best claims in these parts!" Sam exploded. "Two fellers, name of Caldwell and Fisher own it. They're hard workers. Can't understand them leaving it."

The wagon rumbled around a bend in the road now, and entered a comparatively straight stretch. Claims lay on either side of the road. But no one was working them.

"Something's wrong," Sam muttered. "Not a soul in sight—hey, wait—there's somebody!"

A lone miner was up ahead, leaning against a tree. As the wagon rumbled closer, they saw that the man was sick. Sam pulled to a stop and Pete went over.

"Where is everybody?" Pete asked him. The miner waved a vague hand toward Rockville. The man was dead drunk.

"King—throwin' big celebrashun—new singer for his saloon—big celebrashun—free likker—lots of free likker—" He broke off and was sick again. Pete turned and plodded back to the wagon.

"King put it over on us," he told Sam dully. "Knew we'd be back today—so he's got the whole town drunk."

"So drunk," Sam said with brutal frankness, "that nobody'd pay any attention when Joliet and his crew shoot you full of holes."

Pete nodded. With the town drunk, King could calmly pull off cold-blooded murder, and by tomorrow, no one would know the straight of it. Pete suddenly felt more lonesome than he'd ever been in his whole life. He flung a glance over his shoulder, and froze in that position.

"Sam," he said in a tight voice. "Behind us—Slim Joliet and seven—right—nine men with him—they let us almost get to town, then injuned up behind us—"

If he hadn't glanced over his shoulder, the men would have approached within six-gun range before he'd heard them—they were riding up so quietly. Even at this distance, however, he could see the hard grin on Slim Joliet's face. Joliet lifted a hand in a mocking salute and led his men forward at that same slow pace.

"Playing with us like a cat does a mouse," Sam groaned. "Got us pocketed and know we can't get away. That's every danged one of King's men with Slim this time!"

"You mean—King's in town with no gunmen to side him?" Pete roared. "Whip up them nags, Sam! Give 'em the whip!

Let's go! Adam King overplayed his hand!"

Sam tried to protest, but Pete sent the blacksnake hissing over the startled animals. They were comparatively fresh and the big freighter lurched ahead. A startled yell broke from the band of gunmen behind them, then a pistol banged. Pete slipped off the seat of the wagon and onto the load of freight.

There was no way the horsemen behind could ride around the big wagon. The ground on either side was torn up by diggings, and beyond the diggings, the mountain sides rose steeply. Pete glanced at the load of freight.

The horsemen were coming fast now, closing the gap. Sixguns were thundering and Pete heard the lead whine dangerously close. He ducked beneath the protection of the tailgate and worked frantically. He ripped a hole in a sack of beans and shoved what he had been working on into the sack. It was part of a stick of dynamite. He tried to gauge the fuse he'd need, then chopped it off and touched a match to it.

He lifted the sack of beans, leaned far over the tailgate and let it drop gently as he could in the roadway. Slim Joliet yelled derisively.

"Lighten that load all you want, Hawkins!" he bellowed. "We c'n outrun that freighter any day. Here we come!"

Pete breathed a prayer. If that bunch got past the dynamite before it blew—it would spook their horses that much faster. But it went off before they passed it—

Wham!

The ground shook with the blast. Dust obscured Pete's vision for a moment, then he looked back. Half the gunmen were already unhorsed, sprawled in the dust. The rest were fighting to keep their seats, as their crazed horses—smarting from the sting of hundreds of dried beans and the fear of the blast—bucked, sunfished and fought the bit.

"Whip 'em up, Sam!" Pete roared and flung another stick backward. A couple of the gunmen had gotten their mounts quieted when the second stick thundered. The horses went back to bucking harder than ever.

"Now for Adam King!" Pete yelled, as the big freighter lumbered into the outskirts of Rockville. "Right up past the big saloon, Sam!"

There were only a few man staggering along the streets of Rockville as the freighter thundered up the main drag. Even drunk, they knew enough to get out of the way, and they cleared a path in front of the saloon. The big freighter flashed past. Pete threw. The dynamite landed on the wooden porch. A second later the porch and half the front of the saloon mushroomed out and blasted skyward.

Pete dropped to the ground from the fast-moving wagon. The big saloon looked like a squashed ant-hill. Men were climbing through windows, pouring at the side and rear doors, charging blindly through the space where the wall had been. Pete ran back, and by the time he reached the saloon, it was almost free of customers.

"King!" Pete roared. "Where are you?"

"Right here," a snarling voice answered. Pete flung himself sideways. He caught a glimpse of King. The man's coat was ripped. King had panicked with the rest and gone out through a window.

But Adam King wasn't panicked now. His smooth face was twisted with hatred, as he made his draw. Pete stumbled and staggered for a moment, just as King's gun blasted. Then Pete was down on one knee, pumping careful shots into Adam King's broad chest. One shot, and the man was staggering, two shots and King was clutching his chest, trying to stem the red tide of life that gushed through his fingers. There wasn't any need for a third shot. . . .

"I'm glad nobody got hurt bad when I blew the porch off the saloon," Pete said later, as he shovelled a big piece of pie into his mouth.

"Never seen a crowd sober up so fast in my days," Sam Mayberry marvelled. "The way they grabbed guns and started blasting at Joliet and his men when they rode in was a caution."

"When you're through gabbing, Sam," Doc said testily, "let's me and you go out and have a smoke."

"Gabbing?" Sam was hurt. "Why, can't a man open his mouth—?" he broke off, his gaze shuttling from Lucy to Pete. "Oh, yeah," he muttered. "Me and my big mouth."

THE END

BLOOD ON HIS HOOFS!

At quick-kill range those wild-blooded stallions stood; one the champion of the Bitter Roots Range, the other the challenger—each ready now to trample the other to the earth for the coveted crown of King of Hell Canyon Heights. . . .

The tawny form of the deadly cougar loomed above the young colt, and the air crackled with its snarls.

WELA—king of the Bitter Roots country, lord of the Hell Canyon range—hurled himself into battering action against the big silvertip on the rimrock shelf.

Below, Rad Carter, young maverick-hunting ranny, whirled his pony. His eyes bugged as he craned his neck, hoping for a glimpse of the wild stallion.

Powerful, strong-chested, Wela bared his teeth as he rushed the snarling grizzly.

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Wela's chief consort mare had just been horribly killed, and the stallion chieftain had caught the killer in the midst of the feast.

The silvertip half rose on his haunches, moaning with pain from an already battered shoulder. Wela swapped ends with the speed of lightning, and the killer bear showed a burst of speed and took himself off, racing along a defile, out of range of those tornadic hoofs.

Wela was still challenging with his bugling bellows when a soft call from a lesserling mare at his back brought him whirling about. With the sure-footedness of a goat, he leaped up an incline and hurled himself into a new battle. Two lions had stalked Wela's band—a mustang mare was down. Wela leaped over her to strike. A yearling colt nickered horribly, its throat cut. The stench of the blood of his kindred was sharp in the big old stallion's nostrils.

Wela's thirteen-hundred-pound form bunched, and pile-drove down—hoofs mashing the body of a squirming cougar.

It was at that moment that Rad Carter got his first close-up glimpse of the wild stallion Wela. Rad had seen a stallion kill a rattler; he had seen a buck antelope pound a diamond-back; but here he saw a combination of savagery, of power, of speed that brought the short hairs of his neck out stiff and straight. He watched those terrible battle hoofs pound, until the once beautiful, tawny form of a lioness was an amorphous splash of animal pulp.

The watching ranch hand knew that he'd take a rough ride from the ramrod of his outfit, the Half Square T, but he sat hunkered down, transfixed as the mighty Wela roared and whorled around to stand, head high, facing the hidden man creature.

Dull chestnut coat now black with sweat, the stallion curled up his lip and displayed his strong, yellow-black teeth as he blew shrilly through his red, fluted nostrils. Rad Carter quivered in every nerve with an awesome fear, but suddenly he swallowed hard—to the side of the great swashbuckling warrior Wela trotted a beautiful young colt, a long, gangly-legged youngster which displayed not the slightest sign of fear.

Wela snuffled throatily. Not in any other circumstances would the infuriated Wela have permitted a lesserling member of his wild band to draw up so close to him. Not until the youngster started to punch the big stallion's belly with his muzzle did Wela turn and gently cast him off.

Rad Carter smiled. Quickly he realized that this handsome young colt was the son of the slain mare—son of the great Wela, orphan now, scarcely weaned and thrust upon his great sire as an added responsibility.

As the sunrise lights broadened and sharpened, the foal's coat seemed to burst into flame.

Flame! Flame, son of Wela—indeed there could be no more appropriate a name.

Rad licked his dry lips as he screwed up his forehead. He himself was an orphan, a maverick with nothing but the buckskin riding clothes on his back. Here, in this colt Flame, was something he wanted.

"One day," he said softly to himself, "ol' Cass Finnerty, our wrangler, will show me how to set a trap for you, feller. I'll be good to you an' show you off as the greatest stallion in all of Montana."

Rad cuffed sweat from his forehead and tucked a sopping forelock back under his battered hat as he silently withdrew. Shortly he was back riding the breaks, chousing mavericks to be picked up by other riders of the Half Square T. But as he worked the brush, his mind was trained only on the colt Flame, and save for telling Cass Finnerty of his discovery, he would lock it in his mind—a deep secret.

He could not trust Dal Mitchell, ramrod of the Half Square T. Mitchell would have sold his soul to gain possession of the chestnut Wela. He would never stop hunting if he learned of the existence of the colt Flame. And Rad Carter knew that if he trapped the colt, Mitchell would kill the youngling.

Cass Finnerty, the old wrangler, was wise. He was kind to Rad. He would show the young waddy how to build a trap—when the time came. As he rode on till sunset, Rad Carter built up visions of a future horse-spread from the get of Flame, the most beautiful colt he had ever seen, more handsome, more powerful than the great fighting Wela himself.

IN THE SHARP winter that followed, the big stallion was hard pressed to find wind-blown pastures for his band. He missed old Nista, the lead mare. He hazed

or led his band from range to range, and when the hot spring suns brought the threat of slides and avalanches, Wela led the band from the danger zones.

The foal crop this year was fairly heavy, and it brought marauding cougars on the prowl for kill. Wela caught their fresh scent and tossed his head, snuffling warnings to his kindred.

Today he was down at a lower level, at the first of the willow-and-aspen-studded hills. He stood blinking in the sunlight, watching a pair of handsome youngsters play in the sunshine. They were the colt Flame and a little filly. They reared and pawed, squealing in complete abandonment. Farther and farther from the main band they strayed, until they were alone.

Almost free of its long winter hair and its baby wool, Flame's coat glistened like silk. He stood poised, head high, on a knoll, his upper lip curled.

Suddenly the filly squealed and lunged, crowding him sharply. He whirled, the dread tang of bear in his nostrils.

No longer did his handsome muscles ripple and flow. They seemed to have grown limp and soggy. Through the constant companionship of his sire, Flame had learnt to fear and respect the scent of bear or cougar.

Sudsy lather formed on his body. Then he heard the shrill penetrating call of Wela, his father. It was at the main band the grizzly had struck. Wela was again in battle. Blood scent struck Flame's nostrils. He heard the drumbeat of thundering hoofs as mares and young stock fled off to safety in a sharp exodus.

Flame stomped his hoofs and tossed his head. He flung out a battle call, but his voice was cloyed and hoarse. All at once he whirled, startled by a terrible chorus of bear snarls and stallion screams. Head high, the young filly pounding hurriedly along his trail, young Flame broke for safer range.

When at last he paused, blowing fiercely from his hard run, he could no longer hear the dread sounds of battle.

Alone, the big stallion fought a huge, rangy heller of a bear. Wela himself had lost his youth, though none of the fighting spirit. He would have welcomed old Nista his mare now as he feinted, back-leaped and whorled to batter and chop.

The bear lunged and Wela whipped about like chain lightning. The grizzly was poised at the brink of the rimrock. Thundering battle hoofs struck, but the silvertip had half risen to strike inside as Wela swapped ends. The stallion toppled momentarily. He recovered, but his off-side stifle joint was badly hurt.

Fortunately the last battering barrage of hoofs had damaged the silvertip's ribs sector, stifling his breathing.

Teeth bared, head down, Wela struck. The grizzly stretched and in that split second the stallion coiled and struck. Battering-ram hoofs pummeled full on. The silvertip struggled to maintain a grip on the rim of the shelf, but again those battle hoofs caught him—this time full in his broad face, mashing it to a hideous mask before it disappeared, to go toppling down two hundred feet to the canyon bottom.

Wela snuffled softly. His power to shrill out his bugling battle sounds was gone. He limped from the rimrock, hobbling on to a small, spring-fed green pasture where he sank in the ice-cold water of the spring. Never in all his vigorous years here in the Bitter Roots hinterland had he suffered such grievous pain in battle; nor had he ever had to expend so much energy in dispatching an enemy.

Out from the spring, he sank to rest, stretched on his nigh side. The night deepened, closing in on him—a great victor, but a victory that cost the conqueror a terrific price.

With the coming of fresh, dewy dawn, Wela had scarcely the strength to ride. Suddenly his nostrils fluted. On the dawn breeze came to him the tang of his son's scent.

The colt Flame bounded to the old stallion's side, and Wela muzzled him.

Wisely, Wela held his son with the main band. As his wounded limb grew stronger he realized there would be a permanent weakness in the game leg.

Flame was rising three when the great test came.

It was the winter when Osak, the old lobo pack leader, had gathered in a large pack for sweeping raids. High in the craglands levels, the unusually heavy snows had sent elk and the wild horse band down in search of food.

Wela led his band down to search for grazing in the valleys adjacent to Hell

Canyon. Backs to the incessant, bitter winds, the wild horse bunch pawed vigorously for their existence in small swales full of matted slough grass.

Wind whistled eerily in the trees, but it could not fully drown out the pack call of Osak. Wela heard and tossed his head nervously, snuffling warnings to his kindred. From several points there came wolf cries, and colt Flame whorled, screaming to the band, but Wela whipped in to avert a threat of stampede.

Flame reared to challenge his sire. Battle was imminent, but the sudden scream of a mare cut short the threat. The gray pack of Osak was in.

Wela circled his band, hazing them into close formation. He flashed his teeth and struck at Flame.

Although he half buckled at a foreleg, Wela launched himself into battle action. The ribs of a she-wolf caved in and she dragged herself to the thickets.

Osak fought a strike-and-leap battle. He avoided engagement with the terrible old stallion heller, electing to feint and nip at lesserlings—mares and young stock. He endeavored to decoy them to attack, away from the huddled band.

Osak had fought the wild-horse band before, but this night of wailing winds and heavy frost, he faced two squealing, powerful guardians—two stallions whose thundering hoofs set up a reverberating drumfire along the canyon.

A small mare squealed and lunged forward, striking sharply at the big wolf with a forehoof. Osak leaped back. Like a twin flash, two sets of gleaming eyes cut from the shadows. Two sets of wolf fangs gaped and snapped simultaneously and the filly toppled, both hamstrings severed.

The tang of blood revived all the old fire and spirit in Wela. He reared and lunged, chopping down at a cowering wolf.

A shaggy little filly went screaming to her death, but Flame, in passionate anger, exacted swift vengeance and at his first kill he seemed to grasp the full heritage of his fighting sire—the heritage of majesty, the heritage of battle-hoofed conqueror. When the great Wela toppled and sank, with fangs nipping at his hamstrings, Flame leaped the back of a colt to rush to his sire's aid.

Horrible cries poured from the young stallion's throat as he drove his hoofs. Osak, the wolf leader, sagged at the haunches and dragged himself off. Never again would he lead a wolf pack. The terrible son of Wela had finished him forever.

Flame now poured his war challenges fiercely along the hollow chasm of Hell Canyon, standing there, head high, the soapy lather flecking his flanks.

From a nearby pine, old Ah-Hoo, the great horned owl, sent out calls to feast—hailing weasel and mink and other sharp-fanged creatures of prey.

Until the coming of dawn, Flame stood like a piece of statuary, head high, tail and mane pennanting in the breeze. As the first lights of dawn struggled throug the gloom, Flame whirled and trotted up to Wela's side. The colt's muzzle touched his sire's but there was no resentment in Wela's throaty snuffles. The great Wela was abdicating in peace. From now on, he would lead the band, leaving the guardianship of the rear to Flame, the new monarch of the Bitter Roots rangeland.

IT WAS at a new range that Cass Finnerty got his first glimpse of the young stallion. He and Rad Carter sat together in the cover of a clump of piñons, eyes wide as they gazed at Flame on a plateau across a gorge.

"He's more hoss than I figured, son," old Cass whispered. "He ain't what you thought—a Palomino, but a—uh—red chestnut. Must be risin' three an' just right for—for us to take. Mate him with the right stock an' you'll git the best Palominos in the whole uh Montana.

"Okay, we go to work pronto on our trap. Lucky we're out huntin' our own slicks. If'n we're lucky enough to take the Flame colt, he's yours an' the hell with Dal Mitchell. I'll back you up. I'll—say, boy, is they somethin' botherin' you?"

Rad Carter started, forcing a grin. He shook his head.

"Uh, no, Cass. Nothin'. Reckon I was just moonin' or somethin' like that."

Rad Carter had glimpsed old Wela, the cripple, beyond a clump of wild fruit shrubbery, and he knew that Flame had taken over the leadership of the wild band.

Cass Finnerty shifted his eating tobacco and spat sharply. He wasn't so sure that his young friend was altogether happy. He

didn't lie very well. He wasn't used to it.

Suddenly the Flame reared, squealing, charging back to his hidden band. His keen nose had picked up the tang of man scent.

The men worked with deliberation. All their tracks were carefully smeared out with grease from the hide of a filly. Cass had chosen a small, narrow-necked box canyon for a two-section trap. It was an old trick, using a mare as decoy.

Cougars, bears and wolves harassed the wild horse band, forcing them to move—a restless, nomadic herd of frightened creatures. Cass and Rad heard the cries of the cougars at night—and those cries were echoed by wolf wails.

The decoy mare was in her section of the trap and now Cass and Rad rode up into the upper levels, to give the wild horse band their scent, driving them down to the low country. They hoped to lure Flame to the trap. It was Rad Carter's last hope of capturing the horse.

A half moon hung lazily in the sky tonight as Flame circled his band. Suddenly, he whirled in his tracks. Wela, the old stallion monarch, had become greatly agitated. As Flame trotted up Wela bared his teeth and charged.

Flame tanged the trapped mare and caught her soft nickers. His shadow was cast in gargantuan proportions on the trees as he wheeled away from the chieftain but Wela still retained his passionate fighting spirit. He charged and shortly the fierce screams of the stallions, now rivals, shattered the stillness of the canyon country as their battering hoofs thundered.

Battle sounds of the stallions aroused Cass Finnerty and Rad.

"What is it, Cass?" Rad asked, sleepily.

"War, son! Battle. Flame is showin' fight to his pappy. The time has come, so hang an' rattle. It's tonight, or not at all. Soon, shore as shootin', ol' Wela'll back off, an' yore Flame colt'll go mincin' on down like a—uh—Prince Charmin', to pay his respects to the little sorrel in the corral trap."

Father and son reared and lashed, bit and struck. The wind in their favor, the men crept through the underbrush to watch, and Rad Carter wished he had not come when he saw the great Wela go down, breathing hard.

Flame stood at full height, at his full majesty, etched in the moonlight like a piece of bas relief, then suddenly he and his great shadow vanished, and old Cass chuckled softly.

Cass was busy whittling off the corner of a tobacco plug when suddenly, there came a shrill stallion call, and then the thunderous pound of hoofs.

"An' there you have it, Rad!" Cass said hoarsely. "We got 'im, boy. But hang onto yore galluses. If'n he catches our scent strong afore he's wore hisself out, he's liable to break a laig, kill hisself. Just settle down an' wipe the sweat off'n yore face. Lots uh time, boy—lots uh time. Time to brew up a mess uh corfee an' fry a little sidemeat."

But as Rad Carter went about the chores of breakfast, his hands shook. He dropped bacon into the ashes, and spilled the coffee pot.

The young stallion king hurled himself again and again at the poles, battering them, mouthing them savagely, but to no avail. Blood showed on his soapy flanks and here and there on his legs, but now he stood, nostrils aquiver, every nerve fibre taut. Soft, throaty calls came from the mare in the next corral. He minced forward, snorting, coughing up harsh calls; then he was snuffling softly as he curled his upper lip and advanced toward that barrier of aspen poles.

THREE days later, the colt Flame, hitched close in alongside a little mare, and snubbed securely between Rad and Cass Finnerty's saddle horns, came into the ranch yard of the Half Square T.

Old Nate Thomas almost swallowed his tobacco cud as he glimpsed the beautiful young stallion. Dal Mitchell, the ramrod, came hustling from an old log tack shack. A smile broadened his mouth as he strode up.

"Thanks a heap, Cass," he said. "I'll see you git a good bonus for this job. I always did want a colt off of Wela. Looks like you got the cream uh the crop."

Cass Finnerty snorted. He suddenly jerked a thumb Rad's way.

"You've been soundin' off in the wrong corner uh your mouth, Dal," he said to Mitchell. "This colt is Rad Carter's. It was him discovered the wild band, him that engineered the hunt." The wrangler turned to Thomas and added: "I'd like

you to make that plenty plain to Dal, boss."

The ramrod started talking.

"You've mebbeso forgot that I'm still roddin' the Half Square T," Cass said. "Better step up your memory some. All stock brung in is Half Square T stock an' it happens I'm a pardner here as well as foreman." He turned to Rad Carter, smiling, like a diamond-back might smile.

"I'll give you fifty dollars for your trouble, maverick," he said. "Take it or leave it."

Rad's eyes flashed. He exchanged meaning glances with Cass. Now he swung to Mitchell.

"You don't get this colt at any price, ramrod," he declared hotly. "He's mine. I figure to hang onto him an' raise stock from him—into a spread of my own. Likely I'll git me some of them Spanish Palo—uh—cream-tails. He—"

Nate Thomas strode up into the breach.

"I think mebbe the boy'll keep the colt, Dal," he said. "While I still own seventy-five per cent of the Half Square T, I reckon I'll have a mite of say now an' then. I may be ha'f blind, times, but I ain't dumb. The Colt's Rad's an' I'll lend him breedin' stock so's he can git his start. That understood now, so there won't be no further augerment?"

Dal Mitchell's lips were tight, almost gone, replaced by a thin, hard line. Then they parted in a smile. He shrugged.

"Okay, Nate, okay," he answered. "I'll step up my price to five hundred if Ra—the maverick wants to sell. I'll even—"

Rad shook his head.

It took the combined efforts of four cowhands to get Flame inside the pole gate of the corral where he stomped his hoofs and flung his head high, screaming his defiance. As the men watched from a distance, he stood, head high, nose searching the westerly wind for the scent of his sire Wela, and the band.

From a corner of the main old log barn, Dal Mitchell watched. He watched the handsome stallion's movement, appraised his every point in that magnificently chiseled form of beauty. . . .

Old Wela called softly to an old mare which moved timorously up to his flank. He flicked her with his long upper lip.

Above his eyes, deep sockets seemed suddenly to have formed. His lower lip sagged, but although his body seemed aged his spirit was still aflame. Every now and then he tossed his head high at the tang of cougar or bear and sent his shrilly-ringing warnings blasting along Hell Canyon.

Tonight, two months after the disappearance of his great son, Wela stood alone, poised on his favorite vantage point, his stifled foreleg raised as he sniffed into a changing wind which brought him the tang of his son's scent.

Then he poured out cries—cries which had not lost any of their timbre as they rang along the canyon and out over the open lowland range.

In his corral, Flame heard. This evening he was alone, the man creatures having roped and removed a companion mare. For the past three weeks Flame had had constant company, company which had taken his attention away from the far hills. This evening he heard the voice of his father and his every nerve quivered excitedly. Suddenly he whirled about. Men were approaching. He snuffled their scent and stomped his big hoofs.

Mitchell was talking with two strangers. He was giving them instructions:

"Rope him, an' choke him enough to cut off any cries. I'm payin' you to hustle him out to the Twin Coulee place. Get goin', an' make it awful quiet."

The hired wranglers mounted the corral poles. Sharply a loop hissed, to settle about Flame's neck. Before he could rear or scream a second loop swished about his throat to tighten on his wind pipe. Now he was being forcibly dragged from the corral.

Flame was forced to submit. However, as he stomped outside the corral the freshening wind brought to his keen hearing the shrill call of his father. There was no mistaking that cry. Old Wela was in close, and instinctively Flame knew those calls were to him alone.

He lunged forward. He flung a loop clear, sending a wrangler leaping for the safety of the corral fence. Now the stallion whirled, rearing. There was still a rope on his neck, but it was settled low on his chest and was loose. He curled his lip and screamed to send a call back to Wela.

It was this squeal which aroused old

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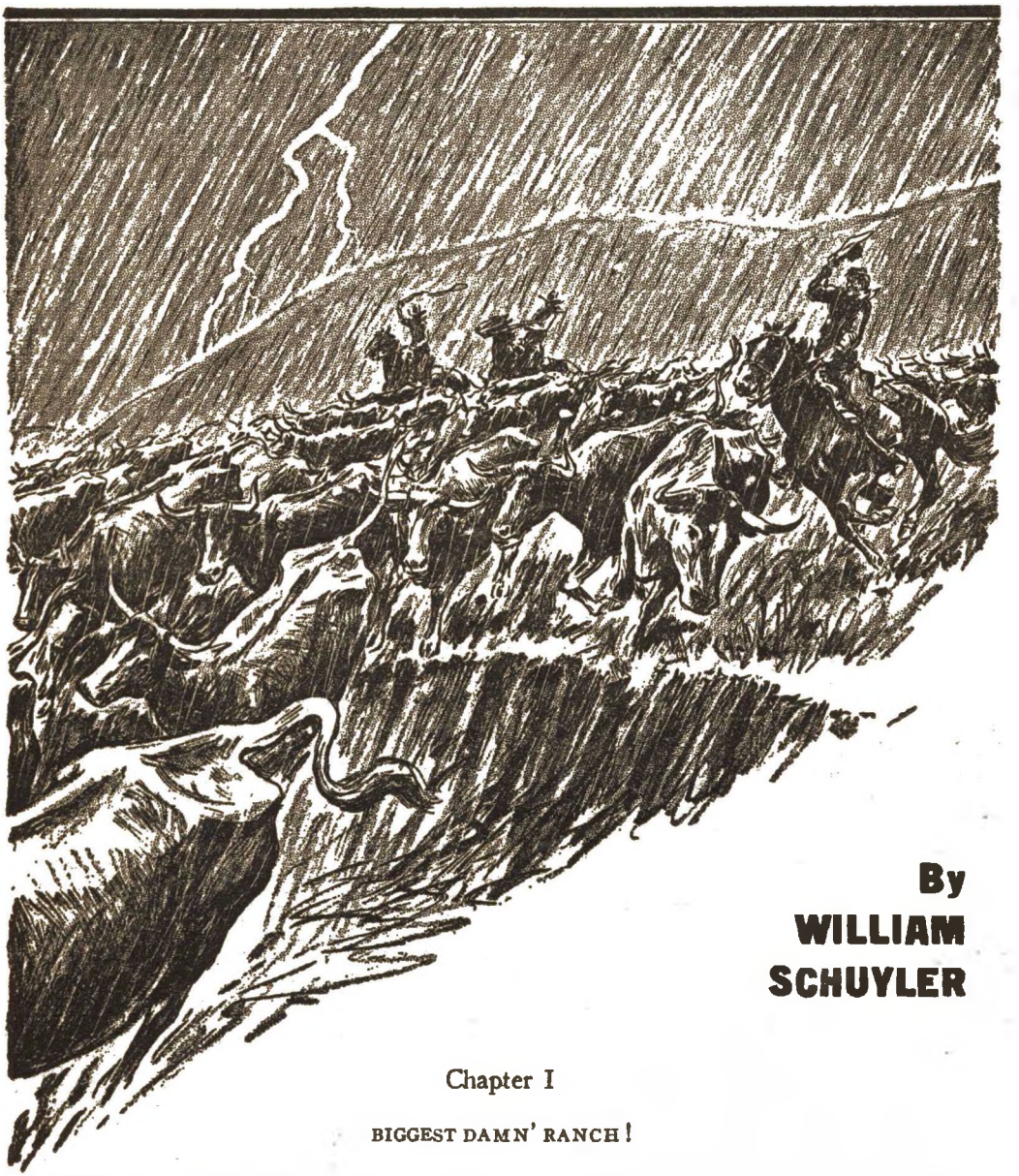
THE DEVIL RIDES THE DEADLINE

Ambition has torn the guts out of many men and tossed their hulks to the buzzards—and ambition was the curse of young Charley Aiken. So the snake-eyed ramrod of the Big Spread, who'd left more than one good man a shattered, broken shell, waited—backed by his kill-hardened gun-crew—ready and willing for the final graveyard showdown. . . .

Charley tried to turn aside, but the cattle made a wild dash down the bank, swiftly engulfing him in their midst.



By
WILLIAM
SCHUYLER

Chapter I

BIGGEST DAMN' RANCH!

CHARLEY AIKEN was in San Angelo after a full drive with the T Ladder outfit when he first heard of Raoul Claibourne's Big Spread. Men spoke of it as if it were another country. It was in the background of every conversation and yet no one seemed to know much about it except that it was big; that was peculiar in a country where everybody knows a lot about everybody else. Charley never met a man who worked for the outfit, but tradespeople and business men considered the Big Spread an important customer.

One afternoon, when Charley was having a beer to kill time at Hennessey's American Eagle Saloon, he did run into a man who had worked for the Big Spread, or claimed

he had. The man was drunk, plenty drunk for that time of day, and what's more, he looked like a man who spent most of his time with the bottle. This medium-sized, square-shaped hombre roamed around Hennessey's with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. His eyes were glassy with drink and the skin of his face was slack. Nevertheless, the set of the man and the way he walked showed that in his day he was a puncher, maybe a good one.

He drifted around the bar and the tables and horned in on conversations. Little knots of men would tolerate him for a while as they would the droning of a fly, then brush him off and shoo him on to the next group. Charley, new to this country, and with the natural curiosity of a young man, watched the old cowpoke on his rounds.

After a while the man eased up to the bar a short way from Charley and next to a hairy, taciturn man who preferred to be alone. The drunk was weaving by this time and his voice was loud and muddled.

"Lis'n, pardner," he said, nudging the big fellow, "you're new 'round here, 'n you ought to know me."

The hairy man waved him away. This didn't faze the square looking man; he was on his routine and the liquor in him made him impervious to insult.

"I'm Calfee," he continued, as if he hadn't been interrupted. "Know wha' tha' means?"—he drew himself up with the false dignity of the souse—"I was the best damn foreman on the biggest damn ranch in the whole damn country!"

The other man was annoyed. He turned and said flatly, "Beat it!"

Calfee didn't mind and went on raving. "I'd still be there—why, me and old man 'Laburn were as close as ticks—if it wasn't for that sidewinder Shelley!" Charley supposed *'Laburn* was really Claibourne, too hard a name for a drunk to pronounce. He listened with interest, knowing the man was talking about the Big Spread.

Charley didn't hear any more, though, because the quiet hairy man was fed up. He turned on the drunken Calfee and put his big hand on his chest, and shoved him hard, not looking where he pushed. Calfee's limp figure sailed into Charley Aiken, splashing his beer over him. Calfee tripped on a spittoon and fell.

Aiken, young and easy going, was tolerant of drunks in general. He helped Calfee to his feet and noticed that the bottle and glass were still firmly gripped. Then Charley looked at the man who'd done the pushing, thinking he'd have something to say, maybe offer to buy another beer. But no—the big fierce waddie was surly—he threw a nasty look at Calfee and then returned to his drink.

Aiken, though he looked like an overgrown boy at twenty-four, was big. Around three-four inches over six feet in his spike heels. Something in the cut of the hairy man didn't strike him right and he decided not to take the insult. He stepped over and spun the man around.

"You and me are going to have trouble," he said.

The man looked disdainfully at Charley's tan freckled face and the mat of sunburned hair that curled under his stetson. Without a warning he threw his drink in Charley's face, glass and all. The glass caromed off his chin and crashed on the floor, the contents flooded his eyes and mixed with the beer on his vest.

"Go home and don't mix your drinks, kid," the man snapped.

The whiskey stung the young puncher's eyes but he reached out his long arms to grab the man. He stepped back out of reach and Charley followed, sweeping the stuff from his eyes. The surly gent was quick. He snatched an empty chair and whirled it at Charley's knees, bringing him down in a sprawl. Then the man picked up another, smaller chair and brought it high over his head to bash the prone Aiken.

The crowd was enjoying the fight and no one noticed Calfee as he careened around behind the man, until he swung his bottle. It cracked with a solid thud on the hairy man's big wrist and he dropped the chair. Things were even when Charley got up from the floor.

Neither man knew the other's name but they fought like old enemies. Aiken hadn't expected this much to come out of a quiet beer. Now he was in it, though, and he stalked the man to get him within reach of his powerful arms. The other didn't like in-fighting and eased away from Aiken, always keeping a chair or a table between them. Charley kicked these aside and moved in, until finally the hairy one was back against a wall and only a round table stood

between them as they glared at each other.

Charley was reaching for this when he saw the man claw for his gun. With all the power of his long body, the younger man flicked the heavy table up and over as the gun roared. Two shots splintered through the thick pine before Aiken could slam the man flat against the wall, pinning him there with only his head showing. Charley bashed the head with a looping right and heard it crack against a stud.

The crowd which had dived for cover when the gun showed, came out now and looked at the unconscious figure that Charley was propping in a chair. Nobody knew the man, nobody cared much, although one man said the hairy giant looked a lot like one of the Barton brothers who'd been playing hell with the Fort Reno stage. The bartender went through the pockets but found no identifying articles but he did find several twenty-dollar gold pieces. He took one of these to pay for the damage and slipped the rest back. Then he threw the sagging figure out into the street.

Calfee was pleased to find a man who would side for him, and he was drunkenly proud of his part in evening up the odds. He came up to Aiken with a new bottle. "Lemme buy you a drink. Wha's your name, pardner?"

"Aiken, Charley Aiken," he answered. "Just one drink. My outfit's shovin' off in an hour." The others wanted to stand for drinks too but Charley thanked them and took off. As he left he heard Calfee saying, "Could'a used an hombre like that on the Big Spread six years ago. That Shelley—"

Often, in the weeks that followed, Charley thought of Calfee and wondered what happened to him to make him the wreck he was.

LATE that winter, Charley Aiken was again in San Angelo, this time out of a job. It was hard times and he had been the newest hand at the T Ladder. Asking around town, he ran into a man at the livery stable who told him that the Big Spread foreman was in town looking for a good man. Charley was eager and asked a lot of questions about where he could find the foreman and what kind of an outfit the Big Spread was.

The man laughed uncomfortably and said he really hadn't meant to mention it. Charley persisted, and the man finally said all right he'd tell him where to find the foreman, but he warned against going after the job. He said he'd heard too much about the slave-driving reputation of the foreman. The man was inhuman, everybody said, but if Charley was crazy enough to want the job, why he'd find Tod Shelley up at the hotel.

Shelley—that was the name the little square-shaped guy had used in such hateful tones that day at Hennessey's. But Charley couldn't afford to heed the warning of his memory. He was jobless and had only a small stake to go on. He decided to give it a try, it couldn't hurt to talk to the man, maybe that Coffee, or Calfee, or whatever his name was, was just bearing a drunken grudge.

Aiken rolled a smoke and buttoned his blanket coat against the chill day. In front of the Parks Hotel he pinched out his cigarette and climbed the bare plank steps to the door. Inside the small lobby he asked the man who was slouching by the key rack where he could find Shelley. The man spat a piece of match off the end of his tongue and jerked his thumb toward the stairs.

"Just went up. Two-ten. Far end of the hall on the right," he said.

The door of the room was open and Charley was starting to knock on the jamb when he saw the high, square shoulders of a lean man. The man was faced to a mirror near the window and was working with a fine blond mustache. He heard Charley and turned around, smiling. Aiken spoke first:

"You Shelley?"

"Yeah," the handsome man answered. "You after the job?"

Charley said he might be, and while Shelley was explaining that there was another puncher after the job too, Charley looked over the man who might be his boss. What he saw he thought he liked. The foreman of the Big Spread was young, not as young as Aiken, but not over thirty. His hard, lean frame stood as tall as Charley's which was tall even by plains standards. He'd make two of that Calfee, Charley thought. The keen eyes and the strong teeth that showed when he smiled—which was often—gave the man a steady friendly look that impressed Aiken.

He noted too, but passed over, Shelley's obvious vanity about his clothes and his

mustache. And there was a certain angle and flare to the way his medium Stetson snugged to his head; and Charley skipped that.

He applied for the job, and told Shelley his name and where he'd worked before. At this point another young cowboy walked in. Shelley introduced him as the other man after the job. This fellow, a little younger than Aiken, said his name was Champ Hardesty. He was big too, but softer and very easy going.

This friendly galoot was to be Charley's unwilling teacher. But for now he was just another leather pounder after work in hard times.

Shelley told them both to wait in San Angelo for a few days until he could get back to the Big Spread. He'd send word, he said, if there were jobs for both of them. He smiled and rode off a little while later behind a heavily laden wagon, driven by a Mexican.

Aiken didn't like this waiting around and would have taken another job if there was one. The Mexican was back that same week with a message for both men to be at the headquarters of the Big Spread in three days. There were instructions on how to proceed through the carefully patrolled boundaries. Charley's interest in the Big Spread was renewed.

Nearly broke, Charley and Hardesty checked out of their shabby room and let their broncs ease into their best gait for the long ride ahead.

They soon left the protected valley and broke into the badlands to the south. This was hard going but cut miles off the longer route of the wagon road to the west. There was a thin cattle trail that had been the first leg in the early cattle drives to the Chisholm trail from the Big Spread. The two young men followed this meandering track through waterless country, scarred by deep dry arroyos, gulches and washes; studded with squat, ugly buttes and windswept mesas. Hundreds of prairie dog holes and tangles of wicked cactus slowed the pace of the horses.

The first long day's ride was rewarded by the sight of a ragged clump of willow, skirting the remnants of a once filled tank. Only a puddle of crusty water was left. The horses got little comfort from it as the men made a dismal camp, using the willows for a windbreak, but still miserably cold.

The January chill deepened during the night and Charley rolled out early to get the warmth of action in his bones. He hated to shake the peacefully snoring Champ whose big body ignored the cold. The bleak sun woke Champ at last and they shared some cold beans before saddling the horses. Charley was apprehensive of the changing weather.

It was late that second afternoon, in the lap of a threatening wind, that they came to the hills and rimrock that marked the northern edge of the Big Spread. The Mexican had told them that they would be stopped somewhere in these hills, but in the driving wind they were not prepared for the rider who suddenly appeared from the shelter of a large limestone outcrop. This grizzled hombre rode his bronc easily with his knees and kept his Winchester and his small black eyes trained on the weary riders. The wind flattened the brim of his greasy hat back against the crown and parted his tobacco stained beard. He came close before he spoke.

"Keep your hands away from them guns," he ordered. "And tell me your business pronto!"

As the Mexican had instructed them, the young waddies gave their names and said they were coming to get jobs on the Big Spread. The man's manner changed immediately. He sheathed his rifle and let go a raucous laugh and a long stream of tobacco juice with the wind.

"You're the new meat for Shelley, huh?" He grinned through his rough beard. "You look big enough—maybe. Anyways, you'll find fire wood by them cedars under that overhang yonder. Camp there tonight. Tomorrow, cross the crest of them hills and get onto the river. Keep it nigh on your right, if you cain't see the trail, till you get to headquarters." He laughed again, wheeled his horse and was gone.

Chapter II

NEW RAMROD—OLD STORY

IN THE morning the sun was pale and hazy. The wind whipped and whistled in earnest, bringing the snow and bleakness down from the far northern plains, as the duo worked their laborious way through

the vast ranch. They tied their hats down and hunched into the collars of their blanket coats against the stinging snow. The landscape was striped with the horizontal driving streaks but Charley could see the lushness of the great, private valley. The stream they followed was clear and fast while the hills lasted but slowed and meandered over rich plains before they sighted the headquarters layout.

Winter's last Norther had gathered its strength for a final blast when the two painfully chilled figures finally reached the bunkhouse and corrals of the Big Spread headquarters. They could discern, through the teeth of the blizzard, the vague outline of a big house on a rise beyond the bunkhouse. They cared for their horses quickly, anxious to get to the stove that emitted the welcome plume of smoke from the bunkhouse roof.

Champ, entering first, croaked a friendly but frostbitten "Howdy," and threw his war bag onto the first empty bunk he saw near the glowing stove. Charley stood by the door a while to get his bearings. The circle of men around the stove hardly acknowledged their coming.

A man they were later to know as Zeb Lueke detached himself from the group at the stove and stepped up to Champ. This Lueke was a singularly ugly man: flat face, shallow eyes, broken nose. His lumpy figure was long and powerful, but stooped and ape-like—the product of hard work and many battles. Without a word he pushed the newcomer aside and tossed his bag off the bunk.

"That's my rack, tenderfoot."

Sociable Champ looked surprised but gave the man the benefit of the doubt. He grinned. "Didn't see any stuff on it, partner."

The crowd at the stove shifted their interest from the tips of their boots to the two men, and Charley, still by the door, thought they anticipated something. They did.

Lueke snapped at Champ's innocent statement. "Look under it, Lard." Lueke had a particularly unfriendly inflection in his rasping voice.

Hardesty, still trying to be friendly, ignored his new name and stooped to look under the bunk. Without warning Lueke kicked Champ where his pants were the tightest, ramming his head solidly against the hard edge of the bunk. Instantly, the crowd formed a new circle around the scene of attack. They gave fierce attention to the quick onslaught.

Over their heads, Charley saw the dazed and cold-stiffened Champ turn to rise from his hands and knees, and at this moment Tod Shelley came in and the punchers made room for the foreman. He watched like the others except that Charley noticed his aloofness, in contrast to the eagerness of the men.

When Champ's chin came in range, Lueke kicked it, and not lightly, right on the point. It was neater than a good uppercut and drew the grunting applause of the watchers. Champ struggled to keep consciousness, failed, and sank to the pine boards. The big newcomer hadn't had a chance to show fight. The men, more like wolves than men, closed in around him. Some giant said, "Lard here needs brandin', don't he boys?"

The howling Norther outside blasted a grim accompaniment as the crowd laughed and picked up Hardesty's inert form. They jack-knifed it and it was immediately apparent to Aiken that they intended to push the seat of Champ's pants against the cherry red stove.

Charley Aiken knew he could not start his life on the Big Spread by siding for this gullible cowboy, but he did look to Shelley, expecting the foreman would not allow this extent of brutality on a man who had ridden three cold days on short rations. He was wrong. Tod Shelley smiled his smile and lit a fresh cigarette.

A short hiss, a pungent smell and a wild laugh from the gang told Charley it was done. He saw the burned and half-conscious Hardesty dumped heavily on a bunk in a corner. His bag was heaved on top of him; the fun was over. The name Lard would be his as long as he stayed on the Big Spread.

Aiken covered his short-time friend and found a bunk for himself, feeling a kind of fear coming into him. It was not fear of these men—rough stuff didn't bother him. He had long since proven that he could take care of himself. But he'd seen Tod Shelley's smile in its true character, and, with it, the breed of viciousness in the man. He remembered the words and the laugh of the bearded man at the boundary.

EVERY day of Charley Aiken's new job brought fresh jolts. He had considered himself hard and experienced for a young guy. Farming as a kid, stevedoring on the docks at Frisco, knocking around the country in general, had put heavy muscles on his big bones. He'd known the feel of a saddle too, these last two years, and he handled a rope with the easy coordination of a man born with balance.

But this was a new life, and a sharp shock to the uninitiated. Charley had learned that all cowboys work hard, and in the next few months he was to discover just how hard a man could work. Champ Hardesty didn't last out the first two weeks.

Raoul Claibourne's Big Spread was different. It had been called the Crown Ranch by Claibourne, but some cowboy in the early longhorn days had dubbed it the Big Spread because he had never seen anything bigger. Larger than most counties, Claibourne's kingdom was an entity in itself. It contained—besides the headquarters layout and the great house on the knoll—a town of its own, a considerable farm, a river, and miles of range in its valley and uplands with countless herds of whiteface fattening on them. Lord of all this, Claibourne had his own law too: nobody shared his range. Rugged gun hands rode his borders, discouraging nosey outsiders. With their ready triggers, these border rangers made their own rules and did their jobs with cold efficiency. Charley had seen one, and that first windy spring he saw a small band of them dispense quick justice to a couple of foolhardy rustlers. No questions; two shots; hasty burial.

Charley Aiken worked hard and learned fast. He had to. He was put with two saddle-wise experts, Tiny Rattan and Cliff Ivers; and he didn't have to be told that they were his teachers. Tiny and Cliff were gaunt, muscular men, not much given to talk, and, like the other veteran hands, they took quiet pride in their arduous work. Unsmiling, humorless, they tackled every task quickly and with full vigor. If Charley lagged or fumbled they would punish him for it on the spot, big as he was, and they would give him their harsh supervision that night as he practiced with rope or bronc.

Tod Shelley soon singled out Charley for his taunts and gave him the dirtiest jobs, and smiled that smile. The gang loved it and laughed. The foreman could see the dogged progress of this pilgrim and took every opportunity to criticize and humiliate him. Tod Shelley wanted good hands but would not tolerate ambition. He spotted the sign of it in Aiken and ruthlessly tried to work it out of him. The new hand thrived on the work and bore his growing grudge silently. Charley soon knew that one day he and Shelley would have a showdown. You can't hate a man like that and not make your play.

Charley often wondered about the big boss, Claibourne. He'd never met him or seen him with the men, and he gathered that none of the other men, except Shelley, had ever been in the big two-story house. A time or two, Charley saw Claibourne standing quietly on the long Louisiana gallery across the second floor of his mansion. A thin, straight man he was, with a long, aristocratic nose and fine white hair over a high forehead. He would stand there with his long thin hands resting on the rail, and look up the valley of his river, over his corrals and barns, over the farms, over the buff adobe houses of the Mexican farmers, to the green and brown of his range. Only the hills that marked his northern boundary stopped his view.

Tiny and Cliff and Charley got to be pretty close partners, as close as reticent cowmen get, and it was Tiny Rattan who told Charley some of the story of Raoul Claibourne; and of Shelley too. Tiny had been on the Spread many years and his story came in scraps, the way he'd gotten it, but it fit together.

Story had it that Claibourne came from Louisiana in the early sixties after the malaria of the bayous had killed his wife and infant son. Claibourne, himself, had been born in a large, proud, but poor family. He had been the youngest but the smartest one and had struggled hard to put himself and his brothers and sisters on top of the heap. He'd made a lot of money on sugar and rum. Then he'd married a girl, a very young and very pretty girl, simply because he loved her and that was the only thing he needed.

For a few years, they said, Claibourne and his pretty wife were happy with their one child, a daughter, Zoe. But then, in the heat of a Louisiana summer, a boy was born and malaria took the mother and child.

Raoul sold his plantations, settled his affairs and took the five-year-old Zoe with him to the great Southwest to start a new life.

By stage, buckboard and horseback the keen-eyed, patient Claibourne roamed thousands of square miles of this half-developed cattle country. Finally, on the banks of a stream the Mexicans called the Trampas, he found something to renew his old ambition. A small ranchhouse, now the bunkhouse, nestled in the cottonwoods near the stream and wild longhorn cattle grazed the endless reaches of plains and hills to the north and west of it.

The unambitious Mexican family who lived there sold it to him gladly for a thousand pesos. The story had it that these Mexicans gave him some papers they could not read but which they claimed signified their ownership of the ranch. Claibourne discovered that these documents were a grant from the Spanish Crown, presented to the great-great-grandfather of the present owner in payment for his services in the armies of the Conquistadores. Claibourne proved in a long court battle that the grant still held.

Claibourne called his new home the Crown Ranch and set out immediately to make it his empire. With his innate knowledge of men and their abilities he quickly gathered the finest cowboys of the region. To them and their foreman he gave the responsibility of bettering and increasing the herd. Then he went about the business of making the place self-sustaining.

He established a town and peopled it with Mexicans, now Spanish-Americans, who farmed the rich acres by the river and built his magnificent two-story mansion on the little rise above the original house. In a few years the ranch got its new name, the Big Spread, and it was an independent kingdom, buying little from outside and driving large herds to distant shipping points and up the Chisholm Trail. Raoul Claibourne was king; his daughter the princess; his foreman the prime minister.

The Big Spread had had an excellent foreman even before Tod Shelley came down from the North. Tiny Rattan had been working for the Spread then and remembered the man's name was Calfee, Burt Calfee. Tiny claimed that this foreman was responsible for bringing in the whiteface to replace the romantic but scrawny longhorn. He had been a hard boss but a good one and the men liked him. He increased Claibourne's cattle wealth beyond belief. He was a violent, primitive man, with a one-track mind fixed on cattle. Aiken didn't tell Tiny of the broken, drunken wreck he had met by the name of Calfee.

Shelley, Rattan said, was half English. His father had been a remittance man. Like many another Englishman he had become a rancher in the high grass plains of the Wyoming territory. Tod was an only child and grew up in the mixed atmosphere of English propriety, American hardiness, Indian savagery and Powder River rustling that marked that territory in those days. At twenty, Tod took over the ranch from his aging father and built a redoubtable reputation as a stockman, fighter and sharp dealer. Drought years and the blizzard killed his parents and ruined the ranch. Tod smiled and moved south.

It had been accident that Shelley had stumbled onto the Big Spread. He had innocently ridden over the unfenced boundary and had found himself confronted by the guns of two bearded horsemen. These hirsute toughs ordered him to turn north and keep riding. The presence of such a well-guarded range aroused Tod's fighting curiosity and that night he worked his way stealthily past the outposts and into the grassland valley of Claibourne's kingdom. He was careful to avoid the men he saw occasionally and at last came to the headquarters and saw the great house of the owner.

Shelley had then skirted the bunkhouse and sheds and corrals and had gone to the foot of the path that led to the house. A hard-ridden horse overtook him just as he dismounted. It was the foreman, Calfee. Calfee demanded to know who Tod was, what he was doing there and how in hell he had come onto the ranch unnoticed. The intruder haughtily announced that he was there to see the big boss himself, even though he didn't know his name, and he turned to walk up the flower-bordered path.

The foreman abruptly halted Shelley with a heavy hand and, not waiting for any preliminaries, he plowed into this stranger. The square, violent Calfee went at Shelley flailing heavy fists. The power of his first assault had knocked Tod down, but from then on the fight was Shelley's. With the

graceful footing of a panther, so the story goes, he blocked the foreman's rushes and then cut the man's face to ribbons with precise and wicked punches. Enraged, Calfee had gone for his gun, but too late, for Tod had anticipated this and drawn his own, with which he whipped the shorter fighter down.

A dozen big waddies, Tiny with them, showed up then from all directions and Tod was quickly disarmed and his hands tied. The great man himself, the quiet and distinguished Claibourne stepped out onto the long gallery then and looked down on this violation of his privacy. A spokesman for the punchers who held Tod explained that this stranger had somehow made his way through the whole ranch and had whipped the foreman. Had whipped him and beaten him in a fair fight.

Hearing this, Claibourne had disappeared from the balcony and reappeared out of the front door, walking slowly down the path to see this interloper. Rattan remembered Shelley standing there confident and smiling a little, breathing no harder than if he had just walked up from the corral. Claibourne, for his part, was serious and calm. He had pulled pensively on the long nose that fitted his long patrician face. He had looked long at Shelley and then he had looked at the beaten Calfee.

"What is your name?" Claibourne had asked the newcomer.

"Tod Shelley."

"What do you want here on this ranch, Mr. Shelley?"

"If that was your foreman," Tod had gestured with his chin at Calfee, "I want his job."

Claibourne had smiled at the arrogance of the tall, blond stranger, but had recognized the quality of his nerve. He had said, simply, "Untie him, he is your new foreman."

Tod Shelley had proven himself quickly after that and made the most of his opportunity. Handling men, rough men, was no trick to him. He soon made them know they were working for him. He had plans. Charley learned later that Claibourne's daughter Zoe, now a beauty out of her teens, was part of them. Tod was young and skillful and played his hand slowly. That was the situation when Charley Aiken hired on.

Chapter III

WATERY GRAVE

DAY after day, in this new life, Charley Aiken scrambled out of his roll in the gray dawn and slaved with his range mates at the giant tasks of herding, cutting, roping, branding, breaking. Each day he thinned and hardened until, as the summer came on, there was nothing left of his great body but bone and muscle and a grim determination. Any awkardness he might have had before, disappeared under the discipline of Tiny and Cliff. He wolfed down the heavy fried food of the cowboys and thrived on it. His twenty-fifth birthday passed without notice, even from him—he rode herd in a driving rain that day.

Out there it was work without stint, no pleasures except to swear at the cook and sleep, and little of the latter. Sometimes, when the work would seem unbearable, Charley would hear one of his partners mention Fiesta. This word worked magic on the morale of the men but Charley never had the time to inquire as to its meaning.

One cloudless June day, Charley Aiken saw Zoe Claibourne for the first time. In fact he nearly ran her down. He was working a few reluctant strays down to the water and had them in a dry wash where he could move them easily. Near the stream they took the hint and Charley swung abruptly up the bank to go for more. Too late, he felt the impact as his bay thudded into the rump of another horse, causing its rider to do some fancy handling to keep seated. The rider, Charley noticed to his embarrassment, was the big boss's daughter; and he also noted the expert way she maneuvered her frightened thoroughbred. The young puncher quickly doffed his hat and offered his assistance, apologizing for his carelessness.

The girl soon had her big gray quiet. She wheeled around to look at the cowboy, and Charley felt her great, dark eyes take in the tangle of his sunburned hair and the work-worn hollows of his face.

Zoe Claibourne saw these and more. She saw the freckles that persisted through the walnut tan of his face; and the young, earnest brown eyes. She knew immediately that he was different from the callous waddies Tod Shelley usually hired. Zoe's

light hair was neatly swept up under her black Stetson, and she held her head high, revealing unconsciously the exciting contrast of black felt and black eyes against light skin and hair. She sat her horse easily, Western style. No English saddle either, Charley saw, just a plain but clean stock saddle. Her clothes had the careless elegance of the rich; faded denim looked richer than satin on her slim legs.

Charley sat burning and uneasy waiting for her to dismiss him. At last she said, "I think a cinch is twisted, will you straighten it for me?" She smiled, and the cowboy felt the heavens break down on him.

He threw off his horse with unaccustomed clumsiness and adjusted the cinch with fumbling fingers as she lifted a graceful leg out of the way. Charley barely heard her "Thanks" in his ringing ears.

Mounting again, Aiken saw Zeb Lueke galloping toward them. Zeb drew up his horse and took off his hat. His flat, cruel eyes glanced wickedly at Aiken before he spoke to the girl.

"Anything wrong, Miss Zoe? Has this man been botherin' you?" His tone was mixed—humility for Zoe, threat for Aiken.

Charley was about to protest but Zoe Claibourne raised a gloved hand to stop him. She said, "A little trouble with my cinch, Zeb. This man was kind enough to fix it." She dismissed them both with a pleasant nod and rode off.

The craggy Lueke was not satisfied, and when the girl was out of earshot he pulled his horse close to Charley's and stuck his jaw out to emphasize what he said.

"Shelley don't tolerate shinin' the Old Man's daughter," he snapped. "The work ain't out here, fussin' with saddles. So ride!" And then he added with menace, "I'll see you tonight." He spurred his horse sharply and headed him in the general direction Miss Claibourne had taken.

Charley, as the newest hand on the Spread, was used to taking a lot from the veteran cowmen, but he wondered where Zeb got off taking such a tone of authority with him. He looked up Cliff Ivers late that afternoon before evening chow. The two of them sat in the breathless shade of the bunkhouse porch and Cliff, a serious man of many wrinkles and few words, explained it to Charley.

He told his young partner that whenever Zoe chose to ride on the range she had a virtual military escort within calling distance at all times, though she did not know it. Shelley assigned certain men each month to stay within reach of her but mostly out of sight. She never suspected that the man who forded the stream near her or topped a rise a half-mile away was her bodyguard. Like all Western men, these punchers considered womanhood sacred, and watching out for her was their only chance to exercise their gallantry from one Fiesta to another. Lueke, Charley guessed correctly, was the guardian for today.

Their talk drifted off when Lueke and Shelley walked up from the corral. Several other hands followed, getting set for the evening meal. There was an air of conspiracy in their manner.

A few feet from Charley and Cliff, Zeb Lueke stopped. Shelley drifted on to lean against one of the rough porch supports. When the others caught up with Zeb, he went into an act. With the heavy-handed humor of the amateur actor, the flat-faced puncher replayed the happening of the afternoon with all the sarcasm at his command.

He swept off his dusty sombrero in a gesture of exaggerated gallantry that put his audience in the mood. Then he forced a mincing quality into his harsh voice and said, "Oh, Miss Zoe, my name's Charley and I'm the new tenderfoot here." He fluttered his eyelids coyly. "Can't I fix your saddle or somethin'? They work me too hard here!"

The antics of this bow-legged tough brought howls of laughter from the punchers, and they looked expectantly at Charley to make something out of it. Young Aiken knew he was being baited but refused to show anger. He sat where he was, unconcerned, and rolled a smoke. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Shelley, some ten feet away. It was obvious from that smile that he was in on this and was waiting for Charley to break. The realization came to Charley that he could not pass this up, nor could he act like a hotheaded, gullible fool. He made his decision while Lueke continued his mimicry.

When the men were laughing the hardest, Charley ground his cigarette out under his thumb and uncurled his rangy six-foot-four. He smiled at Lueke and gave him some phoney applause. Then he made a gesture

to the rest to bring them around him closer.

"Zeb left out the best part," he said. "What he said to me."

Charley then displayed his talents as an actor. He tugged down his hat, put a mean look on his young face and walked up to the gang with a sort of bowlegged limp. Out of the corner of his mouth he snarled, with the nasal accent of Zeb, "Anything wrong, Miss Zoe? Has this man been botherin' you?" Charley looked meaner and copied the jerky gestures of Lueke. Instantly, the crowd was with him, laughing harder than before.

Then he pulled the clincher. He filled his chest and stuck out his chin just as Zeb had done, and snarled again, "Mr. Shelley don't tolerate shinin' the Old Man's daughter!" and added with a frown, "I'll see you tonight about this, young feller!" Lueke, not so good at taking as dishing it out, froze.

The men were coughing and laughing and pounding each other on the back, until suddenly they realized that the foreman's name had been brought into the game. They stopped and looked expectant like they had that first night in the bunkhouse.

Lueke looked to see if his boss wanted to cut in. Shelley's smile didn't alter a whit. He looked Charley up and down without feeling and then made a simple movement with his hand, as if to say, "Take him Lueke, I can't be bothered." Lueke jabbed back his hat and ranged up to Charley, knowing he'd have to finish what he'd started.

"That kind of talk don't sound good from a pilgrim, Kid," he said.

Kid! It was a long time since Charley had been addressed as *Kid* in that tone. The last one had been the man at Hennessey's. Charley gathered up Zeb's vest, shirt and suspenders in his huge left hand and held the man at the end of his long reach. Zeb valiantly tried to swing, kick and use his knees.

Charley let the crowd chuckle at his struggles for a minute and then he drew the man to him and drove a killing blow to his stomach. When Zeb's head came down, Charley said, "And this one's for Champ!" and split the ugly face with a crushing right. And then he unceremoniously dragged the helpless, twitching figure to the watering trough where he dumped it. He looked up to Shelley to get the full value of his triumph. The foreman was gone.

THE summer wore on, and Charley, wanting to learn and anxious to share the pride of perfection his partners had, unconsciously avoided friction with his foreman. He was not afraid of the man, far from it—just wary. And ambitious. He would have laughed at himself if he had stopped to think how much his meeting with Zoe Claibourne had to do with his ambition. But he could see now, how steadily Tod Shelley was working toward his own goal. Insistently, the foreman was winning the positive respect, almost the affection of Claibourne. His handling of the cattle business of the ranch was masterly. This he cleverly brought to the attention of the big boss.

Tod's attentions to Zoe were a little bolder but not pretentious or insulting. He curbed his conceit and showed polite humility in the presence of the tall heiress of the Big Spread. She rewarded him with the same gracious smiles and charm she showered on all the fine gentlemen who traveled from Louisiana to woo her. And the same disdain, though Shelley did not know it.

On a big cattle drive in the middle of July, it became obvious to Charley that his brush with Lueke was a preliminary round to the final showdown that was bound to come between Shelley and himself. He knew Shelley well enough now to be sure that the foreman hated him deeply. It took a stampede to show the deepness of that hate and Shelley's real treachery.

Six men and the foreman had worked a big gather down to the Trampas. Shelley had given the men terse instructions.

"We've been ten days getting this herd to the river. Today we're moving the whole outfit across." He had looked up at the low hills to the northwest. Black clouds were gathering there, and slowly marching south. "That," he had said rashly, "doesn't look like it will bust over us, and the hell with it if it does. This beef has got to be ready for the drover by day after tomorrow. Now get 'em over!"

Charley Aiken and his old partners, Cliff Ivers and Tiny Rattan had the herd gently milling toward the swift water of the ford. The other three punchers worked as a team, harrying the leaders into the water and forc-

ing them to make for the easiest bank on the other side. Shelley rode hard, giving orders and trying to accelerate the crossing.

About fifty or sixty head had mounted the other bank when Charley's weather sense, sharpened by weeks in the open, caused him to observe the clouds. They were much thicker now and sheets of light silhouetted their dark outlines. A sharp wind was behind the storm now and Charley could see its relentless march toward them. Patch after patch of sun-drenched valley grass fell under the shadow. Charley looked to the foreman. Shelley was giving directions and ignoring the threat; he had made his decision and he would bear it through.

The apprehensive crew accepted the voice of authority, gave new energy and determination to the business at hand. The seasoned riders, each in his private cloud of blinding dust, cursing his lot, shunted the great body of valuable animals with reckless speed toward the water. The steers, mumbling and threatening in their Hereford language, sensed the impending storm, showing signs of dangerous restlessness under the frantic urging. Half of them now were across or in the knee-deep water.

The thunderhead progressed and blanked out the sun. That fateful hush settled over the landscape, accentuating the dusty, thudding progress of the herd to the river and the boiling splash of those in the water—but more frightfully auguring the fireworks to come. The herd plunged on with raised head, fearful of the deepening dark and gashes of bright lightning, their dilated nostrils sniffing the ozone of electrified air.

Charley felt the first wet slap of a rain drop make mud of the dust on his glove. He gave a quick glance around, checking his position with those of his partners. He, Tiny Rattan and Cliff Ivers were flanking the herd on the down-stream side, he himself in a position roughly halfway between the river bank, where Cliff was, and the tail position of Rattan.

Rattan was mostly hidden by the swirl of dust and tossing heads. The usually calm Ivers worked like a madman to bend his charges into an orderly line at the river's edge, his little pony fighting for footholds on the rounded gravel. Across the stream Charley could see the stocky figures of Norm Wickham and Buss Boone flashing their mounts around their new wet herd, giving it form and direction toward the plain above the bank. The others were lost from sight in the melee.

In a flash the crisis was on. The bedlam of the skies crashed like Doomsday. A mile-long streak of lightning rent the stillness and the clouds dropped their burdens in a flood. At the second blinding flash the cattle went berserk, bellowing and lunging and ignoring their once orderly progress. Aiken remembered the insecure position of his partner Cliff at the rocky brink of the stream. Looking there now, he could, in the blue nightmare of the lightning, see the struggling puncher, deetrmined to straighten a bulge in the herd that was taking the path of least resistance down the narrow river bank, between the line of willows and the water. The next light showed the unlucky Ivers engulfed in the crazed mob, horse and rider all but lost to view as the cattle made their wild dash down the bank.

This was Charley's first full dress stampede. He forgot his harsh training in that moment and drove his black toward the river to save Ivers if he could. Before he had ridden thirty feet, he was in danger himself, but his partner was in trouble and that sent him on. Shouting and thrashing his hat, the young waddie plunged headlong into the confusion, trying vainly to make a split in the bellowing mass. It was futile, and Charley thought he saw Cliff dragged down below the heads and backs of the steers in the water. No outcry, just an inevitable submission to a crazy force.

Charley found his attention completely riveted on his own predicament, for he and the black were being pummeled and gored and dragged bodily along with the rush downstream. Charley thought his legs would break under the impact of the heavy steers as they charged past a tangle of willows. Directly ahead, not fifty feet, he spotted two large cottonwoods—and there the herd divided for an instant before it merged again. These trees were growing tandem, about fifteen feet apart, to the direction of the stampede.

Bruised and battered, Aiken took a desperate chance, his only chance. Pulling his legs from the stirrups he crouched in his saddle. The break came; he ran like a dancer across the broad backs of half a dozen beef to the protection of the narrow

open space, leaving his black to the mercy of the crush. He plastered himself against the inside of the upstream tree and felt the scraping rush of the cattle pass inches from each side. In a few terrorizing moments the herd was past—he blessed his luck.

TOD SHELLEY had seen the rash act. And he had seen his precious charges hopelessly scattered. There would be many hours of hard riding to bring them together again. Claibourne would hear of it, and Shelley was infuriated with himself for the choice of action which might jeopardize the ever-increasing trust of the Big Spread owner. The foreman's cunning mind grasped eagerly at the opportunity to shift a part of the responsibility, and Charley, by recklessly leaving his post, gave Tod the scapegoat he needed.

In the lull that followed the stampede, a quite drizzle marked the van of the storm which raced down the valley. Shelley spurred his horse through this to the pair of cottonwoods and reined up when he saw Aiken's shoulders propped against one tree. Through the veil of drops, cascading from his Stetson, the foreman watched the younger man tenderly stretch his bruised legs to see if any real damage had been done.

With the treachery of a man who would not hesitate to bet on a sure thing, Shelley made his decision to rid himself of this man. He threw the spurs to his mount and loped to Aiken's position. The famous smile was gone as he dropped off his horse and faced the sitting Charley. Charley painfully rose, still breathing heavily from the punishment of his ride and close escape. The two lank men stood eye to eye an arm's length apart, the younger divining the portent of the vicious look of the other.

"Clumsy tenderfoot!" the foreman said. "I have no room for stampeding petticoat cowpokes in my outfit!"

"Dammit, Shelley, Ivers was being killed! And the herd was gone anyways."

"This is a cow ranch, not a nursery for a fiddle-footed kid!" Tod emphasized the insult by jabbing a hard gloved finger into Aiken's chest.

Kid, again! Charley, white hot with hate for this man, brushed the hand aside and snapped, "The hell with you!"

In his exhausted state, he should never have invited a fight; the mere act of standing was agonizing.

Shelley was not a man to dicker or pass the advantage. His grim smile returned as he followed the roll of Charley's sweeping gesture and lashed his left fist to his ear. As Charley dug for footing on the slippery ground, Shelley followed with a whipping right, snapping Aiken's head against the rough bark.

Charley instinctively tried to use his long reach to keep this man at a less punishing distance. But Shelley was no ordinary fighter and his arms were a match for Aiken's. The foreman, fresh and unhurt, wove inside Charley's guard and cut at him with calculated viciousness, the seams of his gloved hands ripping at his flesh. The taste of his own blood in his mouth brought new determination to the flagging Charley. He caught up the edges of Shelley's calf-skin vest in both hands and shoved himself away from the tree to bring the full force of his body against the foreman.

This maneuver had the desired effect. It threw Shelley out of balance and the two men skidded to the muddy ground of the river bank. The feet of the stampeding cattle had chewed this slope into a morass of muck and gravel and both men were soon covered brown from head to foot.

They grappled for each other, and pounded, each blow marked with a shower of mud. Unknown to either man, their rolling fight was bringing them to the river. Shelley was the first to spot the nearness of the rain-swollen stream. He drew up his legs and heaved Charley, who was temporarily on top, into the water. Then he got to his feet to get set for the opportunity to finish his rival when his head would appear.

Charley, for his part, felt the shock of the cold water as his mud-heavy clothes dragged him under. His tired muscles worked fruitlessly against the weight that pulled. He fought to hold what little breath was left after the kick in the stomach that had sent him there. He sensed the loose gravel bottom under his feet at last and pushed up as hard as he could. He had barely time for one frantic gulp of air when he saw through water-dimmed eyes the leaping figure of Shelley.

Tod's boots caught Charley squarely on the shoulders, thrusting his head once more into the choking horror of the water. Each

time he struggled to regain the surface, the foreman's hands and knees pushed him down. With desperate wisdom Charley held onto one of the trampling legs and reached higher, hand over hand, to pull himself up to the blessed air or pull the man down with him.

Shelley got a taste of the fear of drowning and quickly changed his tactics. He clutched the half-submerged willows on the steep bank and dragged himself and the clinging Aiken bodily out of the water. He thrashed his legs free of Charley's grip and scratched his way up the gravel to the advantage of the bank's top. Charley wisely chose the downstream flank of this patch of willows for his weary climb.

The two panting men once more faced each other on level ground. The foreman did not wait for a breather but went after Charley with determination but more respect for his rugged antagonist. The rain was falling hard again. And Charley once more found himself the target for heavy fists, unable to dodge them in his utter exhaustion.

Even the shell-hard Aiken had to cave under such assault. A hard right downed him and he felt the crush of knees in his stomach, the vice-grip of strong gloved hands at his throat.

The storm that had started the fight, in the contradictory way of natural things, stopped it. As a final defiant thrust at the scene of havoc, the skies split once more; a pink-white strap of lightning seared the air above the fighters and spent its fury on the giant cottonwood ten feet behind them. A glance showed Shelley the toppling of one rent half in their direction. With alarming momentum it was thundering down on them. Shelley scurried to safety and saddle, leaving his adversary to the crushing tree. He did not see Charley exert his final effort to roll from the reach of the flailing branches.

Chapter IV

WOLVES IN THE WILDS

AN HOUR later, Tiny Rattan found his muddy and bloody partner doggedly plodding toward the bunkhouse. Charley did not mention the fight. Both he and Tod did not invite inquiries about their battered condition. By tacit understanding they allowed the men to think that they had been hurt in the stampede; or to think whatever they pleased. This was their private fight. They both accepted the fact that the war to the finish was on between them. Charley wanted the spark to come and ignite the final explosion. The viciousness and treachery of his foreman was clear to him now and he would not be caught again. However, July passed without further conflict.

Something else was happening, more important to Charley, more threatening to Shelley. Charley Aiken became the best hand on the ranch, and the toughest. No one dared cross him, his fights were short. He was no longer the eager, reckless student of the range, but a seasoned tophand, not looking for trouble but not afraid of man or beast or the elements. His latent qualities of leadership came to the surface. He welcomed them and used them with new purpose. His intelligence and energy were felt by these hard partners of his and they began to look to him for decisions. He was even skilfully insubordinate to his foreman, when he was sure that he could handle a particular job better. Shelley could not fire him. All the men would go.

Shelley's characteristic aloofness disappeared. He worked harder to assert his authority, feeling the beginning of mutiny among his men. He could instinctively sense their anticipation of the final battle. He cursed the day in San Angelo when he had hired Aiken. He was impatient to rid himself of this upstart rival and did not doubt that he could when the chance came. The Indians days of his youth in Wyoming had taught him that a man only fights to win, rules out, no holds barred. Shelley would not have to stoop to cunning and double dealing; they were part of his soul. He looked for another time when the balance would be in his favor.

The thorn of Charley Aiken's insolence rankled, though, and Tod felt the necessity of removing this threat to his security. So, when one of the border rangers was crippled in a fall that August, Shelley grasped the chance to have his rival tranferred to the dangerous ranger duty. Charley was angered and protested this change from the life he loved so well. Shelley smiled; the foreman's word was still law. Charley went.

As he was getting set to go, Charley

found one real friend he had made. Tiny Rattan came up to him. Tiny's prized Winchester hung over his arm, and a box of shells bulged from his pocket.

"Pardner," the gaunt, serious man said. "You'll be needin' this out there." He handed Charley the oiled and glistening gun. Charley could see that the man who had taught him so much wanted to say more but couldn't.

"Thanks," Aiken said, and meant thanks for a lot more than the gun. The word carried gratitude for the patience and the harshness of this man; and for his other teacher, the dead Cliff Ivers.

Western men are embarrassed by thoughts like that, and Tiny Rattan broke the spell with a wallop on Aiken's arm. "See you at Fiesta," he said and turned away.

Charley didn't tell his friend that Shelley had ordered him to stay on the border crew for duty through Fiesta.

A NEW partner came into Aiken's life. A different breed of man from the salty cowpokes he was used to; a secret, hermit of a man, dedicated to his lonely task. John Davis was his name. A bearded man and thin, but as elastic as a bow-string. Charley could not guess his age.

For the first week in the timbered northern hills, Davis hardly spoke to his tall young pupil. They ate in silence in the bare line cabin that was their home. They divided the chore of ranging the ten miles under their supervision without discussion. Davis only spoke to Charley when he did wrong, and then without rancor.

Seeing Aiken's clumsiness with the rifle, he carefully schooled him in its use, astride and afoot. Davis scoffed at the reliance a cowboy puts on the heavy .45, but he showed his new partner how efficiently that weapon could be used at close range. Aiken learned not to try to crowd a bunch of lead into a small target but to make one bullet do the job.

One sultry evening, Charley was returning from his round. The sun was still up and Charley was walking his hot, tired horse the last half mile to the cabin. All day he had ridden the bare, jagged rimrock that overlooked the badlands, north and east. Wolf had been reported and the border gang were on the alert. Charley had seen nothing suspicious and now he looked forward to a hot cup of coffee and a little shade.

The sweating, jaded black between Charley's legs stopped short. He whinnied sharply. His ears went back and his muscles tightened as he shied away from what he saw or smelled. Charley could see nothing within the range of his vision, but he trusted his range-wise horse to judge the danger and remembered the rumors of wolves in the area. He spurred the black on to the cabin. Davis met him at the door.

"What spooked your horse, son?" the bearded man said, looking at the wild eye and flattened ear of the bronc.

Charley reported what had happened and Davis, without haste, but with that disturbing speed of his, was in the cabin and out again with rifle and saddle. In a moment he joined Charley on a small, dun-colored horse.

"Where's the trail?" was all he asked. There was no fresh horse in the corral for Charley so he wheeled his black and led off.

When they arrived shortly at the spot in question, the dun shied as well as the black. Davis threw off and inspected the ground for a space of a few yards. He mounted again, nodding, and forced his animal to the south, Aiken trailing.

"Wolf," he said simply.

As he followed Davis, Charley tried to remember what he had been told about wolves on the Big Spread. On this vast range, they usually worked in small packs from the badlands, sliding past the guards to attack the stray calves and yearlings that wandered into the northernmost reaches of the ranch. Sometimes a scattering of coyotes, like poor relations eager to pick up the leavings, would travel with them. Their forays were hasty and violent, and Davis, who always made a reconnaissance of the fingers of the range that reached into his bailiwick, knew where to look for them now. He raked the dun and went with such speed that Charley's tired horse could not keep him in sight.

For twenty minutes they moved up a shallow valley to a low crest in the hills, Davis pulling far ahead. Aiken could be sure of his course only by sighting a faint trail of dust ahead which marked the advance of his partner. The black, by now, was slowed to a gasping walk, and finally Aiken had to reply on an occasional fresh hoof-mark to guide him.

Topping the crest at last, Charley heard a raucous clamor far ahead, down the rolling slope which descended in easy grades to the swift upper reaches of the Trampas. This terrain was marked by broad patches of bunch grass and heavy thickets of cedar and runty pine. The noise was easily located as the squawking and cawing of jays and crows who were concentrating their heckling on a spot just beyond a finger of woods. The sharp crack of a rifle punctuated the racket. A horse screamed. Aiken spurred his black to its last effort, and shortly he came upon a wicked scene.

In a horseshoe-shaped recess, a grassy park surrounded by woods, a terrible confusion came to view. John Davis was afoot, levering shells rapidly into his carbine. The dun lay close by, screaming with the pain of a broken leg. The raving, hunger-thin pack of gray killers ringed the field of battle, snarling and plunging, eager to remove the man who guarded their prey. A calf and its mother lay gory and torn a few yards from Davis.

Charley urged the reluctant black into the foray, opening a wedge in the savage circle. He brought Tiny's gun into deadly action. Quickly, methodically, the two silent gun men threw accurate lead at the bold leaders of the pack and routed them in a matter of minutes. Wolves, like Shelley, thought Charley, liked better odds.

Davis gritted his teeth and swore a short stream of incisive cuss words as he lowered a final cartridge into the chamber of his gun. With painful steps he moved over to his treasured dun and relieved it from its hopeless misery. One more corpse in a field of carnage. Davis allowed that this was the biggest pack he'd ever seen, maybe twenty wolves and an uncounted number of coyotes on the fringes.

An inspection of Davis' leg showed a badly bruised ankle and a long gash where the leader of the pack had made his attack when Davis was thrown from his horse. The dun had tripped. Davis' boot had to be cut off and a pulsing flow of blood stopped before he could be hoisted to Charley's saddle. It was a long walk back for Charley.

For the next four days, Charley Aiken carried the whole burden of patrol, packing a blanket and rations behind his saddle. On the fifth day, with the hardiness of a mountain man, Davis was up and ready. Charley told him it was too soon for him to get up.

"You can't ride in your condition," he said.

"The hell I can't," Davis resented sympathy. He slapped his wounded leg with his hand to show its fitness.

Charley went on. "Besides, you've got to dig out your Sunday best for Fiesta. It's day after tomorrow."

Davis scowled. "Went to that damn thing three years ago and my horse wouldn't speak to me for a week after." This was the longest speech Aiken had ever heard from his partner.

Davis crinkled the corners of his faraway eyes and added, "That's a young man's game, that Fiesta. You go." He dismissed the matter with that and would not reopen it.

Charley couldn't hide his pleasure and spent the next day making preparations for the holiday—brushing his hat, washing his red shirt, tying fresh thongs to his saddle. Davis spat long yellow streams and grinned through his unkempt beard, offering short, wry remarks about fancy pants and petticoats.

That evening, after washing down their beans with a gallon of black, stiff coffee. Charley and John settled back to enjoy the end of the day. Aiken put his clean and polished boots on the table to admire them and day-dream. This was the hour when Davis usually sat in his barrel chair with a pipe and answered the younger man's questions with grunts of yes or no. But this night the thin ranger looked restless.

After a while he got up from his chair and went into the dark corner of the little cabin behind his bunk. With much scraping and profanity he dragged a heavy box out into the room. He wore a secret look of conspiracy on his face as he opened the lid so that the contents of the box were hidden from Charley's view. On hands and knees, the older man started tossing piles of souvenirs from his hidden past, onto the floor. At last he straightened up with a burden of gleaming leather and sparkling flashes of silver. This, with a flourish, he dumped on the table in front of Charley.

Charley stood and put the now dull boots on the floor. Gingerly, as if he were handling a masterpiece, he spread the most beautiful bridle he had ever seen. It was no storeboughten rig but the work of a most

meticulous Mexican leather craftsman. The rich brown leather was decorated every four inches of its length with hand-wrought conchas of coin silver. They were simple and round and reflected the flickering of the lamp in their sides. As Aiken inspected these, the bearded Davis said, "Navajo," implying truthfully that they were museum pieces.

"A man could look right proud with that rig!" Charley offered in admiration.

"You will," Davis said. "I did. Used to have a saddle to match, had to sell it to get out of Arizona." This was the first hint of the wiry man's past and Charley knew now that he had won the respect of this exacting man. Charley envisioned the time past when that beard had been trimmed and the man had been a heller with the ladies.

He thanked Davis for the loan of his finery.

Davis looked a little hurt. "It's yours," he said. "A man don't loan a thing like that. You might want to hock it someday to get a stake—but don't tell me about it."

Charley couldn't speak his thanks.

Chapter V

DEATH COMES TO FIESTA

FIESTA!

Charley had been told what to expect. Now, at last, the big work would stop for two blessed days. The lid was off. Each year, at the end of the fall beef roundup, and after the last bunch had been trailed to the shipping point, and after the last crops were out of the ground, the Big Spread held its Fiesta.

Claibourne knew the value of a celebration and the necessity of these hard men of his to let off steam. He spared no expense to throw this annual explosion. In a few years after the first Fiesta, it bacame a tradition and the fame of it spread. Claibourne's former friends from Louisiana vied for invitations to witness the spectacle.

It was a lively, wild drunken spree with only one rule: All guns had to be checked at the commissary. Raoul knew that the primitive life of the range brought violence with it at times of celebration. Fights would be a part of the festivities and that was to be expected. But with guns ruled out, Claibourne did not stand to lose valuable hands. And all the ladies would be safe.

The Spanish-American people added their color and their pretty daughters to the Fiesta. The marimba bands, stoked with tequila, would play tirelessly for hours. Their folk dances—some delicate, like the Pretty Foot or, as they called it, the Varsoviana; some wild, like La Raspa—were the center of attraction in the space between the groaning tables of food and the cradled barrels of beer and whiskey. The dark-eyed girls found apt pupils among the bandy-legged but nimble footed punchers. Fat, straight-faced mother and aunts jealously guarded the morals of the flashing girls. As the evening wore on, the duennas succumbed to the pressure of food and mescal.

The whole party was punctuated with good-natured slugfests; once in a while a serious fight would put a man on the injured list for a day or two. A few sober volunteers cruised the shadows to prevent violence of the deadly sort. All in all, the yearly Fiesta was the cowboy's dream of a bang-up whing-ding. It furnished conversation and solace for many lonely nights on the range; it set a goal.

Charley Aiken rode at an easy pace down the long valley. He didn't know what made his heart pound. Was it the prospect of Fiesta, or the imminent meeting with Tod Shelley? The latter probably.

Ambition had grown in Charley Aiken quietly and steadily with his pride. In this huge, remote cattle empire he had come to realize that the division between leader and follower was clean-cut. His duty with John Davis had given him time to look back, had allowed him to view his own life with the proper perspective. The knowledge had come to him that he liked this hard life and admired these quiet men who loved work for the steel it put in a man. More important, he knew for certain that he, Charley Aiken, had to lead these men. He never doubted now that he could—except for one thing. Tod Shelley!

Charley didn't see Tod the morning of the big doings. He wasn't looking for him exactly but the corners of his eyes were always set—he wasn't going to be dry-gulched this time. He knew the perfidy of the man. And Shelley would want to know why Aiken took Davis' place at Fiesta.

The morning was taken up with greeting his old partners, and helping to dig the big

barbecue pits and set up the barrels of beer and red-eye. Tiny Rattan was pleased to see his old partner around and admired the bridle. Charley told Tiny what good use he had made of his gun. The taciturn Rattan chuckled at the thought of Charley hunting wolves, and then with a serious face he offered a word of advice.

"Speakin' of wolves," he said, "Shelley ain't expectin' you. He's been braggin' about the way he took care of 'that damn tenderfoot,' as he calls you. He's worked in pretty close to the old man, and his daughter too, I reckon. Watch out for him. He ain't goin' to take this nice."

Charley felt the thrill of anticipation. He still hadn't seen Shelley and wondered what would happen when he did. He curbed himself when he saw his friends generously sampling the kegs as they rigged them up. This nipping got the men pretty well organized by noon, when the music started.

At high noon, work was called off all over the huge ranch. Only a skeleton crew of men like Davis was left to scout the boundaries. Every cowboy, farmhand, laborer, cook and bottle-washer had gathered at the headquarters ranch to give the party all the steam he had bottled up since Christmas! A leaner, browner gang of men was never assembled.

Once, as the afternoon really took hold and the crowd was getting up to full pitch, Charley looked up at the big Claibourne house. Funny, he thought, how nobody paid much attention to that house: it was a sort of holy-of-holies, remote from the mob.

Presently, as if his watching brought them out, several people stepped onto the long gallery. Even from his point, fifty yards away, Charley could tell they were handsome, gentle people. They moved down the porch with the studied ease of the well-born, the ripple of their polite laughter reached his ears. The straight man with the fine head and great nose was Claibourne.

Zoe, slim, vital and confident, in a soft, flowing dress, clung lightly to her father's arm. A breeze seemed to detach itself from this hot, still day for her benefit, blowing her light hair against her cheek, and making long folds in the material of her dress. Behind Zoe were ten or fifteen other young women and their escorts, beautifully dressed and very gay. They looked at the milling noisy crowd below them as if it were a menagerie collected for their entertainment. Charley stood a little apart, his hat well back on his head, frankly staring—a little resentful of his aristocratic audience. The pressure of his glance must have been felt by Zoe. She turned, lifting her lovely chin, her dark eyes looking straight and hard at him.

Charley in his turn, felt the weight of her gaze; thought he perceived the slightest nod of recognition. Before she turned away, he lifted his hat a respectful inch and bent his waist in a stiff bow.

This gallant mood was broken abruptly by the opening of the front door. The panther-grace of the man who walked out could belong only to Tod Shelley. Aiken would never mistake that man. The medium Stetson set snug on his head as always, and that infernal smile was there as he turned and nodded to the group on the balcony, touching the brim of his hat. Charley's finger tips twitched to get hold of the man. He wheeled to the nearest barrel to drown the black mood that was on him.

Shelley did not see him. The shock of their meeting was delayed.

With evening, the festival reached its zenith. The weaker spirits were passed out under the willows and cottonwoods by the river. Some had blissfully sought the shelter of the barrels which had brought them ecstasy and its companion, sleep. The others, just hitting their stride, were gathered in noisy groups, singing and howling in competition with the music. Charley spotted Rattan precisely footing his way through a schottische, his pointed boots matching skill with the little red shoes of his partner. Tiny's usually dour face was rapt with delight as he swung the plump beauty in the circle of his lean arm. The marimba orchestra was at its drunken best.

Aiken had tired of trying to drink himself into the fun and was standing on the fringe of the dancers, watching, wondering, in the added courage of his liquor, if he would try his skill in the wild La Raspa which the band had just launched. The rapid kicking and reverse spinning of this dance was tantalizing and intoxicating to the young man.

THEN, into the light of the great bonfires around the dancers, a new group entered. Charley recognized Zoe Claibourne,

her father and their guests, though their clothes were different. Claibourne had furnished everyone with superb Western clothes, and the group looked like any bunch of dudes, except Raoul and Zoe. The girl was in a dress of plain gingham that reached modestly to her ankles. The common blue cloth exaggerated her beauty. She smiled at her friends, who stood uneasily in spike-heeled boots, but none of the men seem to have the courage to whirl her away.

Charley Aiken's pulse danced. He could not resist the impulse. His feet took him striding across the hard-packed ground to where she stood.

"Would you care to dance, Miss?" He took off his hat and poured his heart through his eyes and his smile.

"Yes, cowboy." The girl was surprised and pleased. "None of these men seems to care." She dismissed the crowd with an imperious gesture. It was only then that Charley noted that Shelley stood at the back of the group. A look of utter hatred was clearly visible in the semi-darkness as Charley swung his feather-light partner into the crowd of dancers. Tod flung off his hat and fairly carried one of the other young ladies into the arena.

The rapid, circling dance gained in momentum and frenzy with each chorus. Charley and his lovely burden lost themselves in the wonderful madness. In his daze of delight, he did not see Tod close to him. Deftly, cruelly, the foreman maneuvered his partner in front of the flying feet of Charley and Zoe. Too late, the young puncher saw he was going to kick the girl as she and Tod whirled by. Attempting to soften the blow, Charley was thrown violently out of balance. The girl cried sharply with the pain of the kick and Charley twisted his ankle as he fell. He came awkwardly to his feet, mumbling apologies.

He was greeted by the clenched right hand of his foreman—on the chin.

"Always in the way!" Shelley snarled in blind rage. His partner screamed and ran to her friends. Zoe backed away, amazed at this flare-up.

The orchestra stopped in the middle of a chorus. The crowd fell silent and gathered around eagerly. This is what they had been waiting for. A good fight! And what a fight!

That first punch had hurt but it cleared Charley's brain and he knew that what had happened was no accident. His hated rival had neatly engineered a situation, making Aiken seem a fool and a heel at the same time. He fell back a little to get his bearings. The twisted ankle throbbed. *The hell with the ankle,* it would hold him through this. He was ready now and this was it! And with the odds fairly even for a change.

Tod Shelley threatened, as the two tall men squared off to reopen their fight to settle their rivalry once and for all, "I could fire you and have you thrown off the ranch for coming to Fiesta against orders."

"Why don't you?" Charley taunted. "Afraid the men will go with me?"

"They know who's boss here, and I like it better this way."

"Cut the pow-wow, then, and get to it!" Charley eyed Tod's fine mustache. "I'm going to scalp that fancy strainer off your upper lip tonight."

They still talk about that fight out there. Tiny Rattan tells the best story. He says, if he has a nice, attentive audience, "It started out like just any good bare-knuckle go. The whole ranch was there. Most of our bunch was for Charley Aiken, he was a good hombre.

"Like always, at Fiesta, guns were checked at Dan Finch's commissary, so everybody knew this was goin' to be a straight fight and nobody had to duck for cover. Us boys kept the crowd from closin' in too far and Charley and that Shelley had plenty of room. They needed it.

"First off, Shelley looked the best. He had a good short punch in both hands, and was careful to keep his pretty face covered. His timin' was sharp and Charley had trouble for a while gettin' inside that guard. Charley's eye, his right eye, was opened up early and pretty soon it got puffed up and was hard to see out of. But that didn't stop him; that boy was in there to fight. He waded right in and those arm of his were like wagon tongues geared to greased lightnin'. After a while this steady jabbin' softened that Shelley some and his fancy footin' slowed down.

"One time, Charley got in a beauty to Tod's stomach. This pulled his hands down and Charley clipped him a swipin' one right across the mouth, tearin' 'bout half of his lip whiskers off. Charley grinned and said, 'There's half that scalp!' And that made

Shelley rave. He forgot his footwork and went after Charley with the works.

"They settled down then, and all the pokes figgered one of those hombres would kill the other if he could. Never saw two tough young bucks take as much as they did. They stood toe to toe—when one of 'em wasn't on the dirt—giving it everything; and man, those boys had plenty!

"The bloodiest, damn knockdown drag-out I ever seen." And Tiny would shake his head at this point.

"The end was kinda mean. The crowd didn't like it so good. You see, scramblin' around the way they was, they worked over near them barrels of beer. They was both bleedin' bad and sweatin' hard. Charley kinda favored his right foot, like it was hurt; and when Shelley shot that last punch out at his head, why Charley, he tried to duck a little and roll it off.

"This bad foot of his'n tripped over a bung-starter, and down he went, real solid agin this barrel on a wooden cradle. The cradle give 'way and Charley went sprawlin'.

"That's when I saw the clasp knife in Shelley's hand. It wasn't open and I guess maybe I was the only one seen it. I'd seen Tod use a knife for a club like that a couple years before. I figgered maybe he's gettin' impatient and wants to finish the fight quick. This is the end for Aiken I tell myself. You can't fight steel with your hands.

"Anyhow, it ain't the end, not the way Tod figgered. Zoe Claibourne, the old man's daughter, was the one who changed things. Why she didn't go up to the house with the others, I didn't know then, I do now." Tiny winks.

"Well, she screamed like I never heard any woman. Maybe she saw that knife, I don't know, but this scream stopped Shelley for maybe just a second and he looked around.

"Brother, that did it! Charley hitched up a little on his hands and the seat of his pants, and he kicked Shelley's knee so hard I could hear it crack. Then Charley was up and all over the foreman like a blanket. Shelley didn't have a chance to use that knife. Charley stomped on his hand until he turned it loose. Then, to make a nice finish, he dragged Shelley up to his feet and proceeded to bash him, propping him up agin a tree. The crowd thought maybe he hit him longer than he had to, but they let him go at it for a good while before they stepped in."

At this point, Tiny bites into a fresh plug, curses his false teeth and waits for the inevitable question:

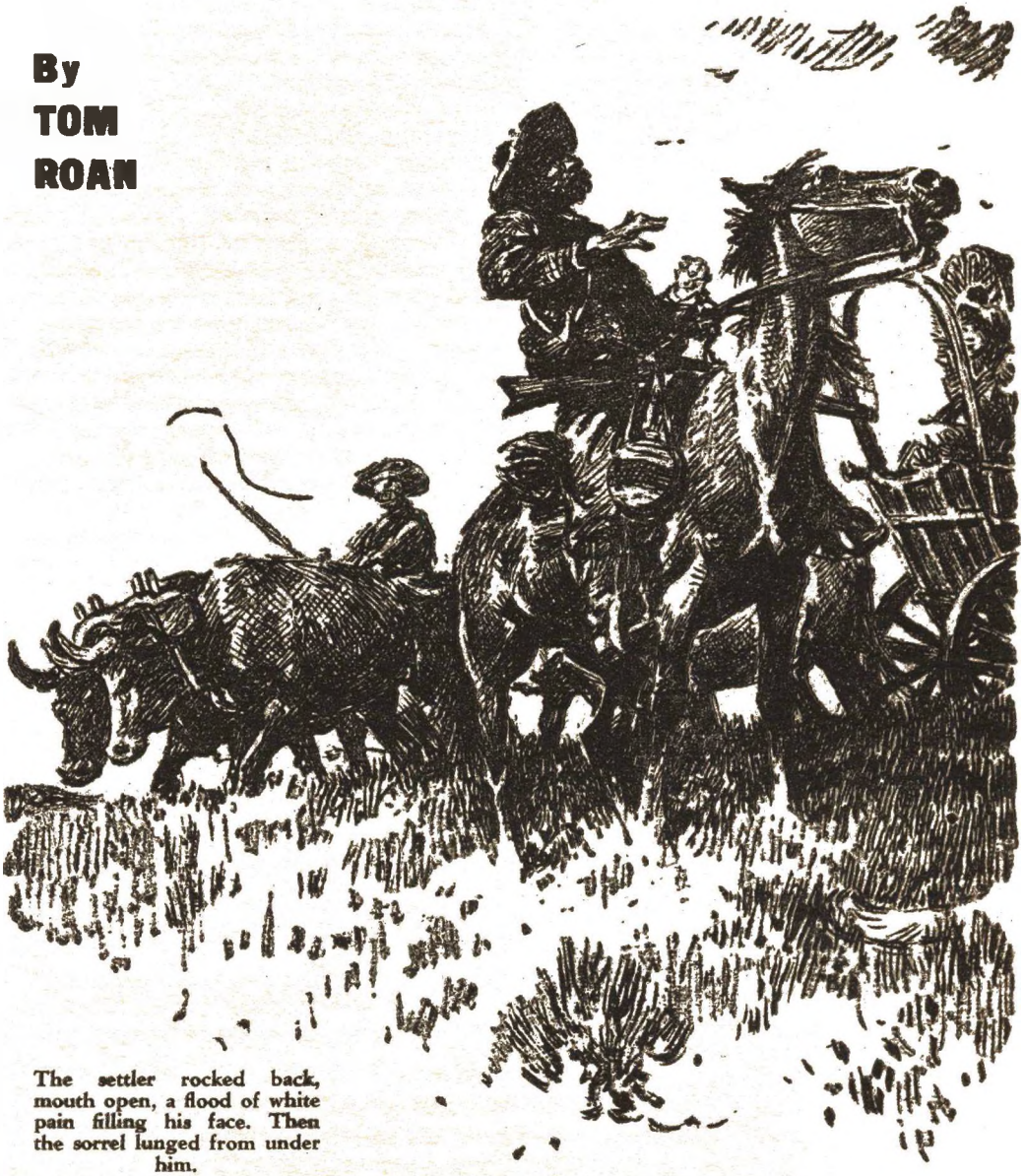
"What happened to Charley Aiken?"

"That girl Zoe had Charley taken up to the big house; ain't never left there. Made a good boss too."

THE END

—— GUN-LAW AT LONE

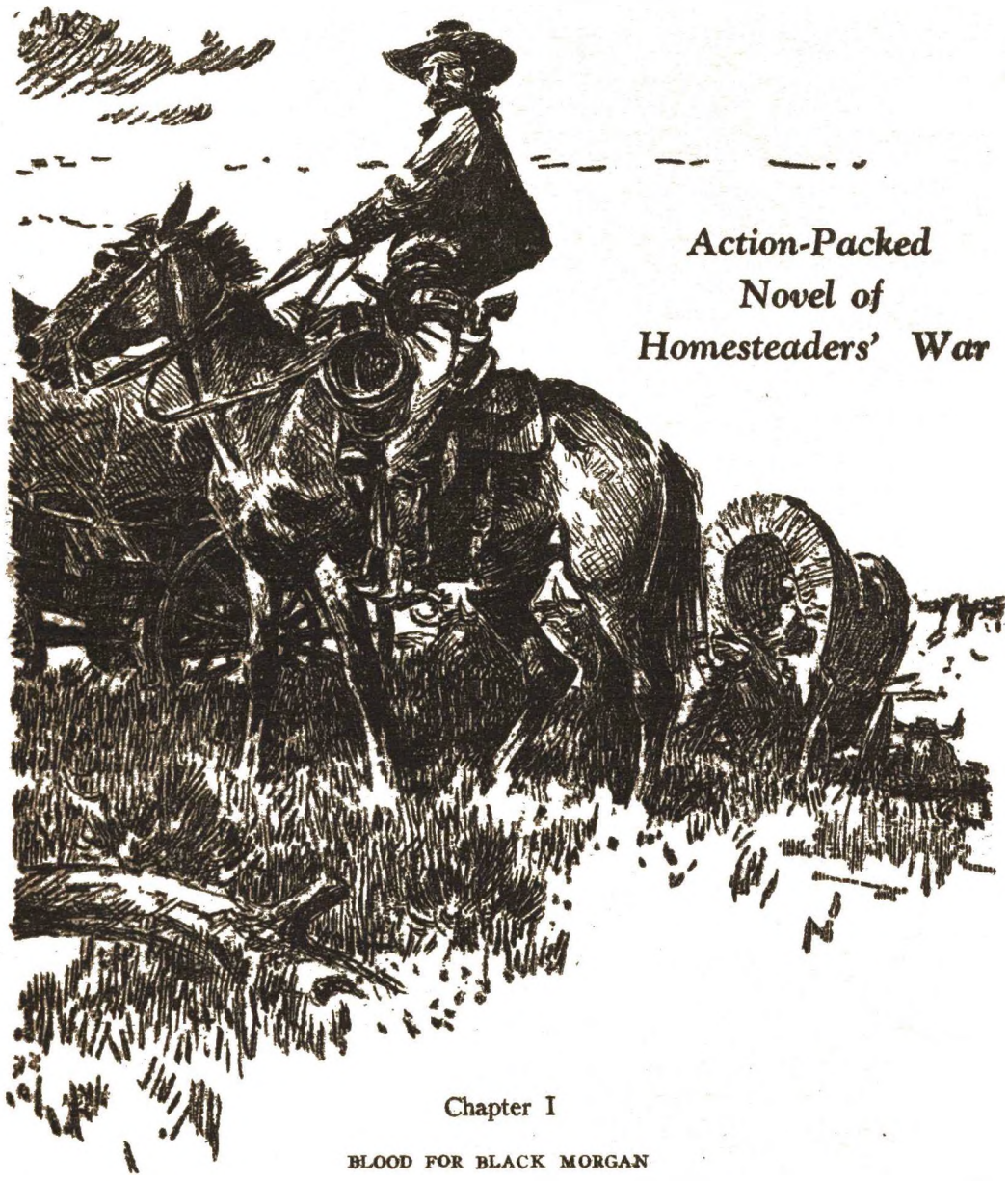
By
TOM
ROAN



The settler rocked back, mouth open, a flood of white pain filling his face. Then the sorrel lunged from under him.

Across the sawback crest of Gunsmoke Range crawled the squatters' wagon train headed for the smoky doom of a cattleman's guntrap. And Black Phil Morgan grimly led them on—to blast that cow-country killer-combine to hell-and-gone. . . .

WOLF RIVER



Action-Packed Novel of Homesteaders' War

Chapter I

BLOOD FOR BLACK MORGAN

THERE HAD BEEN something that had seemed cold and merciless even in the first crack of dawn as it came stealing and slow-creeping along the saw-toothed crest of Gunsmoke Range. The great divide high-walled the eastern side of Lone Wolf River Valley, its towering peaks and crags of the Standing Bears in the west still tipped by a late-August half-moon.

Gunfire would bloom, blood would run, and men would die before this cool, still morning of the late '80's passed. Nothing was going to stop it now, not even a miracle. Men were already in place under the shaggy cottonwoods, a ragged line of them ranged

up and down the river, their horses hidden below the rim of the rock-faced east bank.

As the leader of a gang of sixteen, little old Pistol Frank Roundtree, the cowman, had elected himself to the most dangerous spot. He was a shabby figure in gray perched flat on his belly on a tall, thumb-like rise of rock that stood in the center of the slope where the long-abandoned government trail came down to the shallow crossing.

Government meddling or no government meddling, the big wagon train camped high up there in Gunfire Pass would not cross Lone Wolf River this morning. Lone Wolf River Valley was a cow and sheep country, sixty long miles from north to south, only six miles wide here where the river came splitting down. In other places wide canyons and deep basins sometimes made it forty across. It was a cattle, horse and sheep paradise sheltered by high walls from the winter winds, well-watered and loaded with grass in the long, hot summers.

It was one of the few places in the West where cattlemen and sheepmen had managed to graze their herds fairly close together without trying to cut each other's throats—except for six bitter battles before the truce.

Now, all hell and high water would not let that wagon trail of land-hungry settlers cross Lone Wolf River and enter Silver Creek Basin.

Silver Creek Basin belonged to cows, the entire sixteen-mile length of it. Blood had twice been spilled, and death had ridden high and free over the grass. It had been the last two fights, the final and most desperate blood-letting, that had brought the sneering-dog truce between them.

They had no real love for each other now, but their affairs were better managed. Sheep were kept where they belonged, where the government agents said they could graze, and cows and horses were held to their own rangelands. Settlers about to enter the country had brought this little band of hard-fighting men into an all-together stand for a real showdown. Men this morning were here to defend their rangelands and homes, their honor and even their lives with powder and ball.

"Somethin' a-stirrin' up there, fellas!" Pistol Frank Roundtree's call reached up and down the river. "It ain't gonna be long now, I reckon all hell's gonna bust loose!"

"Let 'em come!" The answer was from barrel-bellied and blond-bearded old Swede Olsen, a sheepman seventy yards down the river from the ford. "I sace vunce more I bane here to stop hail out of 'em!"

"That goes for me!" put in another voice. "For ever' man here!"

"Hell, yuh ain't gonna have to wait at all, Windy!" That was from upstream, from long and lean old Ben Martin, a cattleman. "There they come—leastwise the start of the show!"

A couple of old telescopes were quickly lifted, and men peered through them, so tensely they seemed to be holding their breaths. A tall, snow-white horse had appeared up there in the high notch of the pass. In the saddle rode a tall, brown-haired girl in yellow buckskins, a big white hat on the back of her head, a rifle's barrel shining across her lap.

"An' them's settlers for yuh!" ripped out Roundtree on his high perch, shifting his long rifle forward, a Colt ready at each hip. "Fool dry-land farmers, that's what! Town-makers an' bob-wire stretchers a-sendin' the wimmin in first!"

"Thar's the first wagon, Pistol!" Ben Martin was yelling again. "An' I'm damned 'f a woman ain't drivin' it!"

The wagon had just appeared, a long, silver thunder head, filling the pass behind the girl, the canvas top swaying, three perfectly white yokes of oxen bringing it into full view. A woman in blue gingham sat on the high seat, a sun bonnet on her head.

"Beats me, I'll swear!" Pistol Frank Roundtree almost smiled. "All that white up there makes it look like a peace-feeler from the start. But," he pounded the rock in front of him with his fist, "we ain't here to back water in our aim or lose one inch of ground! Nary an inch, *nary*!"

The girl on the white horse was already on the slope, more and more of those huge covered wagons appearing behind her. Every man hiding along the river knew there would be seventy-six of those wagons, each loaded with tons of supplies and equipment to start a settlement. There were enough people to claim ever rod of the full ninety-six square miles of the basin.

In no time at all that gang coming down the slope would be cutting half the trees

along Silver Creek and its wandering tributaries. Cabins and houses would go up, barns, sheds, corrals and long lines of fences. Before long a general store would rise in the middle of it, with a blacksmith shop, a church, and even a damn' school house where half-moronic yaps could go and learn how to shirk every ounce of work at home!

Pistol Frank Roundtree had cursed all of it dozens of times, and yet a strange, half-nostalgic feeling crept over him as he watched those great wagons on the slope. There was something about them that awakened and stirred old memories. It was like a great, beginning parade up there, the sun casting an enormous, many-colored and many-barred fan of light behind it. Some of the white tops of the wagon were turning golden, others pink, blue and purple, as the light played its tricks.

And, after all, Pistol Frank Roundtree, like most of these men in hiding here and waiting for blood, had come West in a wagon train more than twenty-five years ago when the entire country belonged to the Indians and little bands of desperate outlaws.

Montana in many places could not yet be called a land of picnic grounds, but a man no longer walked or rode with death in his shadow. For a minute Frank Roundtree remembered all of it, especially the campfires and the women bending over their pots in the long, still evenings, the night guards slipping to their places, the thousand dangers waiting out there in the darkness.

There had been the hell-roaring, six-day fight on the Missouri, an all-day, all-night stand on the Powder, and then the before-dawn battle on the benchlands above the Mussellshell where the bodies of seventeen of the train—eleven men, four women and two children—had been left behind in a big, dry sinkhole on the rim.

SWEDE OLSEN'S voice jarred Roundtree back to reality. "I sace, by Yoe, the gal must tank ve von't shoot!"

"They've been ample warned!" called back another sheepman below him. "They know there's a fight facin' 'em as shore as that sun's risin' there so purty. Let 'em come an' feel our lead!"

"But where'n hell's all the men?" The question was from a cowboy somewhere upstream to old man Roundtree's left. "Dammit, I'll swear I ain't yet seed a one of the critters."

"There's six or eight old bats up there!" called back a man with a telescope. "Tryin' to keep behind the wagons, the most are."

"An' the others," nodded Roundtree, thoughtfully, "must be hidin' in the wagons, lyin' low an' waitin' for their wimmin an' kids to face the music an' try to get 'em crost the river."

"They von't cross!" Swede Olsen patted the walnut stock of his rifle and ran a caressing hand along the shining barrel. "I sace they von't an', by Yoe, I sace to mean it!"

"Doc an' Charley Knight will take the first two oxen of the leadin' wagon." Old man Roundtree was giving his final order, speaking to two of his own men thirty yards away to his left. "Bad as I hate to shoot a hoss, bad as it gives me a pain in the brisket, I'll knock the purty white critter from under the gal. They've had their orders. They've been told they'll never, *never* cross this river, though some may go down 'er dead an' a-floatin'. I reckon we've done all we can to save the blood from flyin'."

"They'll say we fought women an' children, Pistol," a little, squint-eyed cowboy called Handy Miller said nervously. "The whole country'll hear about it!"

"Back out now, if yuh wanta back, Handy!" Pistol Frank Roundtree's answer was as hard as a hammer on a spike. "That goes for anybody else whose guts may sorter be turnin' to plain yaller water!"

"I ain't backin' nowhere, Pistol!" Miller tried to put a hard ring to his tone. "I ain't never backed in the past, have I?"

"Then keep yore trap closed!" half-snarled the old cattleman. "I hate a weaklin'. I ain't never lost a hand or a leg. If one had to come off—well, hell, off it'd have to come without any moanin' an' belly-achin' about it! Now ever'body keep quite."

They were as quiet as mice after that, men here and there holding their breaths, thoughts whirling as the girl on the white horse crept closer and closer. All the wagons were down the slope now and stringing across the valley. When the girl was six hundred yards away old man

Roundtree lifted his rifle, voice grinding.

"I'm droppin' the hoss in just one minute more. Hold yore fire, yuh Knight boys, 'til the gal has a chance to hunt the clear atter the hoss hits ground. I aim to take 'im through the chest an' let the ball range back to the heart. Can't risk a shot through the head. Get ready!" He started to pull the butt of the rifle to his shoulder. "Start droppin' more an' more oxen if they open fire!"

"Fire when you're ready, Roundtree, and your first shot will take you straight to Hell!"

"Eh?"—"Huh?"—"Whut!"—"Look!"

A burst of excited voices came up all the way down the line. Each man turned, eyes widening, mouth suddenly agape. They were set for war, rifles ready, six-shooters shoved forward on their belts, double-barreled shotguns ready for the closer, all-downing work that could always be done with heavy buckshot charges.

The settlers had had their final warning only last night up there in the east end of the pass with the supper fires crackling. Two level-headed sheepmen and two cattlemen had gone to them.

With them, leading the way by a few yards, had been the lean, soft-talking old Dave Stark, a sky-pilot from Devil Bend, twelve miles down the valley. Stark had done most of the talking, trying to make the fools see the light and save the blood before it was too late. But it had been useless, and the settlers had merely listened, then turned away.

"Damn!" Pistol Frank Roundtree's voice was a croak, eyes popping. "Ain't—ain't this somethin' to skin yore coon clear hell alive!"

Only fifty yards away the west bank of the river was rough and rocky. Dense little pines grew just beyond the fringe of bushy old cottonwoods and drooping willows, making a perfect screen for the sixty-odd riders who had come stealing up the valley.

All except one of those men had left their horses in the pines to slip forward and get into their positions. Rifles were up now, many old shotguns among them with bores that looked as large as the eyeballs of full-grown bulls.

"We don't want to kill any of you." the one man in the lead was lean and dark from hot wind and sun, his tall horse shiny and black, heavy gun belts around him, a long Colt at either side. "That's why we played this little trick on you this morning, Roundtree. I never love blood until it starts to spill, as you remember, and then I *drink* my part of it!"

"Where—what?" croaked Roundtree, voice sounding as if a big bullfrog had taken him by the throat. "What'n hell are yuh doin' here? How—how'd yuh get *thar*!"

"Questions and croakings amount to little right now, Roundtree." Taking advantage of the shock of surprise he had thrown into them, the man was slowly riding on down the trail, four others slipping back into their saddles to follow him. "All we're looking for at the moment are your fighting tools. Stay right where you are until we get them. The first man who so much as looks as if he wants to reach for a gun will have his guts blown all over that riverbank. Lift your hands, every last one of you. *Lift*!"

"Better—better lift 'em, fellas!" The wail was from Handy Miller, staring himself across the river and into the muzzle of an old shotgun slightly to his left, a rifle to his right. "Hell, yuh know that bird, Pistol! We all know 'im! That's *Black Morgan*, the damned outlaw!"

"Why, shore, why shore!" Roundtree's old hands were already lifted, eyes popping. "Damned 'f it ain't!"

Chapter II

KILL FATHER, KILL SON

IT WAS quiet, smooth and fast, without trouble except for one man. There was no bullying, no threatening. The cow and sheep crowd had been caught red-handed. It was the most humiliating thing that had ever happened to them.

Old Pistol Frank Roundtree snapped open his mouth a couple of times, intending to let the roars of anger and abuse rage out of him. Black Morgan's cold blue eyes stopped him, holding back everything with their near-merciless glint. As meekly as the rest nearby, he let Morgan take his weapons. Words came out of him only when he heard the outlaw say:

"Throw them all in that deep, blue hole

below the shallows—every gun they got."

"Naw, yuh—yuh can't do that!" Even the sound of his own voice must have shamed Frank Roundtree. It was too much like the shattery bleat of a scared goat. "Them—them guns belong to me!"

"Sorry, Mr. Roundtree." Morgan seemed so hellishly polite about it—a thin hard little smile worming across his face. "You're not a man to be trusted with shooting-irons."

"But—but I bought them guns!" The shattery bleat had suddenly become a wail of desperation. "They're mine, I tell yuh. What'n hell's folks gonna say when they hear I let yuh take 'em an' throw 'em in that damn' hole in the river!""

"Sorry again, Mr. Roundtree, but you might know I never worry too much about what people say or think."

"But, hellfire, fella, don't!" The wail changed to a screech. "I'd never get 'em outa that hole! I know that ol' hole! It's a damn' big ol' hole, forty to sixty feet deep! Why—why, the most of us has been a-swimmin' in it. It's too deep. I tell yuh."

"Damn the depth, man." Morgan was slinging six-shooters, belts and rifle behind him. "Dump them in and call it done."

Trying to argue with this man was a wilful waste of breath. They knew him or had heard of him. In partnership with his father and an older brother only a few years ago, he had been a prosperous horse and cattle rancher in the great valley east of Gunfire Range. This Phil Morgan, Phil being his true name, had ridden with his father and brother in four of the six cow and sheep wars here in the valley. Old Link Morgan had been killed beside Bob, his son, in the last bitter fight.

Outlawed because of that last fight, this Morgan had been forced to shoulder the worst of it. In a year they had been calling him *Black* Morgan for his supposed crimes, getting himself a reputation of killing more men than six of the bloodiest Indians in all Montana.

Swede Olsen knew all about him. He should have known better than to have refuse to give up his weapons when the settlers tried to take them. Morgan got there just before they would have shot him down, his voice grim as he spoke.

"You were always, a damned fool Olsen!"

"By Yoe, I will not give—*Damn!*"

There was nothing more to it. A long six-shooter's barrel had come cracking down on his yellow poll, knocking him off into the river with a tremendous splash. Dragged out quickly and still in a daze, his .45's and heavy belts were stripped from him—fighting tools for that big, deep hole just below the shallows.

"You can join the others now!" Morgan gave him a push. "All we came for are your guns. Tough on you, I know, but it's one sure way of stopping cold-blooded murder before it gets started. Move along, sheepman! I don't want to hit you again."

"No!" Both hands on his head, Olsen stumbled on upstream in the strip of dry sand bordering the water. "I sace, by Yoe, it hurt a fallar like hail!"

Fifteen minutes after it had started, the wagon train halted in the distance and waiting for the river to be completely cleared of all danger. Sullen, would-be killers were in their saddles, but there was not a fighting tool in the entire lot. They were moving away, each man muttering his threats, black looks everywhere enough to kill.

It should have been enough, for the time at least, but it was not yet over. Some men were not born to take a drubbing like this and let it go even for a few hours, and there were yet two fool-hardy and sneakingly deadly men in the crowd. One of them was the wide-chested, six-foot-two Hans Olsen, son of old Swede.

EVERYBODY should have known that the pale-eyed, straw-haired Hans Olsen was not through, that he would try to make a lightning come-back at the first opportunity. Now somewhere close to thirty-five, he had been a rough and rowdy ever since he was twenty, locked up then for killing a cowboy. Swede Olsen had spent a small fortune to keep himself from stretching rope or spending time in the pen. Since then other fortunes had gone to the wind to clear him of his wild, hard-drinking escapades.

Then there was Dude Roundtree, son of old Pistol Frank. Always clad in the best of gray; long, lean and hook-nosed, yet handsome in a dark way except for the the inroads of drink: he was the most flashily dressed man in Lone Wolf Valley.

He was a few years younger than the robust Hans, and they had once been deadly enemies. They had sworn a dozen times to kill each other on sight, yet somehow they never managed to get the job done.

Face a purple cloud, lips blue, Hans Olsen had only gritted his strong, even white teeth when Beech McCann, a big, bulbous-nosed settler had taken his six-shooters and rifle. His hands had opened and closed in desperate convulsions several times, but that was all. Hans Olsen always had sense enough to keep his mean tongue still when he found himself on dangerous ground. And this was dangerous ground, with long and shining twin-tubes of a muzzle-loader shotgun in his belly, the hammers cocked and ready to thunder him into Kingdom Come, to let the fire rip through him.

Dude Roundtree had never been able to hold his temper. He had always been the downright nasty one, ready to start a fight with a fast, unexpected blow, sometimes from behind. Standing as if he were spitting on the end of a rifle's barrel, he had sneered in the face of the young settler who had taken his delicately engraved and silver-plated six-shooters before he had known what was to happen to them. By his sneering, lip-smacking and bluffing, he had managed to keep his fine gun belts with their spots of silver and gold. He was fifty or sixty yards away before he heard his father break into a fit of cursing and half-crying back behind him.

"The finest guns I ever wore, been through no less'n forty fights with me, an' now they're in the damn river!"

"What's in the river!" Dude Roundtree swung back to him. "What'n hell are you talkin' about. Old Man?"

"Guns!" Pistol Frank lifted his arms, hands dangling and flapping as a gesture of his desperation. "My guns an' yore guns! Ever'body's fightin tools plunked into that big ol' hole below the shallows! Hell, don't tell me yuh didn't hear what Black Morgan said!"

"He kept his word that far!" Hans Olsen was riding up now on a big, silver-faced roan. "Damn 'im!"

"You mean to tell me," young Roundtree stabbed a long, needle-like forefinger toward him, "that my guns were thrown in that river!"

"Where've you been—asleep?" Hans Olsen leered at him. "You heard what your daddy said. Your guns, my guns, everybody's guns—in that river, forty to sixty feet down! It's going to be some deep-diving for somebody, and I can't swim under water worth a nickel."

"Damn 'im!" Dude Roundtree slapped his chest, dark eyes wide and wild, something akin to terror in them. "He—he can't do this to me! Not to *Dude Roundtree,* by God!"

"He's done 'er, Dude." Old Pistol Frank looked at him with the hint of a half-pitying smile. "They're in the river. 'Long with that, them wagons are goin' crost the ford." He turned and pointed at the big train on the move again, the pretty girl still leading the way on the tall, snow-white horse. "Looks like we got whipped clear to hell 'fore we could even get started to fight. Swede, why'n hell didn't yuh watch the other bank of the river?"

"Vy didn't I, you sace?" The old sheepman was coming up, pulling his big iron-gray to a halt. "Hail, Pistol, I was vatchin' the wagons yoost like you vas vatchin' 'em. By Yoe, I didn't see 'em until I look around an' see a shotgun pointin' at me! Vat could I do then?"

"They can't do this to me, I tell you!" Dude Roundtree was staring on beyond them, face again purple. "I'll kill every one of them!"

"Talk's cheap, Dude!" Pistol Frank scowled at him. "I reckon we ain't even thinkin' of fightin' 'til we get them guns back. We'll ride on up the valley now." His voice was lowered, head turning to glance again behind them. "When it's clear we'll come back. That's all we can do, dogs now with our fightin' teeth pulled. We've got to wag our tails an' be nice dogs for a spell."

"Damned if I have to wag my tail!" Hans Olsen had slipped off his horse, hands half-frantically pulling at the straps of a pair of big saddle-bags behind the cantle of his saddle. "I'm never fool enough to carry everything in one hand!"

"The same goes for me!" Dude Roundtree was suddenly spilling himself off his horse and pawing for his silver-spotted saddle-bags. "No real fightin' man goes about without hidin' out an extra set of fightin' tools. We'll show 'em somethin',

Hans, that is—*if you've got the guts!*"

"*Guts?*" Hans Olsen leered at him, looking for a moment as if he would jump forward and made it a fight as he pulled a heavy Colt and a belt of cartridges from one of his bags. "Damn you, Dude Roundtree, there never was a cowboy had more guts than I have!"

"Steady, both yuh young fools, steady," intoned the older Roundtree, spreading his hands. "Yuh had no business what yuh said with that ever-ready jackass lip of yores, Dude!"

"I wanted to make Hans mad!" Dude Roundtree flashed him a merciless smile that was like the quick baring of fangs. "He always fights better when he's mad at me!"

"But this ain't gonna be no fight!" Pistol Frank swung off his horse and lifted his hands. "Even with yore hide-out guns just yuh two can't fight all that gang back there. Yuh fools are only gonna get killed!"

"We'll at least do somethin'!" sneered the younger Olsen. "Look at the job you've pulled this mornin'! It's a disgrace to ever' cow an' sheeper in the country, Roundtree!"

"But, wait, boys, wait! I—"

"Shut your damned old mouth, you simple-minded fool!" Dude Roundtree turned on his own father, his eyes looking now as if ready to spark dark fire. "You're the cause of all this! You wanted to be the king-pin, the big dog of the parade, the bird to run the show. Rule-or-ruin Pistol Frank Roundtree, you damned old blow-hard!

"If you'd listened to me, you old wart-head," he stepped forward and shoved a knotty fist under his father's nose, "this couldn't have happened! We told you what to do, me an' Hans told you that last night was the time to hit 'em, up there in the pass. We'd have hit that outfit in the dark, just as the Indians used to hit. Maybe coulda blamed it on some of these outlaw bands of reds still sneakin' about the hills. Not a man, not a woman, not a brat would have been left alive!"

"An' that talk was crazy as hail." Swede Olsen was trying to enter the argument, a great weariness on him as he turned and stared at the wagon train in the distance. Already it was stretching down into the river, across and up the high west bank. "You both ought to have a buggy whip take to you, I sace!"

"Shut your mouth, now!" His son whirled on him, buckling the belt of a heavy Colt around him. "We tried to tell you. You listened to Pistol Frank—as usual! From now on it's up to me—and Dude, I guess," he added with a frown, "to run the show."

"Don't be a fool, Hans." Fear took the place of weariness in Swede Olsen's face. "Morgan killed your brother. Olaf Olsen died yoost as a dog vould die—"

"An' all the reason in the world," cut in the younger Olsen, "why I aim to kill Black Phil Morgan before he makes the pass into that basin! Get out of my way!"

"I'll trail with you, Hans!" Dude Roundtree was buckling on one of his hideout belts. "Together—"

"Together, hell!" Olsen leered, then laughed splatteringly. "This job belongs to me an' my fightin' tools. You're maybe thinkin' of the rewards on Morgan's head, Dude. If I make the kill you'd like to see it split your way! *You can go to hell*!"

Chapter III

WAR TAKES PLENTY GUNS!

MOVING back to a rise on the north side of the west bank, looking down now on the old trail, a rifle across his lap, Morgan watched Lee McCann lead the way across the river on her white horse. The great wagons rumbled and swayed behind her, water washed around the wheels; here and there it came up to the hubs.

Right now, eyes still on the pretty girl, he could not help but wonder about many things. He had wondered why he had taken part in this movement of the train. Bench Pardon, the big, rusty-haired sheriff of Devil Bend, still carried a bundle of warrants for him, accusing him of everything from arson to murder. His picture hung in the office of the jail at the head of the wide street and was nailed to trees all over the country—"Dead or Alive."

The Morgans had once held a strong hand in this country, coming West in a wagon train. By the grim, hard will to win or die, Link Morgan had managed to fight it out with Indians and outlaws, carving history for himself in Green River Valley.

Horsemen and cattlemen west of Gunfire had given Link Morgan his first real trou-

ble, trying to make stock-raising a dog-eat-dog proposition so that the strong might override the weak and grab everything in sight. Those men had soon learned that Link Morgan was a fighting man, his two young sons able to ride and shoot with the best of them. All who had tried to grab rangelands in Green River Valley had been whipped and thrown out of it. That included a huge sheep outfit managed by the powerful Laird, Stevens & Ringo Combine.

When Lone Wolf River Valley horse and cowmen had finally been caught themselves, and all but backed to the wall it had been Link Morgan's first enemies who had come to him for help. He had gone in the thick of it, losing his own life and the life of his oldest son. But a truce had been struck, and not a single Green Valley rider had known it was coming.

Backed by only six hired men, Phil Morgan had found himself cut adrift and left to shift and fight for himself. He had never blamed the crowd here for the truce, but only for the way it had been so secretly struck. The sheepmen had brought in fighting men from Wyoming and were preparing to bring in more. The fighting could have gone on for weeks and weeks longer. Horsemen and cowmen had stood the risk of finally losing everything, just as Green River Valley had gone to pot. Now Laird, Stevens & Ringo held every mile of it.

Every half-honest man in the country knew that the Morgans had been as good as wilfully tricked, killed, skinned and pitched to the buzzards. Lone Wolf River Valley had simply taken all and given nothing in return. Old Pistol Frank Roundtree and his strutting Dude had been the ring-leaders—Swede Olsen and his Hans had handled the sheep side of it.

Now Roundtree and Olsen were the undisputed head-hogs at the trough in Lone Wolf River Valley, and there were cattlemen even here in the valley who believed that Swede Olsen owned an interest in Roundtree cattle, and that Roundtree owned an interest in sheep. And the powerful Laird, Stevens & Ringo Combine in Green River Valley, was behind it all, pulling the strings and making the men dance.

A settlement in Silver Creek Basin was the last thing wanted. Settlements meant farms. Farms meant a constant extending, fields spreading, more and more people coming in—civilization crowding in on free rangeland. In time it meant that Lone Wolf River Valley would go by the board—sheep, horses and cows having to hunt other places. The same thing would happen to Green River Valley—cattle and sheep crowded back and back, even as the Indians had had their lands stolen from them by the whites crowding in.

Even Devil Bend was liable to get out of hand. Already there was a railroad spur pushing its way up through the country from below the Wyoming line, and railroads were eventually a curse to any man's fine rangeland. People came with them; more towns mushroomed into being; fools fenced in land and plowed; law and more law moved in as it became safe for shysters to hang out their shingles.

Phil Morgan was still a cowman at heart, still a man who hated to see the free, wide-open spaces crowded back, the politicians flocking in, the greedy hands pawing and clawing for power and blood. It meant that old Montana—high, wide and wild—was on its way out, and a man whose heart and soul was wrapped in it could not help regretting the going of the real West and the coming of the new.

And yet all this had to come. When one looked truth squarely in the eye these people had the same right to come and settle as cattlemen and sheepmen had had a right to come before them. Those hardy frontiersmen had been pushed back and aside, by law, by ball and arrow, the bones of thousands of them left to grow white in the sun, their scalps still decorating the lodges or swinging from the scalp belts and lances of old redskins.

He rolled a cigarette, something still rather new out here, and watched the wagons grind up the slope and past. Men were now on the seats of the most of them. Others walked beside their yokes of oxen, an occasional team of mules or stout horses. Once they were inside the basin he would leave them there.

Blustering Sheriff Bench Pardon, backed by a swarm of his half-drunk deputies, would probably come, trying to bluff them out. Holding to their ground would be up to them, when this sheep and cow crowd had a chance to throw them out.

"Shore was mighty clean an' decent, Mr. Morgan!" Beech McCann came galloping

back to him on a broad, high-headed old sorrel when the last wagon was dragging past—two young cows, a muley bull and a couple of long-tailed little hounds behind it. "A nice an' gentle way of gettin' a bad thing done. Sorry yuh had to hit the fella, but it was yonder better than drawin' blood. Kinda sorry, too, that they had to lose all them fine guns, but I guess it's savin' us a fight now."

"And they'll recover them or the most of them before long." Morgan tossed away his cigarette. "They'll have others, too, or send men high-tailing it for Devil Bend for new ones."

"But," frowned the settler, pawing in his pocket for a chew of his home-made twist, "they can't bother us no more after we're safe in the basin an' mindin' our own business!"

"Montana," smiled Morgan, "has grown to what it is on the blood and bones of men. The government rules that any man or group of men can come and settle here in all manner of places. Some day the politicians may get around to passing a real homestead law. But even that won't stop fighting and blood-letting. There will always be men who'll want everything they can steal or grab by bullying.

"You'll fight, yes." The smile widened, a bitter touch to the corners of his mouth. "They'll gang you, dog you. If nothing else they'll take pot-shots from the rims of the basin. They'll be ready to kill when you strike back and have to fight—"

"An' we will fight!" cut in the older man, nodding grimly. "Me, now, I ain't got much. I've got Lee, my daughter. She's got her white hoss. I have my big wagons, two of 'em, an' a couple of settler boys hired to drive 'em. They carry all my worldly goods, my blacksmithin' tools, anvil an' bellows an' such. All any of us want is a chance to make a fair an' square livin'. None of us aim to claim the world. We—"

A noise from the rocks and low trees behind cut him off, a thundering, dull-rolling report that seemed to fill the valley from rim to rim. Morgan saw him rock back, mouth fly open, a flood of white filling his face in the grimace of sudden pain; then the sorrel was lunging from under him with one wild snort, and McCann was falling.

Morgan was off his horse, catching him before he could strike the ground, a second and a third shot thundering at them. The last bullet caught the lunging sorrel through the side of the head, and the horse was going down, blood flying.

NEVER a man to be stopped, not when an opportunity as clear as this faced him to settle an old score, Hans Olsen had wasted no time to stand and argue with two old fools like his father and Pistol Frank Roundtree. This was the time to kill Black Morgan, the time to settle it with an enemy he had long wanted to kill. He had hunted Morgan for weeks after the body of Olaf, his brother, had been found in the mouth of Indian Tomb Canyon, ten miles up the valley. There had been a bullet hole squarely in Olaf's skull, just above the eyes, and Morgan had been seen up the canyon that afternoon.

The mere fact that Morgan had been sighted in the canyon had been no positive proof that he had killed Olaf Olsen, but it had been enough for Bench Pardon to get another warrant for him and storm forth with his usual pack of half-drunks at his heels, trying to pick up his trail. It had led him as always into the high mountain ramparts of the Standing Bears, and there the trail had vanished.

Now Hans Olsen was taking his chance. He had slipped across the river at a sharp bend above the ford, and had kept to the rocks and brush, leaving his horse behind him. On his hands and knees he had come to what looked like the ideal spot just as the big settler rode back to pull up beside Morgan, catching him right where he wanted him, not a step more than sixty yards away.

Half-blind fury had spoiled that first shot, and desperation and sheer terror made the next two go wide. Now he was going backward like a machine, in a quick hard recoil from an explosion.

Morgan was after him now, letting the settler slip to the ground and then wheeling to dive under the belly of his rearing horse. Long black six-shooters filled his hands and he was swinging right and left, like a fool flinging himself this way and that to sway with some wild rhythm, one Colt suddenly blazing, then the other, two bullets slapping rocks just above Olsen's vanishing head.

Olsen yet had the advantage of a small ravine here, and he had dropped into it,

hugging the rock-crusted south bank as it led back toward the river. All his thoughts were now on his horse. Morgan, he knew, would not be fool enough to rush right down on him, but he was still keeping himself in good shooting range. Right when it looked as if Hans Olsen would make it around a spur of rock, two more shots thundered up there behind him.

One bullet hit. Olsen felt it slap against his long left holster and glance against the side of his leg. Before he could go on and fling himself in the clear another shot had come. Something sounded against the right side of his head with the *plop!* He had a short memory of going down, smashing face-first in the weeds and rocks. The next thing that came to him was his father's face bending over him and a big, wet neckerchief on his head. Old Man Olsen spoke, voice low and grinding:

"I sace, by Yoe, you always bane a damn fool, Hans. Today you vas vorse than I ever see you. What'n hail good did it do you to go try to kill that fallar Morgan?"

"Where—is he?" Hans Olsen tried to rear to his left elbow, and saw now that he was lying on a smooth, clean rock just above the edge of the river. "I don't know why I missed 'im!"

"An'," nodded the older man, "I don't know vy he didn't finish killin' a fool like you, Hans! Maybe he thought you vas dead ven he come close enough to look."

"He's just about that kind, yeah," put in the voice of Pistol Frank Roundtree from the right, and a jerk of Hans Olsen's head allowed him to see him squatting there on his heels. "Shootin' yuh woulda been like a man shootin' a dead-drunk fella. Maybe he saved yuh so yuh can be lookin' 'im in the eye the next time yuh tackle 'im, Hans."

"Where's your damned Dude?"

"He's tryin' to get our fightin' tools outa that hole in the river." Roundtree half-smiled at him. "Him an' half the rest of the fellas. Hell, Hans, yuh know yuh can't fight without guns! Yuh was a plain fool, just like yore daddy called yuh!"

"I asked about Morgan." Hans Olsen was staring back down on the rim of the river a yard away. "Where'n hell is he?"

"Vent on vith the vagons." His father answered him, dipping the neckerchief back into the water and pressing it on his head again. "Ve couldn't do nothin'."

"Dude had guns!"

"An' he's still alive an' well," nodded old Roundtree. "Hell, I'm to be thanked for that when I wouldn't let 'im follow yuh crost the river. Yuh ain't got much sense when you get mad, Hans."

"But I've got guts enough to try to do things! How long have I been lying here, anyhow?"

"Longer'n an hour." Roundtree grinned at him now. "Thought yore head was busted at the start, but I guess it's thick enough to turn a cannon ball. Say, now, look!" He had glanced down the river and was coming to his feet, a quick grimace crossing his face as his old joints popped. "Do yuh see what I see, Swede!"

"Why, hail, yes, I sace I do!" Swede Olsen was on his feet now, dropping the wet neckerchief as he stared down the river. "By Yoe, that bane Bench Pardon an' his fallers!"

"Who'n hell sent for them!" By an effort, grabbing the top of a stout little bush beside the flat rock for support, Hans Olsen came up, weaving on his feet, blinking as he stared downstream. "We don't need Bench Pardon and his fool crowd in this!"

"*Ja,* ve need anybody vat will help!" said Olsen, still staring, the hint of a grin beginning to form on his face. "Bench bane a friend ven you pay 'im yoost a little!"

The sheriff of Devil Bend stopped for five or six minutes at the place where half-naked men were diving into the river, the best swimmers and divers in the lot trying to recover the weapons. Now he was coming on, Dude Roundtree swinging in beside him, talking rapidly and excitedly, hands constantly waving toward the high, narrow break in the side of the Standing Bears. They crossed the river at the ford, and in a minute the big sheriff was pulling up and swinging off his tall, bald-faced old Midnight.

"So yuh had good an' plenty of trouble, huh?" He grinned as he looked at Roundtree, then stared at Hans Olsen with the wet neckerchief clamped against the side of his hatless head. "Dude admits for the first time I ever heard 'im admit anything agin 'imself that yuh squirts just about had the socks kicked off of yuh. How bad are yuh hurt, Hans?"

"It's none of your business, I guess,"

leered the younger Olsen, "but if you must know I seem to have a lick on the head and a nick in the leg. What'n hell could you do about it, anyway, without wantin' somebody to hand over money to grease your fat pockets?"

"Yuh always did have too much lip, Hans." The sheriff's dark, reddish-black eyes narrowed. "One of these days yo're goin' to step on it, good an' hard. Yuh ain't a big, bad fightin' man, Olsen. I've seen yore feet held to the fire more'n once, an' they can be held there agin.

"Hell, yo're like Dude, here!" He jabbed a thumb at young Roundtree. "A lot of talk an' blow. But that ain't worryin' me. We come here for Black Morgan. I've knowed for two days that he was messin' 'round with them settlers. Right now the rim of Silver Creek Basin's surrounded, an' me an' my bunch behind me are gonna move in an' sorter cork the hole over yonder what leads into it. Yuh fellas can be of some help, I reckon, if yuh get yore fightin' tools outa the river. I've got Eck Smith with me. He's the best swimmer an' diver in the country. Swears he could dive clear to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean if there was money enough in it. Why'n hell didja let 'em take yore guns in the first place, Pistol?"

Chapter IV

STEEL RING OF DEATH

IT HAD not been mercy on the part of Phil Morgan that had kept him from blasting Hans Olsen's life out of him. It had been the man who had been shot, his daughter swinging back to him on her white horse, settlers pouring around them, who had called desperately to him, sitting there on the ground beside his dead horse with blood pouring in bright-red ribbons from his right shoulder.

"Don't go on!" Big Beech McCann had begged. "More blood ain't gonna help! An'—an' I ain't hurt! Ball just raked me crost the blade of the shoulder, knockin' me limp an' blind. Come back, for Gawd's sake, Mr. Morgan!"

"Yes, come, please!" The girl had wheeled her horse to him, risking death herself. "Let well enough alone!"

He had turned back reluctantly, the wings of his nostrils quivering, tight lips bloodless. Settlers had rolled over McCann's dead sorrel, quickly stripping off the saddle and bridle. A short time later McCann had been helped into a wagon, an old woman bandaging his wound and stopping the blood as the train moved on.

Phil Morgan was again on the north side of the trail, and they had come to the break in the first high wall of the Standing Bears. Here at the top of a long slope he sat alone, watching the last of the wagons grind up the steep grade and disappear inside the ragged gash. He was still sitting there when the last wagon was gone and the girl swung back to him, her white horse now dripping sweat. She spoke first:

"We'll never forget what you've done for us, Mr. Morgan!"

"The pleasure was all mine, I guess." He was looking back down the long slope at the river in the distance. "Just don't get the idea that it's all over, Miss McCann. I see that the cow and sheep crowd down there have company."

"You mean—they'll follow us!" Her eyes widened as she looked back through the warm clear air at a gang of riders now stringing out from the bank of the river. "They *are* following!"

"With the sheriff of Devil Bend, yes." His nod was slight, his hint of a smile grim. "Bench Pardon's been interested in my—er—personal habits for quite a time."

It was enough for him to tell her now, knowing that she had probably heard a great deal more about him, a lot more than could be good for him. He could expect anything now. This would be another chance for Bench Pardon. He had most likely been down the river, waiting with his gang and watching the wagon train cross the valley, waiting for it to go on inside the basin. Now Bench Pardon would try to play his trump card.

But even Phil Morgan, long used to tricks, never suspected that it would start so quickly. They had just turned to ride on into the narrow pass with only about seven hundred feet to go before the pass would widen. The wagons were almost through to the place where Silver Creek swirled down to the left. Before they had gone a third of the distance the girl screamed:

"Look out!"

He saw it coming, heard the rumble and

smash of a huge boulder and flung out his left hand to grab the girl's reins just in time. With a final bound from high up there on the north rim the rock struck eight yards ahead of them, shattering stone flying in all directions as if a gigantic bomb had exploded right in front of their eyes.

"More! *More!*" yelled a voice frantic with excitement above them as the dust from the shattered rock puffed skyward, instantly filling the pass with its blinding, suffocating cloud. "We've got 'im!"

Another big rock was coming before the man's voice died away. The second one was from the south rim, not quite as large as the first but enough to crack the brittle shelves above the trail and start an enormous spilling of stone pelting down on them.

From ahead came the scream of a woman and the crying of children on the last wagon. Unable to see more than a rod ahead of him because of the sudden dust, Morgan spurred his horse into a run, the girl's tall white hugging close to him. The rocks poured in, faster and faster, as if Bench Pardon had hired all the town hangons in Devil Bend for this one desperate bid.

"They want me, not you!" Morgan released the girl's reins when they banged on through and passed the last wagon just clearing the falling rock. "Keep close to the wagons!"

Swinging to the left, he shot on, getting himself away from the wagons. Before he could go fifty yards gunfire started crashing up there on the rims, bullets kicking up little geysers of dust ahead and behind, to the right and left. Zig-zagging his black like a running wolf fleeing a danger zone, he came to the creek, taking time to slow up and swing down over the rock-walled bank, wild shots still raging about him.

In a matter of seconds it was no longer a one-sided thing. Phil Morgan had swung down around a shoulder of rock in the creekbank, letting his horse go on further around the bend. Now he was opening up with his rifle, the first shot bringing a yell from up there high above the pass, a zealous would-be killer staggering back and flopping out of sight.

The second shot brought better results. A man on the north rim staggered to his feet stood there rocking, rifle dropped beside him, hands flapping. He started to turn, staggered, then slipped. Dust puffing from under his feet, he shot outward into space, not a sound coming from him. An instant later he was disappearing feet-first downward, the dust cloud boiling up from below.

BENCH PARDON moved up rapidly when he saw the stones falling ahead of him and heard the firing. Sheep and cattlemen were behind him now, swelling his gang. Eck Smith, the ape-like diver, was recovering more and more weapons from the river. As fast as they were handed up, waiting men claimed them, and then followed the crowd in the distance.

This was the day for fast work. Unknown yet to these fool cow and sheepmen, other big settler outfits were on their way to Lone Wolf River Valley. Others were heading for Green River Valley, all of them willing to fight with each other, and—more than that—both the government and the powerful railroad company were behind them. The latter was going to push the spur line on through to the head of the valley, with Washington donating every other section of land on either side of the tracks to help pay the cost of it—damning the valley forever as an out and out grazing country, making sheep and cowmen push their herds back into the high hills.

Every railroad company that had invaded the West had made arrangements like that, and people had been ruthlessly slammed back, their homes broken, their farms as far east as Missouri split apart for the rails of steel. Stockmen in each valley would soon be calling Bench Pardon a scheming doublecrosser, but he had been called that before. In the cow and sheep wars here he had pitted one side against the other, lying to them, laughing at them behind their backs as a slick politician could do.

And now, just before the axe started to fall on the sheep men and cowmen, he would grab a man he had long wanted to grab. One of his part-time deputies would claim the rewards. Bench Pardon would see to it that they would be paid, and then the bulk of the money would fall back into his hands, fattening the fortune he had gleaned in his eleven years as the sheriff of all the surrounding hills.

Certain railroad officials had already

made peace with him. There would be railroad sections of land to handle here. As an agent of the company he would have the right to sell and convey, as good as fix his own prices for those who willfully settled or unknowingly erected homes on a yard of forbidden ground.

Aided by men who would sell their votes for a few drinks of rot-gut whiskey and a couple of cheap cigars, a man could do almost anything with a badge on his chest and a gang of court house shysters to back his play. Taxes and fees could soon jump sky-high with so many settlers pouring in, fertile lands could bloom with crops, houses, barns and town. In a few years the right man could retire on the legal take and quiet rake-offs and be rolling in all the riches.

Seven of his best men knew what they were to do here, and they were soon handling the others, spreading them into a wide halfcircle to cover the entrance to the basin. As he came charging up well to the south side of the break the dust was still filling in, but the firing had ceased. For a few moments he had the wild hope that the men who had been in hiding had already dropped Phil Morgan from his saddle, and all he would have to do would be to get the body and hurry it back to Devil Bend.

With Morgan out of the way, the settlers could be left to wait and wonder. Bench Pardon would know how to handle them—pretending to take sides with them, getting tough if they resisted, using them as so many cattle, using the bullies among them as tools, protecting those who had sense enough to listen, seeing to it that all manner of hard luck happened to the others until the most bull-headed rebel had to fall into line.

Cold disappointment struck him after he had zig-zagged his big, bald-faced Midnight up a dangerous trail in the rocks and came to the top. Bull Evergreen, a dark-bearded, thick-lipped man of forty, slid back from a rock and came forward to meet him.

"Duck Spider's dead, Bench." His voice was a growl. "Shot off the rim over there." He nodded across the break. "Spence Cole has a busted arm an's been taken down the way in the clear. Rube Bell's just about got a hip knocked off, an' Morgan's still down there, playin' merry hell each time a face shows at 'im. Him an' the gal on the white hoss run through enough lead an' fallin' rock to sink forty steamboats, an' not a scratch on 'em, I reckon. Sometimes I can't help thinkin' Phil Morgan's got as many lives as a damn cat!"

"He's got one, just like us." Pardon slid out of his saddle and moved forward in a low crouch. His first glance showed him that the wagon train was moving on, apparently heading for the center of the basin. A dozen horsemen had swung back and were in hiding behind rocks and clumps of trees six or seven hundred yards away. "What part in the fight has them damn settlers took?"

"None!" Evergreen was keeping closer to the rocks. "At first it looked like they would, but ever'time a fella showed signs of fightin' Morgan yelled 'im back. He's stackin' 'imself full-alone agin this whole crowd, Bench, an' if he runs half-straight to what he's run in the past he's liable to win out yet."

"Like hell!" snorted Pardon. "He might have made fools out of the Roundtree-Olsen crowd down there at the river, but he's right where I want him now. He—*Damn!*"

He had ventured a yard too close to the rim and on the right side of a big rock. A bullet had come wailing up from below, the shattering report of a rifle from the creek-bank behind it. As an unseen blade would slash with a lightning stroke, the bullet had raked along the right side of the sheriff's mouth, burning his cheek like a branding iron.

"Shootin' to kill today, Bench." Evergreen almost smiled. "In the past he's made it only a standoff, shootin' just enough an' just close enough to hold us back. Now it looks like he's out for a kill."

"Don't let your nerve fail you, Bench!" The long, far-carrying call was from the distance below. "Come on in and make it interesting!"

"We'll make it interestin' from now on!" Pardon had glanced back and beyond his patient old Midnight, at first a mean scowl filling his face, then, suddenly, the scowl turning to a wide grin. "Look at what we've got comin' up. A ring of steel to finish this thing!"

It was the cow and sheep crowd, men afoot scaling the rocks, every one now having recovered his weapons from the river. All of them now burnt with an eagerness

next to insanity. Pistol Roundtree led the way up, Swede Olsen right behind him. Behind the sheepman trailed Dude Roundtree, all-wise, all-knowing as before. A couple of yards behind him was the sullen Hans, head now in a rude bandage, a limp showing in his left leg.

Nothing was going to stop this gang now from making it a general fight that would take in Morgan and all the settlers. Angered at the first sight of them, Bench Pardon had no thought of stopping them now. He would use them all. Stroking his yet-burning cheek he started giving his orders:

"Swing to the left! Pass the word below for the others to take to the north side of the break. Get in place an' open up, an' kill ever' damn thing that lifts a hand against us! We've got 'em *in a ring of steel!* Now we'll snap that ring . . ."

Chapter V

ROPE'S END

MOVING back and forth, trying to fire no two shots in succession from the same spot, Morgan saw that they were ringing him. In time men would be coming down the cliffs on ropes further up the basin. The bullets here were coming faster and faster, glancing on the rocks before and behind him, half of them splattering to bits or making hellish wails in the air as they deflected.

It was time now to take the bull by the horns—but first of all he must save his horse. He worked his way back to the pocket where he had left him. In a few moments he had slipped off the saddle and bridle, giving the black a quick slap of the reins to send him galloping wildly on up the creek, bullets whistling for the horse.

They were opening up in one wild volley after another from the north side of the pass when he started back down the creek, hugging the rocks and holding his fire, doing his best now to puzzle them. By the time he came to the big, slot-like opening in the rocks where the creek plunged under the cliffs the entire basin seemed to be ringing, crashing and thundering with ever-increasing gunfire. Some of the settlers were joining in with long rifles, and bullets were still slapping the places where he had been making his stand only a short moment before.

He knew that Bench Pardon was up there, knew that Pistol Frank Roundtree and Swede Olsen had joined the sheriff. The flashy Dude and the big Hans would be somewhere close, trying to play bodyguards to the two older men when. With them there would be others, but none of them would matter—not if Phil Morgan could carry out his hasty plan.

The plan looked like suicide when he moved on inside the opening under the cliffs, the spray fogging around him, rapid water thundering in his ears as he picked his way over the rocks. A slip meant death here. On some of the rocks he had to pause, look carefully around him, and then leap to another before he could work his way upward. The darkness was becoming inky-black, the roar still thundering in his ears.

It took a long time and a world of patience before the roar died to a whisper behind him and faint light began to show ahead. Rifle in his left hand, Colt in his right, he was finally easing up through a round hole and emerging in a large bowl of rocks deeply shaded by a dense clump of low pines. Dropping flat on his stomach in the open air, he flinched as two shots sounded just to his left. A second later he heard a voice, the owner easily recognized as the cocksure Dude Roundtree.

"Keep 'er up, Hans. That settler crowd won't try to fight long before they show the white feather!"

"Don't be too damn sure!" Hans Olsen's voice was a growl. "They'll keep on until the crowd up the basin swings down on them ropes an' starts closin' in on 'em!"

"An' there they are!" Roundtree's voice lifted to a little yelp. "About a mile to our left! An'—an' more to our right! Hell, Hans, this is goin' to be easy now!"

"Maybe not." Morgan was right behind them, rising to his feet in a crouch, rifle dropped for a moment, a Colt in each hand. "Steady."

His voice was low, no trace of excitement in it, but he might have been talking to two wild mules in the middle of a run-away. Both men came up, jeaking to their hands and knees, then rearing back, Roundtree slightly quicker. Before he could let out a yell the slam of a heavy Colt to the side

of his head pitched him back on his face.

Five minutes later he was moving on, as silent as creeping death among the rocks. Two yet-unconscious, bound and gagged men lay behind him, all their part in the fight sealed in darkness.

Morgan was handling it in his own way. At the end of a five-minute crawl and creep he was behind Pistol Frank Roundtree and Swede Olsen. Too close now for talk, he hit Olsen first, then made a Colt bounce on Roundtree's hard old head.

It looked easy, as if he would handle all of it without a smattering of serious trouble, but it came when he was turning away from Roundtree and Olsen. He saw brush move ahead of him, and the stooping figure of Bull Evergreen was suddenly in front of him.

"Lord A'mighty, look who's here, Bench! I—"

Bench Pardon was coming out of the rocks like a bucking steer now, and he was not more than six or seven yards away, a wild man with a long rifle in his left hand, right hand pawing for a Colt in his excitement. A shot tore at him. He felt it smash against the left side of his chin, and he slumped back. . . .

"GO AHEAD, Bull, and tell them the rest of it." Phil Morgan's voice seemed to jar like a bolt of electricity through the sheriff when he opened his eyes, finding himself on the ground with his wrists behind him in his own handcuffs.

"Damn it, I've told all I know, I guess." Tears were filling Bull Evergreen's pain-ridden eyes now. "Hell, yuh didn't kill Olaf Olsen. I was with Bench, myself, that afternoon when Bench shot 'im."

"Shut yore mouth, Bull!" Pardon was managing a roar by this time. "I'm still the sheriff of Devil Bend, an'—an'—"

"Vell, go ahead an' sace it!" Swede Olsen was glaring now, Morgan having stepped behind him and removed the gag.

"An' me!" Pistol Frank Roundtree's gag had been taken away. "By Hell, yeah! More settlers a-comin', an' yuh know all about it. Yuh made the most of the trouble 'tween us an' Link Morgan at the start. No wonder yuh wanted Phil outa the way. No wonder—Oh, damn it," he glared at Morgan, "untie my hands! Untie my

hands, I tell yuh! Let me haul 'im to his feet an' show 'im another big settler outfit right now pourin' down crost the valley from Gunfire Pass!"

"Yeah, an' more an' more to come!" half-yelled Evergreen, trying to make himself the good fellow now. "Bench knows ever'thing, I tell yuh! Hell, he's got a pocketful of letters on him right now from the railroad an' the government fellas. Look an' see! Look, I tell yuh!"

"Wait, Morgan, wait!" Despite the ragged tear of a bullet on his chin and his wrists handcuffed behind him, Bench Pardon was trying to stumble to his feet. "Don't untie Swede Olsen's hands, *damn yuh!* Swede Olsen will turn his whole sheep crowd on me!"

"He'll first untie me, Swede will." Pistol Frank Roundtree's voice was suddenly low and grim. "This ain't just a sheeper's job, Bench Pardon. Cows have their part in it, an' cows are gonna get it. Untie me, Swede, an' we'll call back all the boys!"

"Wait, Morgan!" Pardon was still struggling to rise, chin bloody, the rest of his face like chalk. "Don't leave me to these damned wolves! Can't yuh see what they're gonna do to me?"

"Wolves to wolves, Bench. That's the way you tried to throw me." Rifle across his arm, Morgan was moving away. For some reason, men all around the rim seemed to have realized that a terrible drama was going to play itself out here. A great silence had settled. Not waiting to see the end of it, Morgan was heading back to the hole in the rocks and the basin below, the thoughts of a girl on a snow-white horse appearing to float before him.

Just as he reached the hole he heard Pistol Frank yelling for his cowboys, then the voice of Swede Olsen calling his herders, the voice of Bench Pardon wailing and cursing as if he were trying to drown him out.

"Volves to volves!" Olsen laughed like a crazy man. "By Yoe, I sace Morgan bane purty good faller at that!"

"Come here, boys, come here!" Roundtree was again calling his riders. "We've got somethin' to show an' somethin' to tell yuh! Put down all them guns! This job needs a rope!"

THE END

BLOOD ON HIS HOOFS!

(Continued from page 91)

Cass Finnerty who, with Rad Carter, shortly came hurricaning from the bunkhouse. Dal Mitchell and his hirelings had melted into the shadows. They had, however, left evidence of their work—their one grounded rope. Rad spun, to see the colt streaking on westward in the moonlight, a lariat trailing from his neck. Cass Finnerty caught the young ranny's arm.

"We'd best saddle up an' take after him, son. If'n he gits tangled up in the buck brush, he'll likely choke hisself."

In a few moments, the two friends were pounding along on the wild creature's trail, hearing his powerful calls, thrilling at the replies of old Wela.

Wela had come down from the plateau. He glimpsed his son racing toward him, but, at the same instant, a call came from the band. Acheeta, the cougar, and her kindred had patiently waited for an opening when the stallion guardian might absent himself. Now the long, sleek lions had struck.

Now Flame came back into battle action. Rad Carter and Cass Finnerty found him, a terrible battle creature threshing about on the narrow shelf plateau in the eerie light of the moon.

A family of lions was in action. The men could see at least four sets of red-green eyes low to the ground. Rad Carter fingered his old Sharps, but Finnerty laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Watch Flame, son," he said. "Gawd! watch that stallion. He's back where he belongs, Rad. He—lookit!"

The old wrangler snatched the rifle from Rad's hands and jerked its butt to his shoulder.

Squealing, old Wela was down. He had battled gallantly, but with the handicap of the loss of use of a forelimb, he had at last reached the end of his battle trail unless—

Cass Finnerty slid the barrel of the Sharps into the fork of a bush and sighted. His aim was steady. The cougar was bunched, ready to spring at the old king Wela's throat. Suddenly, out of the melee of whorling forms, came Flame. He leaped the back of a toppled filly and struck, squealing. He reared and chopped again and then he drove a lightning barrage of hoofs at that pulped, tawny animal shape.

Old Wela struggled to his feet to stand quivering, blowing hard, blood dripping from his wounds.

Suddenly the colt Flame whipped about to hurl himself alongside the old king. He snuffled hoarsely and ran his sleek muzzle along his old sire's lathered neck.

Deep throat sounds came from Wela. He turned and hobbled to the rear of the band, while Flame trotted almost to the edge of the rimrock. For a long moment he stood in silence; then suddenly he tossed up his muzzle and poured out a long screaming cry of defiance.

In the cover of the thicket, the men

Cass turned, grinning.

quivered. Now the new horse king of the Bitter Roots whirled. He throated cries to the band and led them, on through a narrow pass, to the seclusion of a small lush pasture bedground where, for the balance of the night, he would stand guard.

Slowly Rad Carter and Cass Finnerty recovered their full senses. Cass turned, grinning, as he loaded his mouth with fresh tobacco from shaking fingers.

"Gawd A'mighty, son, I've been with hosses, wild hosses, all my life, but I ain't never seen the like of tonight's doin's. Reckon you want to catch Flame ag'in?"

"I—I guess I'll leave him where he belongs, Cass," Rad said brokenly. "King of the Bitter Roots, but—" the young waddy chuckled thickly. "I got something to look forward to back at the spread. A colt, Cass. Mebbeso two, or a colt an' a filly. I—we, you an' me could—"

He was cut off by a long shrill cry from beyond the canyon. It was Flame—now king of the Bitter Roots country, now Lord of Hell Canyon Range, now King Flame, Monarch of all the Mountains.

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