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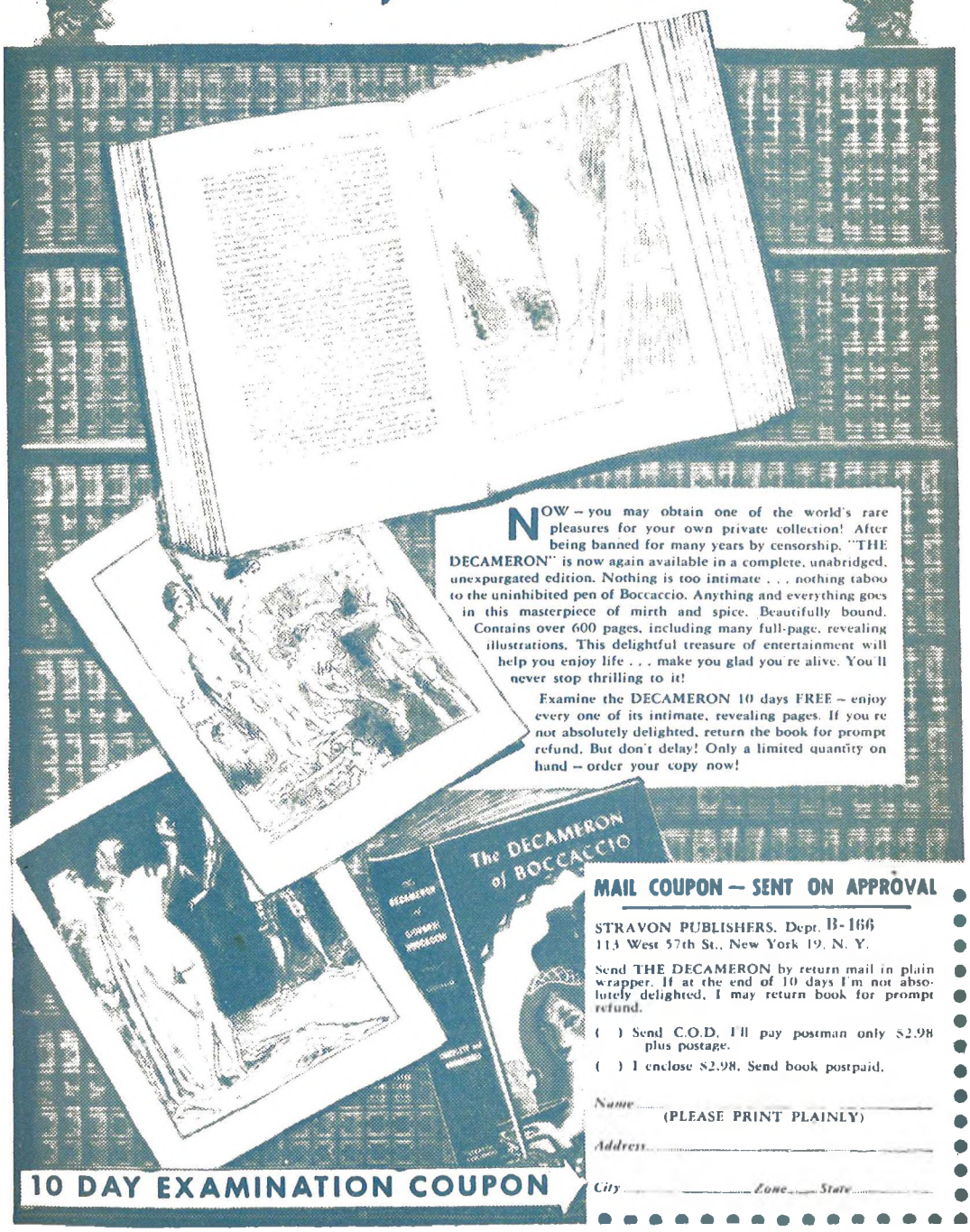

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BLUE RIBBON
WESTERN

Volume 10 *June, 1948* *Number 5*

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

DISASTER TRAIL

by Al Cody . . . 6

Starvation awaited this poverty-stricken group in Texas, after the terrible war between the states; death and disaster awaited them on the long trail to Missouri with their herd. But Cherry Vegas had a plan, and Alamo Sage was willing to try . . .

SHORT STORIES

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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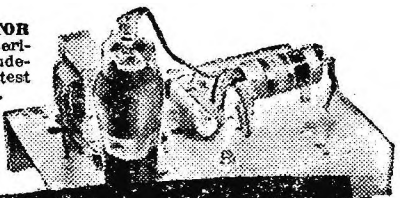

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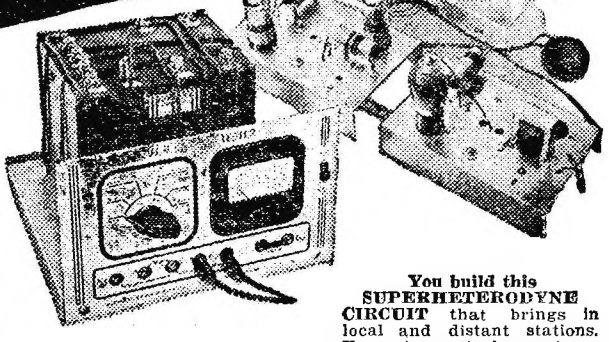

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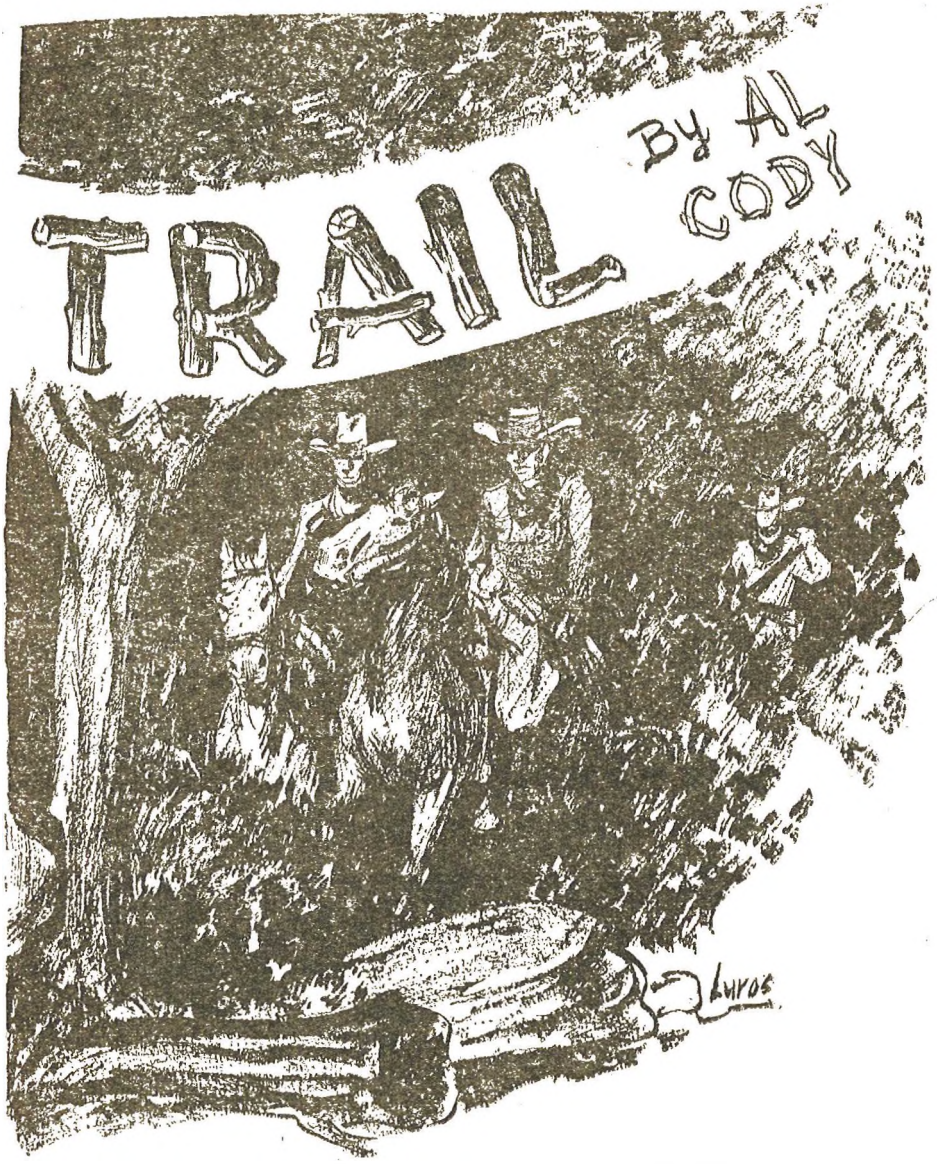

It was suicidal madness, this desperate trek from Texas to Missouri, and even if they escaped the renegades lying in wait, there was sure death and disaster in the carpetbagger-ridden towns where they would try to sell the herd!

1

HE WAS a tall man, even in a land of tall men. Tall, with wide shoulders that sloped toward narrow hips and bowed out again at the knees, in the manner of a man who has lived half his life in the saddle. His hair was a sun-bleached brown, and the blue eyes

beneath had a probing steadiness. And the clothes he wore were old before their time, like the face of him, with youth pinched out like a new-blown flower too soon plucked and left to wither.

Others had seen him, from a mile away. Someone had recognized him, from half that distance, and had lifted a shout and an arm in greeting. Yet no one, curiously enough, had come racing, giving an eager cayuse a chance to run, to meet him. The group of them—a score and half as many again—had remained clustered uneasily around the three canvas-topped wagons, watchfully doing nothing.

Off at the side, big even on the bigness of this sprawling Texas plain, Alamo Sage could see the herd—the biggest bunch of beef he'd ever seen gathered at one time. Longhorns cropping the new short grass, raising their heads to look and bawl uneasily, as if aware that their fate was in the making. Six thousand of them, if he hadn't lost the knack of a quick estimate.

Resentment deepened the thin furrow between Alamo's eyes, smouldered in their depths. It wasn't good for a man to harbor such thoughts, and Alamo knew it. Dangerous thoughts, born of killing and seeing men killed. Defeat of the south had thrown his world into chaos. Defeat had been bad enough, a bitter thing to take. Viewing the consequences of defeat across those thousand miles had been infinitely worse. The resentment had grown with every passing mile.

Yet it had been offset in part by hope. Texas was a long way from the scene of conflict. Texas was big. Texas was home. Texas would be as it had been, and untouched. Hope had been a hard thing to down.

Now it too, was dead. War had not reached here, but the blood of conflict had spattered the land. Here were ranches, such as this Rio Ranch whereon he now rode, wide as space itself. Men, strong as Texas could breed. Cattle upon a thousand hills and plains. And in the midst of it all, desolation and ruin.

All of that was bad enough. But this summons, which had reached him yesterday—and to which, for some reason that he did not quite understand, he had responded—that had been the worst of all. The work of a woman. He had answered the call, but only that he might turn it down, flatly, coldly—As he would be doing, now. Whatever it was that she wanted of him.

ALAMO SAGE was close, now; close enough that he could hear the uneasy sound of the great herd, like muted, unceasing thunder. The early morning sunlight, flashing back from thousands of horns, was like the glint of drawn sabres.

Now a figure was riding to meet him, detaching itself from the cluster near the three wagons. Coming out, tall and straight and slender, on a sorrel pony which seemed to spurn the grass, as though buoyed up by the glory of the burden it bore.

Despite himself, Alamo's eyes warmed a little to the sight of her. It had been four years since he'd seen Cherry Vegas, and he'd remembered her as still a rather leggy kid, with the arrogance in her, softened a little by the look in her eyes, the catch in her voice, as she had bid him goodby.

"Alamo Sage!" she said, and her voice was warm, like the sun, warm and golden and mellow. It had deepened with the years, yet still it was light and tinkling as little bells at vesper-time—such bells as he had heard far to the east. "It's good to see you back, Alamo."

"It's nice to see you too, Cherry," Alamo agreed, and lifted his black flat hat, for just an instant his eyes lighted to her own smile. Just an instant, and they were somber again. No more than the moment, she noted. Only the polite greeting. No word of having missed her, nor of any change in her. Cherry noted it, but her smile remained unchanged.

"You got my message?" she asked.

"That's why I'm here," Alamo said shortly.

She sensed the resentment in him, but put it down to other things. Outwardly, he was still the same Alamo Sage that she had known, four years

Pinto hadn't forgotten that Cherry had whipped him once.

before—He was still tall and straight and slender. Only a little older, a little grimmer, with defeat and disillusion looking out of his eyes. Yet no despair, such as she had seen in the eyes of so many who had returned.

She gestured toward the cattle, now, toward the wagons and the riders gathered around them.

"You know what things are like in Texas, Alamo," she said. "We're starving to death. So we've gathered a big herd—three thousand head of Rio stock, another three thousand belonging to Rolla Ely. We're going to drive to Missouri."

THERE WAS no time for more, not then. They had come up to the group, and others were greeting him.

Godfrey Jensen, who sat solid in his saddle and who had lifted his hand and voice in that hail. He lifted his hand again, extending it, and Alamo noted that the middle and third fingers were missing, though neither of them mentioned it. That was war, and it might have been worse.

There was Ross Martin, who had had a small spread of his own, in the old days. Joseph Rock, who had been foreman for Rio. The same, yet the Rock had been moved a little, and hopelessness dwelt in hooded eyes. Rolla Ely, a pudgy man, quiet and somehow out of place in such a land; Madsen Lynch and Ira Knapp and Diamond, who slung the hash. These, and others, came up to shake his hand, and all were chary of words—for it was Cherry, the woman, who was in charge here.

"We've just been waiting for you, Alamo," said Cherry now. "We want you to get this herd to Missouri for us." Her eyes clouded for just an instant. "Oh, we know that there's trouble for Texas beef going to Missouri, but it's that—or starve, and we don't like to starve. So we're going to Missouri, and we all figure that you're the one man to take us there."

"Me?" Alamo repeated, and there was a lift to his shoulder, as if in mockery. "Why me? How about Rock, there? He's your foreman. Or Ely. Or Jensen—or plenty of others?"

Cherry's eyes were steady; and they could be disturbing to a man, if he was to let them, Alamo reflected.

"None of them want the job, Alamo. Jensen had said that he'd try it, if we couldn't get a better man. But when we heard that you were coming back, he said that you were the man. Everybody wanted you. It's a thousand miles, and we know how hard it will be. But we all know Alamo Sage. Will you take them through for us, Alamo?"

Here it was, direct and to the point. Looking at her, as she seemed to read his hesitation, Alamo saw that there was challenge in deep gray eyes, intended by nature to be warm. He felt it, and his own blue eyes grew darker with a resentment the more disturbing because he could not quite understand it. But when he spoke, it was all the pent-up resentment that he did know, speaking.

"No," he said slowly, aware of all the eyes upon him. "A man's a fool, to try and drive Texas beef to Missouri, these days. Don't you know that there's been two hundred thousand head have tried it already—and not a dollar has come back to Texas! Or many Texas men, either."

"You sound," said Cherry Vegas; "as if you were afraid, but since you're Alamo Sage, I know you're not."

So she wanted the truth, did she? Well, she could have it.

"No," Alamo agreed. "I'm not afraid; though it's suicide to try. But a man would be a fool to try and take beef to Missouri. And any man's a double fool, to work for a woman."

IT WAS out now, the last galling part of it, and he met the gray eyes challengingly. A part of his thought, he knew, was inconsistent. A leggy kid had no right to grow so beautiful in that time. Nor to wear levis and ride straddle like a man.

"Why don't you leave this sort of thing to your Dad, Cherry? Or your brother. It's no work for a woman."

"Because," said Cherry Vegas, and her words were even. "Dad's dead. So is—Dave. And you think you can't take these cattle to Missouri?"

"I didn't say that," Alamo contradicted. "I can take 'em there, yes. Only to have renegades or the carpetbaggers steal 'em, on one excuse or another. Not that there's any difference between the two, except that one cuts your throat in the open, the other drives a knife in your back. Now they say it's Texas fever—and that puts the law on their side—carpetbagger law. And if we fight—what good does that do, at odds of ten to one?"

He was feeling sorry for her now, so he spoke more sharply than he had intended. The circle of men were listening, intently, but offering no comment. Her answer came back at him.

"I've known Texas men to beat those odds," Cherry said, and she smiled suddenly. "I'm taking these cattle to Missouri, Alamo. And Rolla

Ely's going along; so are these men. We've got six thousand head, between us. Of course it's a risk; but it's a difference between staying here and starving—or making a try. We prefer to try. And I think I know how to get them across the line into Missouri and sold—once they're that far."

Silence made a river between them. Alamo wanted to ask her how she would manage that, but he would get a woman's answer. The lowing of the cattle was mournful, a little impatient, and Cherry volunteered no information. But suddenly her smile was warm, winning, her lips curved transformingly.

"What have we—any of us, to lose, except maybe our cattle—and our lives?" she challenged. "And we've everything to gain. I'm not asking you, any of you, to do it, just for wages. But ten per cent of what the herd brings, goes to those who take it there."

Ten per cent. Alamo calculated swiftly. That, if they got their pay, could amount to two or three years wages for three months of work. Cherry was speaking directly to him again.

"As to working for a woman, Alamo—you know that trail, and cattle, better than any man here. That's why we're asking you. Let's put it that you'd be working with me—instead of for me!"

"You'll be trail boss," Rolla Ely said unexpectedly. No more, but that meant that his word would be the law on the trail. The law, and the responsibility; yet the thing was tempting.

Still he was a fool. A double fool. Alamo knew it, even as he knew that he was weakening before the appeal of Cherry. The whole thing was a losing proposition, but she was right, in one way: to go north to Missouri was probably to die; but to stay here, in this poverty-stricken land, was to starve to death.

"I'll take the herd to Missouri," he agreed.

2

SIX THOUSAND head of Texas beef on the move—a long, straggling mass which moved across the face of the earth, a longer, thicker swelter of dust rising above and behind. The three wagons—one for the use of Cherry Vegas, two chuck wagons for the combined outfits—high-wheeled, their canvas dingy gray, bumping in the dust of the drag, or circling ahead to find wood and a camping place for the night. Three dozen riders, eating the dust, or riding point, heading into the rising sun. One woman, with smoky gray eyes and a plan which she kept to herself.

Alamo like none of it, but he had agreed to take the herd to Missouri. Texas would be bad enough, but routine. The Colorado to cross, and numerous smaller streams, such as the Lampasas and the Leon. Then the Red, always a killer of men and of beef, and Texas would be behind them, the really bad part all ahead.

The Nations lay squarely athwart their trail, with scattered bands of Apaches, Comanches, Choctaws and others, all eager for fresh beef, all resentful of the intrusion of white men into their last stronghold. A savage wilderness, made worse by the white Indians who had come to throng it as well—renegades from both sides of the late struggle, men without a country, without a scruple.

The Washita, the Canadian, the Arkansas. And if they were crossed, and the border of Missouri finally reached, then all that they had come through would be only a mild introduction to what waited for them. Disaster Trail. Every outfit to follow it of late had found it so.

A week on the trail, and the thing had become routine. There had been no trouble, as yet; and here was a neighboring ranch, cattle and land poor, but holding to the old tradition of hospitality. When the big herd bedded down for the night, most of the crew rode three miles off to the side, to the big ranchhouse, for a few hours of dancing.

Alamo had not chosen to go. He had remained at the camp, keeping an eye on things. Cherry had ridden off with Rolla Ely, and the rest of the boys, parties were few, in these days. There would, in all liklihood, be no break after this until Missouri was reached.

That was all one to Alamo. He felt

in no mood for a party, for dancing. He knew that Cherry had been disappointed in his decision to remain behind, though she had made no protest. There had been a fatuous look on the face of Ely as she rode off beside him. Ely was in love with her, no doubt of that; probably that had been the deciding factor in causing him to join in this drive.

Diamond was still puttering about his fire, lifting off a blackened coffee pot, scouring pans. He was a patient man, was Diamond, thick-set, powerful, and always cheerful. The dust was in everything, as it was in the eyes and the pores and the skin of the men—dust and grit in the beans, sifting into the flour, giving a thin muddy look to whatever he tried to cook. Doubling his labors, in his unnatural passion for neatness.

"You take it too hard, Diamond," Alamo said now, with a brief smile for the scoured pans.

Diamond shook his head.

"Easier to keep busy, a job like this, than loaf," he said laconically. "And while dust has its drawbacks, I'd as lief wrassel with it as with mud an' rain. There's always good points to balance the bad."

That, reflected Alamo, was a philosophy which he had once possessed; but he had lost it somewhere, in those years when all was lost.

He wished, a little wistfully, that he could regain that cheerful faith; it was a comforting thing, when a man had nothing else.

Off in the distance, a dark mass against the horizon, was the big herd. Two men were out there, riding circle, singing softly. Snatches of their melancholy came, a plaint to the distant stars. Alamo shook himself roughly, suddenly angry that Cherry had ridden off with Rolla Ely, leaving him behind; and the knowledge that it was his own fault added to his bitterness.

He looked up, then, and saw her standing there, watching him, drawing off her gloves. The sheen of the firelight from beyond touched her hair, muting it to gold. It gave a sparkle to her eyes. Diamond had disappeared, the world seemed withdrawn, shut away, only they two left in it.

"I thought you'd be dancin', now," Alamo said.

Cherry shook her head.

"I came back," she said. "If you figure you have to stay with the herd, why, it's my job too, isn't it?"

"No need to spoil your evenin'," Alamo said harshly.

"Maybe I like it better this way, Alamo," Cherry told him. Idly she kicked a charred bit of stick on to the fire, causing the flames to leap briefly, stood staring down at them. Alamo knew that she was trying to be friendly; that she had done this out of consideration for him. Something in him melted a little; it was a long time since anyone had done anything for him, shown any consideration.

But habit had laid shackles on him. It was not easy to respond, even to such a simple gesture. And while he hesitated, trouble came to camp.

HE THOUGHT at first that it was others of the crew come back, perhaps Ely. A shadowy horseman approaching, hoof strokes muted by the dark and the green carpet of grass. Then there was another sound behind him, and Alamo spun about, the short hair at the base of his scalp prickling in the old warning of danger.

There were two men there, close behind—dismounted, spraddling forward, curiously like wolves on the prowl. Light gleamed fitfully on a pearl-handled revolver, shifted its sheen to the drawn barrel of a gun in the second man's hand. Their faces were shadowy, dark.

Neither of them spoke. It was the man on horseback who did that, from opposite them now, and as Alamo turned back, he saw that this man too, had a companion. There were four of them, at least.

"No need for trouble, 'less that's what you want. But don't start it, 'less you want plenty!"

Alamo's own hand was crooked, poised a few inches above his leathered gun. He held it there, watchfully, gauging the odds. Diamond was lounging now, by the corner of the chuck wagon, but the quartette knew he was there, were keeping an eye

on him. Four to two—or three, if Cherry were counted. Her presence really made it worse; it would be no time to risk gunplay.

"What do you want?" Alamo challenged.

The leader laughed, musically. He was a slight man, by comparison with the three who rode with him. An easy, graceful, laughing man, and so, Alamo guessed, far more dangerous than any of the rest. His face was marked and pitted by the smallpox, his spurs made a faintly elfin jingle as he swung to the ground.

"Want?" he asked, and moved to hold his hands above the embers of the fire, watching them sidewise, still with that amused look in his eyes. "Why, not much, friend, not much. Nothing from you, really, that you'll miss, Alamo."

Alamo's eyes narrowed, and seeing it, the stranger laughed.

"Sure, I know who you are," he said. "Who doesn't know about Alamo Sage? You're a great hero in Texas, Alamo—in all the south, for the matter of that. And we respect heroes, of course. We wouldn't want anything to happen to them."

"It would be too bad—if anything was to happen to anybody," Alamo drawled. "Take your time. We've got plenty of it."

The stranger laughed again, pla ed his back to the fire now. His eyes were very bright and watchful.

"Sure, Alamo, and we've got plenty of it," he agreed. "I've seen to that. I've been plannin' this thing for a couple of weeks now—before your herd ever moved. I had the notion planted that a big party for your boys would be a fine thing tonight. I even sent in word to Cherry that you wanted her to come back and talk things over—and it's all working out just the way I planned it. Things always do."

"Not always, Pinto Phillips," Cherry said, speaking for the first time.

PINTO laughed. It was like the soft chuckle of a little stream among mossy stones.

"True enough," he agreed. "Once you slapped my face—with a horsewhip. I haven't forgotten; that's why I'm here tonight. When we ride away, we're taking supplies, of which fortunately you have plenty. And you're going with me, Cherry; I've planned for such a chance as this, a long time."

From the corner of his eye, Alamo saw Cherry's face whiten a little. Now he had it. Pinto Phillips! The man had been a guerilla, conducting border warfare of his own with a catholic impartiality between both north and south.

"We'll travel fast, Cherry, my dear," Pinto added now. "I've made all arrangements. As for you, Alamo, there's no need for trouble between us. I know how much you hate working for a woman, how little use you have for any woman! I'm not that way; so I take her off your hands, and where could she find a more proper man? I've even got a parson waiting, Cherry—and that's the first time I've ever made such a concession to any woman. Though you're the first that ever horsewhipped me."

Again he laughed, and his men, like himself, Alamo noted, were very alert.

"You'd have no chance, Alamo," he added. "We're four to two—and you may have heard of me. Likewise, I've more men out there, waiting. If there's the least sign of trouble, they stampede your herd. And let me point out again, to a man of your philosophy, I'm really doing you a favor.

3

ALAMO stood, apparently relaxed, unmoving. Cherry's face had regained its color, but beneath the flush there was still a tinge of ash, like the dead embers of the fire.

The outlaw appeared to be in no hurry; he jingled a spur faintly, head cocked on one side as he looked at Alamo.

"Well, how about it, amigo? Aren't you the man to appreciate a favor? In fact, I'm doing one all around—even for you, Cherry. I'm the man for you, and where in all the land will you find another to equal me? Since there is no other, there is no answer. And

if the herd should be stampeded, they would sweep over this camp first, Alamo!"

That was the thing which was causing Alamo to hesitate, weighing it. The odds, here at hand, were heavy enough, but he knew them for what they were, now. There were only these four men, here. It was the other which was the greater gamble.

Pinto might very well have more men posted out there, ready on signal to spook the big herd. They could do it well enough. And once such a herd was in motion, six thousand head of hell on the hoof, spreading like a washing wave across the land, sweeping here where the camp was—that would be something that no man could fight against. Pinto, and his men, and Cherry, if he grabbed her up, could outride it, with horses ready. But if that ever broke, it would insure destruction for himself, put Cherry out of reach of any help.

That was the gamble. But now Pinto was ready for action.

"I'd feel better, Alamo, if you dropped that gun, or raised your hands," he suggested. "And the cook here, too. We'll not disturb you, my word on that, if you do as you're told."

It wasn't, after all, a matter of choice; Pinto had seen to that. Alamo shrugged.

"Cherry," he suggested. "You'd better go over to the wagon, there."

Cherry shot a sharp look at him. There was keenness in Pinto's glance as well. Alamo's voice held no inflection, could mean anything or nothing. Cherry hesitated, then she moved as he had suggested.

That, so far as appearance went, was submission. Putting her over beside the fourth man, where he could watch her better. It likewise moved her out of the direct line of crossfire, when guns should begin to bark.

Pinto was looking at her, out of the corner of his eyes, as she moved—noting with approval the supple grace of her, all the beauty which seemed to shine more brightly here in the deepening dusk as the fire went low. But he was still keeping a watchful eye on Alamo as well.

Not so with his men. They accepted this as a token of defeat, and their eyes, hungry, bold, were for Cherry as she moved. Alamo had counted on that. He moved, and the shadows seemed one with him. His voice came sharp and urgent.

"Drop your guns, quick—or die!"

He might have shot without the warning, for it had been known long across Texas that Alamo Sage was no man to trifle with, which was usually counted as warning enough. Even Pinto, watching sharply, had not been able quite to follow that twisting motion of his body, that stabbing down and up again of hands. And though Alamo carried only one gun, openly, he had performed what looked like legerdemain, pulling a second gun out of the air. Both weapons were up now and poised as his voice crackled.

Pinto was matching Alamo, move for move—yet not quite. The high blast of the two guns seemed to rocket out almost together, flame in a red lance from two revolver muzzles, a sort of crimson flower blooming on the night, coming to swift and deadly fruition. One gun had been a shade faster than the other.

The dark could be friend or foe, depending on how a man used it. With confusion mounting in the brain, it was a deadly thing, not a curtain; Alamo had counted on that. Both guns in his hands were firing now, as he shifted to the side. He had steeled himself for the remembered shock of bullets, but none came. And then the guns were silent.

FIVE AT least had been in action, besides his own. Cherry and Diamond had both gotten in at least a shot, the cook leaping back behind the big wagon wheel, and firing between the spokes. Pinto and two of his men had been fast enough, but erratic. It was easy, very easy, for bullets to go astray at such a time.

Not all of them had. Pinto stood now, surprise replacing the laugh on his face, his right arm hanging limp, blood bubbling out of a hole in the flesh just below the shoulder, straining the shirt sleeve, working down,

dripping from his finger-tips. He had tried to get a second gun, but had checked in the face of certain disaster. Now, lips twisting in a caricature of mirth, he slowly raised his left hand shoulder high.

"Despite your name, you must have been born under a lucky star, Alamo," he said.

It took courage, to speak that way, with the hot shock of broken flesh still raging in him, with defeat and its consequences at hand. Diamond was already helping himself to the extra gun which Pinto had found no chance to draw.

One of the three trail wolves was dead; another had stopped two bullets—one in his side, one in his left leg. But he could still stand.

There was no stampede. The big herd was on its feet and uneasy, from the crackling of the guns. But though half-spooked, they were not running. The men guarding them knew their business, were redoubling their efforts to soothe them, keeping their own voices steady as they sang, quelling their own nervous desire to ride for camp and see what this was all about.

One of them was Ross Martin. A good man, old in the ways of the trail. Obeying its law, that the herd must come first, ahead of everything else. Comfort, or health, or life itself—these things were secondary to the herd.

And since there had been no action out there, Alamo sucked in his breath and knew that there would be none.

CHERRY looked at him, then, and there was concern soft but bright in her eyes, the fear now gone from them.

"Are you all right, Alamo?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he assured her, and saw the change come into her face then—the reaction, now that it was over. He knew how she felt. Often enough had he experienced the let-down, the cold raw sweat like a dismal dew which broke upon the face. "You and Diamond sure backed me up fine; I never saw things come out better, from being in a right tight place."

Cherry was biting her lips. Color, fading out, was returning to her cheeks with the effort. She looked at him, and forced a smile.

"Thanks, Alamo," she said. "I knew I could count on you."

"I wasn't so sure, myself," he said, a little shortly, and looked at Pinto. He was still standing, waiting, face unnaturally white about the pock marks. So were the others. None were too seriously wounded. They should hang, he knew—and yet there was in him a deep distaste for such a job, for killing men. He'd had too much of that already, when it was a legal but deadly game. He looked at Cherry. She said, "Why not let them go, Alamo? They've paid for their mistake."

It was weakness, and a man might live to regret it. But after all, Cherry was the boss here. He nodded shortly to the others.

"It's better than you deserve," he said. "But get on your horses and ride. Take him with you." He indicated the dead man. "Better profit by this chance, Pinto."

Pinto Phillips' face did not change. Pain was a raging thing in his arm now, Alamo knew, but the old look was on his face, even a trace of a smile.

"I knew you loved me all the time, sweetheart," he said gaily. "As for you, Alamo—au revoir!"

And that, Sage reflected grimly, was not adios or good-bye, but till we meet again. Diamond assisted the others in leading their companion on to his saddle and lashing him there. Then, grimly silent as they had come, the dark swallowed them.

Diamond had disappeared again. Cherry looked at Alamo, and he knew how raw her nerves were—knew instinctively too, that in that moment she would welcome the shelter of his arms. She had come back here tonight, leaving the dance, believing that he had wanted her to; there was answer enough.

Alamo's mouth tightened. He turned away abruptly.

"I'll ride out and see how the boys are," he said. "Likely they're right curious as to what's been happenin' here."

4

DUST. THE thing was like a plague. It rose up from the earth at every stroke of thousands of hoofs, little spurts which spread and mingled and made an endless cloud around and about the herd. The grass was green, but the soil under it was crying out for rain.

Dust. A stifling thing, which got into the nostrils and plugged them, into the mouth so that a man spat mud. Dust in the hair, grinding into the skin. Dust which tormented the cattle and set them wild. It lay in ridges about their red-rimmed eyes, coated them from brown to gray.

There had been three or four incipient stampedes, mostly because of the ragged temper of the cattle. Men were hard put to it to control their own tempers.

Those up near the head, riding point, had it best; they could breathe clean air at least a part of the time. Save when wind gusts whipped it ahead and around them, without clearing it away. Those who had to follow in the haze of the drag hardly looked human—nor felt that way.

Dust. Changing in its color, now, from brown to a dirty red, as the deeper brown loam was replaced by the red clay—a sure sign that the Colorado was now close ahead. Scrub oak and hackberry were dotting the more rolling grass lands. This was a vast and empty land through which they drove now, a land palsied by disaster, man-made. A land which might be an empire, and its gold transmuted into riches, grass to beef to gold. Providing that the beef could be marketed.

THE SAMENESS of it, the luck which had attended them so far, was getting on men's nerves. A touch of real trouble would be good for them, or a change in the weather. Alamo knew it, and hoped for it, even as he dreaded it. Trouble was sure to come; so was a change in weather. Both would probably be violent.

The crew had felt cheated at what had happened the other night. They had had their dance, and there had been a keg of whiskey and a tin cup beside it. Open-handed hospitality, the nostalgic strains of old songs drawn out of a fiddle, the music of a plunking banjo. But they felt that they had missed all the real fun, not even knowing about it until the next day.

Not that there was much complaint, even about the dust. Most of these men were old hands at this sort of thing, and they knew their luck, so far. Alamo heard comment from Ross Martin, when Tom Dunning voiced his dissatisfaction. Tom was the youngest member of the party—a boy of sixteen, big for his age, thinking of himself as a man. Now he shook himself in the saddle, impatience in every line of him.

"I'm sick of it," he said. "I feel like I'd go crazy if this keeps up! Nothin' ever happens—or if it does, we miss out on it!"

"You can be glad it ain't happened—yet," Ross told him drily. "When things happen, with a herd like this—they can be mighty unpleasant. And don't worry; there'll be plenty, 'fore we get to Missouri."

"It can't come too soon to suit me," Dunning insisted impatiently. "I wish it'd rain! Rain for a week!"

"Likely rain for a month, once it starts," Ross prophesied. "That's the way it gen'rally does—not any halfway about it."

"I guess I'm tired," Dunning half-apologized. "But this way, seems like you don't get no sleep—ridin' all day, then half the night, every two or three nights—up early, ridin'—"

"Sleep!" Ross echoed, reproachfully. "Why, son, we been gittin' more sleep on this drive than I ever knew about, most. Most trail bosses, they're in such an all-fired hurry to get somewhere, you never do get to sleep. Many's the time, I've slept in my saddle or not at all. Ride all day, guard duty all night. I got once so I talked an' worked and done everything in my sleep, so's folks couldn't hardly tell the diff'rence, was I awake or asleep. Nigh got myse'f married 'fore I left off dreamin'. You wait till we get to the Nations. You'll think this has been paradise."

NOW, LIKE a distant jewel, they could glimpse the Colorado. Another day would bring them to its banks. Faces brightened a little at the prospect; the Colorado was a definite milestone. Alamo found himself worrying, not liking it. The sun was setting, a perfect day. Clear as a bell. No red in the sky. That, he guessed, would mean a change of weather. It was long overdue.

Cherry had followed them with her wagon. For the last few days she had spent most of her time driving the wagon instead of riding a horse. Part of the time, Rolla Ely rode alongside, or sat on the seat beside her. She was silent, her eyes questioning, remote, neither friendly nor unfriendly when Alamo was near. That suited Ely, and it suited him too, Alamo assured himself.

He saw Rock, riding point, gesture—saw that the wagons had swung a little, as well. Then he picked out what the others had discovered and turned his own horse toward it, his lips thinning to a harsh line.

There were a few trees there, scrub oak against a slope, hackberry in thin scattered clumps. It was that which had kept the other thing from standing out more plainly, until they were quite close. Now, all at once, it was there, vivid, not to be mistaken.

It had been a wagon, once—and not very long before. Two wheels still stood upright, and a part of the frame, like the gaunt skeleton of some prehistoric monster. Another wheel lay on the ground—the iron hub, the iron tire, lying there. Other parts, the temper drawn out of them by the heat, were in among the still warm ashes.

With the ashes, too, or scattered about, were a few broken articles, things of no use to the average person. Something that had probably been a small chest of drawers, before being tossed to the flames. A broken bit of mirror, catching the last of the sun. An empty can.

Indians, was Alamo's first thought. Probably a stray raiding party, sweeping down from the Nations, who had come upon this lone wagon and had made their raid. Then he saw a still figure lying there, not far off from the fire, partly on its face, unmoving. But with its hair still upon its head.

Then he knew. Not Indians, but what was worse—renegades. Whites. They too, seemed a bit off their usual range, but the thing had happened, and not very long before. He reached it as Rock was pulling up as well, his horse snorting and drawing back at what lay on the ground. The wagons were close now, too, coming to a stop. Not far off was a small spring. That had probably attracted the wagon here, in the first place.

Alamo and Rock exchanged glances, then dismounted. The man had worn a cartridge belt, like most did, as a matter of habit. The sign was easy to see, but it was gone now. Probably he had tried to put up a fight. A bullet had taken him, squarely between the eyes.

He looked to be forty—thinning black hair with a touch of gray at the edges. He had worn boots, apparently, but they had been pulled off him and taken too.

Rock stirred the ashes with his foot.

"Warm," he said. "They've been gone less'n the day.

"Not many of them," Alamo added. "Three or four, by the looks." He pointed to horse tracks, leading away—to heavier ones, where the work team which had been with the wagon had evidently been driven.

"Yeah," Rock concurred. "About three."

The thing had been an ambush, evidently, a surprise—murder. Rock was still poking among the ruins. He indicated the chest of drawers, or what remained of it,the bit of mirror.

"Looks like he had a woman, maybe," he suggested.

Alamo's eyes darkened.

"Tell the boys to bed the herd down," he said. "We'll want a couple more to ride with us."

"There'll be plenty volunteers," Rock said simply.

SOON THEY were off, following the trail—Alamo and Rock, Godfrey Jensen and Ross Martin riding with them. Dunning had begged to be allowed to go along, but Alamo refused.

The trail was fairly easy to follow. Apparently the raiders had not figured on any trouble as a result of their attack on the wagon. They had angled north, a little west. The four hurried, hoping to overtake them before night fell. Off in the northwest, sudden clouds were piling up; the boom of thunder made an uneasy growl. This would mean a break in the weather. Alamo studied the moving path of the storm with anxious eye.

There was nothing worse than lightning at night to spook cattle, but this storm would not come within miles of the herd, unless it altered its course. They could see rain now, off in the distance—a gray blanket of it which seemed to dip down and sweep like a broom, the play of lightning eerie against the backdrop of it. But only a few drops reached to where they rode.

Each man had another worry now: that the trail might be washed out, so that they could follow it no farther. There was not more than half an hour of daylight remaining. Then, topping a rise, Jensen stretched a long arm. "There they are!"

Alamo could see it—a thin plume of light smoke which climbed a little and spread out as if afraid of the storm which had been so close. A sure sign of encampment.

"We'll spread out, and come at them from two sides, just in case," Alamo instructed. "Go as easy as you can."

Taking advantage of the broken terrain, they moved on. The storm was gone now, rumbling and muttering in the distance. A clean, wet smell of fresh-washed air rolled across the land, the sweetest smell to come to their nostrils in many a day. The horses pricked up their ears; there was a new eagerness to their stride. Though only a few drops had splashed here, the quivering grass, wore a new look. The green, in the falling dusk, was richer, softer.

Oaks clustered on a knoll. Alamo rode in to them, Martin at his heels. He pulled up, and though the smoke was gone now, he saw the camp, half a mile away. There was early dark, but the false last light of day was across the land, and in it objects stood out curiously distinct. A man moved, limping a little. To the side, beyond again, a horseman was outlined boldly against the horizon.

Alamo moved out a little, lifted his arm in signal. In answer, the horse broke loose from the skyline, became two, sweeping at a gallop. Alamo and Martin spurred.

In the camp, there was consternation. A rifle snarled at them, and Alamo gauged it, mechanically, by the sound. A plains gun, Indian carbine, .50 caliber. Each make of rifle, each caliber, had a distinctive noise of its own. He had heard plenty of them, during the last few years.

The bullet was wide. There was confusion in the camp, men striving to hurry, flat-footed with surprise. Another gun spat at them, and Rock and Jensem, closest now, fired back.

There was a brush beyond, a thick tangled hedge of it. A horse broke out of it, running hard. Alamo shot, but the light was failing fast, and tricky. Three of them were spurring now, and gaining a little. Rock remained back at the now silent camp.

THEY COVERED a mile, one of the fastest that Alamo had ever traveled. The man up ahead had a good horse, but they were gaining on him. He realized it, and turned in the saddle, coolly shooting. They were tricky targets as well, but Alamo heard the high thin whine of the lead. It was too dark to see clearly, but there was something familiar about the look of that man, the easy, smiling insolence of him, even in the face of death. Pinto Phillips.

Then Alamo heard it. Though the storm was past, the air had taken on a sort of breathless hush, as though waiting for something. Something inevitable, sure to come. No wind, but it was like the sound of a strong wind, coming closer. A sound ominous in the gathering night.

Alamo saw it, then; all of them did. Not far ahead, a gulch cut by water, long since. Grass grown now, just a trough laid athwart their trail. Pinto was almost to it. The sweeping wind seemed closer. It burst at them sud-

denly, with its noise louder, more forceful.

Water. A gray wall of it, solid, pushed along by an invisible force. A wall ten feet high, sweeping down the gulch, coming at unbelievable speed. Spreading out a little as it traveled, roaring as it felt its own power. Water!

Off beyond there, where the ground was higher, the earth forming a huge bowl, the storm had passed. Following the long dry spell, it had unloosed its fury in a cloudburst. Now the run-off, gathering itself, was here.

Pinto Phillips saw it. And here was a chance for life, or death. To check in the face of it meant capure. To be caught in it, as seemed likely if he kept going, would be equally certain and swift disaster. But to beat it across the gulch would be safety.

He was a gambler, when it came to that. The three of them pulled up, watching, with a sort of grudging admiration. The thing was going to be close. The terrified cayuse, equally aware now of what impended, was doing its best. Man and beast were nearly across when the water reached them.

IT WAS a resistless force. It caught them, and to swim in such a current was out of the question. The horse was tossed like a chip. Water, spreading out and back, ran up in little, hungry lappings, almost to the feet of where the three still sat and watched. Muddy water.

But luck was still with Pinto. The current changed, swirled horse and man in a mad rush at the bank, flinging them up as it was sullenly forced to turn by a bit of higher ground. The horse climbed, stood and trembled for a moment. Then, in the now heavy dusk, they vanished.

In silence, the three turned back. This water would run for hours; there would be no overtaking Pinto, not now.

Back at camp, Rock had built up the fire. He was completing the preparations for supper begun by the others, and so rudely interrupted. Food was ready for the eating.

One prisoner sat, sullenly, watched by the untroubled Rock. One of the trail wolves who had visited their camp before. Alamo looked inquiringly at Rock, and he jerked a thumb toward the line of darkness beyond the fire.

"Other one's dead," he said. "Have some grub?"

"How about the woman?" Alamo demanded.

Rock shrugged.

"Ain't none. He says there wan't none in the wagon. Just the man."

Alamo looked at him more closely. This was the man who had taken a bullet through his leg in the other fight. He had been in poor shape to run, not much better to fight. His face was now sullen, hopeless, savage.

"Why'd you do it?" Alamo demanded.

He lifted his shoulder in a heavy shrug.

"Why not? We had to have supplies. He had 'em."

"Did you have to murder him?"

"It was Pinto's idea. He thought there was a woman along."

Alamo took a filled plate, which Rock passed to him. It would be easier to eat now than afterward, and he was hungry. He looked toward the sullen captive. Beyond, the moon was turning the east to a ruddy glow. It would be up presently.

"Might as well have yourself some grub," he suggested.

The captive shrugged.

"Sure," he agreed. "It'll break my neck that much easier, eh?" And he ate with unimpaired appetite.

5

THE MOON was high in the sky when they returned to camp, driving the extra horses, carrying the supplies which had been looted from the wagon. Off a little way, the big herd was bedded down, no longer restless since the storm was past. There was a haze between earth and stars, however, and Alamo knew that there would be more rain before they reached the river.

The cook fire still glowed, and a candle light came from Cherry's wagon. Diamond moved like a shadow, his own shadow squat and malformed

behind him. He nodded questioningly toward the coffee pot, to the cook wagon.

"We had supper," Alamo said briefly.

"You caught 'em, then?" Diamond nodded.

"Two of them. Pinto got away."

"Uh—there was a woman, after all," the cook said, a little heavily. "We found her, off back in the brush there. She's alive. Cherry wants you to come have a look, Alamo."

A little startled, Alamo moved toward the wagon. So that was the why of the light at this hour. There must have been a fight, in that case—the man doing what he could to hold them off, while the woman had managed to get back in the brush and hide. But there was something a little queer here. Usually a wife fought beside her man as long as life was in her. The flap parted, and Cherry looked out.

"I'm glad you're back, Alamo," she said. Her tone was soft, a little troubled. "She's been unconscious, ever since we found her. Probably sick a long time."

So that was it. Feeling a little out of place, Alamo climbed in. He had never been inside Cherry's wagon, nor even looked inside. It was like most wagons on the trail, yet with an indefinable difference—and somehow an atmosphere of home, even here in this far land.

The woman was in the bed now, lying there, her face white, her breath even enough but faint. It scarcely moved the sheet above her. It was easy enough to see that she had not been well. The face was thin, pinched by suffering and illness. Yet under the deep brown hair, it was a face of more than average beauty. With health, it would bloom again. Alamo saw that much in the first casual glance.

Cherry, turning her own troubled eyes to his face, saw it go suddenly white and cold. For a moment he looked as if he had seen a ghost, then turned, without a word, and climbed back out of the wagon, was gone in the darkness.

For a minute Cherry stood there, staring out into the darkness, where he had vanished. Then she heard a horse, and knew that he was riding away. She turned back, puzzled, a little angry, deeply concerned.

SHE WAS early awake, hearing Diamond stirring, building up his fire, rattling pots and pans, though this morning he tried to be less noisy than usual. There was a gray haze of cloud across the sky now, a sort of breathless quality to the air. She beckoned to Diamond.

"Where is he?" she asked.

The cook gestured.

"Out there—ridin'," he said. "He's been ridin' all night—though it wan't his turn none." His eyes asked a question.

"I think she's better," Cherry nodded. "I believe she'll wake up all right. It sounds as if she was stirring, now."

She went back to the wagon, leaving half of Diamond's implied question unanswered. Presently she beckoned him again, bidding him bring coffee. Inside the wagon, the cook could hear low voices—w o m e n's voices, two of them, both soft and low. Satisfaction filled him, so that he did not bark a reprimand at Biscuits for tardiness in assisting him. Things were coming out all right.

Alamo was coming back, now. Diamond saw him, as did the others. He always had a healthy appetite, and in any case there was work to be done. None of the others suspected what had happened, of course—only himself and Cherry. And Diamond knew when to keep a close mouth.

Alamo pulled off his saddle, turned his horse with the remuda, came toward them. He was a little haggard, but being up all night could account for that. Most of the men were getting their plates, then retiring shyly, to eat them, hardly looking toward the women on the wagon tongue.

Diamond wondered what Alamo would do. But he didn't shy away; he came straight up, with a sort of ramrod grimness in his walk. Cherry came out of the wagon, and stood beside the other woman. She was looking at Alamo now, one hand at her throat, her eyes widening. The color had faded again from her cheeks.

"Alamo," Cherry said. "She's bet-

ter, this morning. I want you—"

Alamo was speaking, then. His voice cutting across Cherry's. His eyes straight ahead, set like his face. Even his voice had that same set quality.

"I think I'd better do this," he said. "Cherry, I want you—everybody, to meet my wife."

He did not look at the woman on the wagon tongue, and for a minute they could only stare, doubting if they had heard aright. But Alamo had turned away, his voice still held that brittle quality.

"Saddles," he said. "Get the herd to moving. We'll reach the Colorado today."

6

IT WAS beginning to rain now—a steady rain which swiftly increased to a pelting downpour. In no time at all the dust was gone, the men were soaked, the dirt underfoot was turning to mud. Since some of that storm of the previous afternoon would already have spilled itself into the Colorado, it was common knowledge among the older, trail-wise hands, that the river might be rising, would surely be coming up during the day.

And a swollen river could be an ugly barrier to a big trail herd. No wonder that Alamo was urging them forward at a faster clip, today, that he was a driving, grim taskmaster. The river was reason enough for that.

But there was more than the river which was the matter with him. They all knew that. Sadie had told her story—or a part of it, at least. She had owned the wagon, the team; the man had been hired to drive it for her. Where she had come from, where she was heading for, why—she had not said anything about any of that, and Cherry had not asked.

There was more than that. The three outlaws had come on them, and they had known there would be an attack. Sadie had gotten back in the brush, unobserved by the trio, before it started. The man had urged her to do that; he had been intending to work back and join her, where they could put up a better fight together. Then a bullet, fired from ambush, had ended that plan.

She had seen him go down, had fainted, believing that all was lost. When she had awakened, it was in the wagon, with Cherry ministering to her. That was her story. All of it. Not all that could be told, as everyone knew.

The men had respected Alamo Sage before. His name was already a sort of legend in Texas, both for the things that he had done with cattle, and in the armies of the Confederacy. But it had been only respect; now there was added a spice of fear. This was a new, and harder, Alamo, who gave the orders today.

THE RAIN, at first, had been a welcome change from the endless dust; but the savage lashing intensity of it could make it old fast. Biscuits was swearing when at length they came in sight of the sandy-bottomed Colorado. It ran dirty and swift now, and anyone with half an eye could see that it must have risen a lot in the last twenty-four hours. That, however, was not what bothered the T cook.

"How'n blazes can a man cook, weather like this?" he growled. "Men yell twice as loud for hot food, and wood's all soaked, fire won't half burn even if you had dry wood. Me, I'm tired of it."

"Trouble with you, Biscuits, all you ever done was cook around the ranch," Diamond told him sternly. "Most of the time you was inside the house, with a good stove and everything easy. You're out on the trail now—and this is just a mild sample of what we'll be gettin' from now on."

"Mild?" Biscuits yelped. "Then how'n blazes we going to cook at all?"

"What you think I made you load all that dry wood under both wagons for, as well as Miss Cherry's?" Diamond demanded. "You couldn't see the sense of it,, then."

"Well, I guess mebby there'll be enough of it to cook supper on," Biscuits grumbled.

"Supper?" Diamond fixed him with

a stern eye. "If I catch you usin' more'n just a few lean sticks of that dry stuff, Biscuits—just enough to start a fire blazin', then I'll leave you to sweat it out and handle yore crew for yoreself, the rest of the trip. That dry wood stays right there—and we'll hope it keeps more'n halfway dry. When we cross the river, load it inside—pile it anywhere, just to keep it dry. A dry stick 'll be worth more'n gold for a spell now."

"But you got to have dry wood to cook with, a day like this—"

"Knock some of them bigger oak to pieces; find dead ones if you can. They'll burn, after a fashion, once you get 'em started. But I don't reckon we'll be campin' here. Here comes the boss now."

ALAMO WAS coming up. He was soaked, as were all the others, his hat hung low above his eyes, sodden, dripping. He gave a single raking glance at the three wagons, saw Cherry on the seat of the one, only [illegible]ly protected from the driving [illegible], and his glance went on to the river.

"Don't make camp—yet," he ordered, and pushed his horse out, into the flood. Rock followed at his heels.

The water had pushed back for fifty feet from yesterday's shore line. The horses went that far, hoofs splashing it high, and then were swimming. Alamo slipped from the saddle, reins across the saddle horn, on back to one hand, his other hand grasping a strap at the rear of the saddle. He swam too, just below the horse, partly sheltered by it. Rock followed his example.

Presently, as the horses found footing again, the men were back in the saddle. They reached the far shore, some distance farther down. Rock nodded.

"Not too bad," he said.

"Be worse by morning," Alamo agreed, and turned back. Those of the crew who had brought the herd up, watched, a little awed by the magnificent fury of the river. Here was a wild force laid athwart their path, such water as some of them had never seen. The cattle bawled uneasily, sensing that they must cross.

"Godfrey, you go in the wagon," Alamo ordered Jensen. "You know what water's like." He waved his hand to the others. "All right. Get them moving."

It was the sensible thing to do, but a lot of them had counted on camping here for the night. It was not late, but with the ever thickening storm, the dark would be upon them early. This would postpone a hot supper for a matter of hours.

But no one demurred. The wagons went first, Diamond leading the way. His horses shouldered forward, the gray current rising higher against them. Suddenly they were swimming. The wheels clung, lifted a little, the wagon swung downstream, an added pull on the struggling horses. He turned their heads, hoarsely encouraging them. They found footing again, struggled on. Not bad—only a foretaste of what they could expect, later on.

Biscuits came behind, Cherry's wagon in the middle. Godfrey Jensen knew his business. Cherry was inside now, with Sadie. That bleak and haunted look on Sadie's face bothered her. If the girl would cry—if Alamo would come up and speak to her, directly, just once—

Water came seeping in through the cracks, a dirty stream. The box lifted a little while the wheels remained on the bottom, then, wired fast as they were, the wheels reluctantly rose to the pull of the wagon box, jolting it back in place as the wiring held frame and box together. It swayed with the current, a sickening half-swing before Jensen could swing the horses as well.

The wheels found sand and clung, the water ebbed back out. Here was the other side of the river.

DIAMOND had found a protected spot, with wood handy, some of it dry driftwood, cast high up by some former splurge of the flooded river. Soon he had generous fires crackling. Now the herd was taking the water—the leaders being lined out, forced into the flood. They went reluctantly, bawling, trying to swing, to crowd back. Men swung among them,

cutting out a few, rushing them, keeping them going until, once in, they had to swim, to keep going.

A new cordon of riders followed, at the now doubly dangerous business of keeping the herd from milling, from turning on themselves in midstream. Such a thing, once started, could drown hundreds, even thousands. And for men caught in such a jam, it was worse.

Others, on shore behind, were feeding more cattle into the river. They still required urging, but not so much, now that it was a solid brown river of beef which went ahead. A few had reached the far shore, were already scrambling out. This was a good crossing, by any standard. And the water wasn't bad—not compared to what they might find later on—say at the Red or the Canadian.

They were feeding in well. A third of the herd was in or across now. The storm came harder, lashing their faces. Alamo, out in the river, saw Tom Dunning, coming as well. Then he saw something else—one of the hazards which they could be no guarding against.

It was a huge, uprooted tree, jagged, ugly, swinging at them out of the gloom. It struck a steer, three or four of them, broadside, like a battering ram. Like a great hand pushing. There were agonized bawls, blood on the water, making an ugly stain. Confusion, growing as panic spread among the herd and the sawyer raked its way through them. And Dunning was squarely in the path of it all.

7

THERE was pride in Alamo, as well as concern. A good general thinks first of his men. So far, he had lost no men, no stock. That had been partly luck, better luck than he could hope would last—particularly when they should near trail's end. But the farther he could take them without loss, the better. And men, every man, would be needed when the time came for fighting, as come it would.

By staying where he was, on the upper edge of the milling bunch, he could retain his generalship, keep them moving, and be safe enough. It looked like folly to push his own horse down among that moving herd, where panic was spreading, where a real milling was trying to start. Likewise an all but hopeless task, to try and save the boy, caught there below the herd, with the ugly swirl sucking him in.

Alamo fought his way ahead, urging his horse, swinging his coiled rope at snouts, yelling them away. A long horn raked his leg, but he did not feel it. He could barely see Dunning now, as the dark came down to add to the savagery of the scene. But he saw the boy's horse flounder and go down in the press, and for a moment he had a hopeless feeling that he would never see Dunning again.

Then he glimpsed him, fighting in that seething mass, and flung his rope. The noose fell true, and the loop went around one of Dunning's wildly flailing arms. He saw Dunning's white face as he comprehended, turning, and pulled hard on the rope. A steer surged against it, taut like a fiddle string, was bearing straight down on the boy.

Holding the rope with one hand, trusting his horse to take care of both of them, Alamo jerked his gun and shot. It was too close not to drive the bullet to the heat, and he big beast floundered then the current had it in its pull, and the rope was clear again.

He pulled Dunning in, but now the welter of the milling herd was worse. The tree had smashed past, tearing through their close-packed ranks throwing them into panic. Another great horn caught at Dunning, snagging in his coat—tearing it, almost jerking him away before the cloth tore loose.

Alamo was holding on to the rope. He dragged him over to the horse, and across the saddle. But no cayuse could live in such water with a double burden. Alamo slipped off, holding fast only to a saddle-thong, and then a surge of the struggling animals tore that from his hand.

Now it was maddened chaos, here

with black water eager for prey. His chance was gone, and Alamo knew it. And in that moment a new chance came, as another lariat rope flipped out across the water, across the backs of struggling cows.

He caught it, and turned to see who had flung it, and felt amazement for a moment. It was Cherry, there on a horse, risking her life here in the river to help.

With the big log past, the cattle were being turned again, here was a chance. The horse was swimming, and Alamo held fast, was towed along to shore. He found his footing, stumbled out to where Cherry had slipped from the horse.

"You shouldn't have come out there," he said.

"We need you for the rest of the drive," Cherry retorted. "Here, take my horse. I'm going back to the wagon."

She thrust the reins at him, and turned and ran. Alamo swung into the saddle, noting that Tom Dunning, having worked his way to shore, was turning back again, to the job of keeping the cows coming across. This was a cattleman's job.

Diamond had a big fire, extravagantly fed from the stock of drift. Not often, in the rain, would there be such a chance for the men to warm and dry themselves. The herd was across, almost without loss. Coffee made a warm fragrance on the air.

THE RAIN had stopped when they stirred the next morning. But most of the men were still wet, stiff until they had moved about a while, and their clothes would dry on them as the day wore on—unless it rained again. Leaden skies which had clamped down hard all around, dragging in the gray horizon, had a feel of more rain. The river, behind them, was a sullen turgid torrent.

"And to think that we was kickin' about dust—an' sunshine, back a day or so," someone exclaimed, wonder in his tones. "I could stand some sun to thaw the ice out of my bones!"

Strangely enough, the sun did shine, before noon. Bright and full of promise from a gleaming blue sky. For an hour. By noon it had vanished again, and an hour later the rain had recommenced. Men, barely dry and warm, were wet and clammy again.

Only the cattle seemed to enjoy it. The grass was fresh and green and lucious to the taste. There was no thirst to torment them, and they did not mind the rain. It was the men who were not so fortunate. There was no dry wood in a convenient pile that evening. Such wood as could be found a man had to work for, chopping, newly drenched with each jarring axe-atroke at a tree.

The flames spluttered and sulked sullenly, hot pans hissed and cooled in the rain. There was no adequate protection. A canvas tarp, stretched back from the end of the chuck wagon to a tree, whipped wildly in a gust of wind and collapsed, spilling its pent-up water on to the remnants of the fire. Biscuits swore.

Even Diamond was helpless. He had made a huge pot of coffee, but the dark had closed in now, black as a traitor's imaginings. There was nothing that could be cooked, even if a man could see. Only cold biscuits and cold meat for sandwiches, left over from the morning. They had cooked a double portion then, with something like this in the back of Diamond's mind.

This was a night built for trouble. The herd was uneasy, for to the rain and the gusty wind had been added occasional rumblings of thunder, an occasional sharp flash of lightning which ran eerily across the world and left the night doubly thick.

Cattle were slow to bed down, quick to come to their feet, uneasy bellowings in their throats. Half of the crew were on watch now, riding a circle which meant nothing. Even the instinct of cow ponies could tell little of where to go in such blackness. If the herd should break and stampede, nothing could be done with them.

Alamo took the first half of the night. Nothing happened, and the men tried to get some sleep. The lightning had quit its wild playing, but the rain kept up. There was only mud on which to lie down, scant cover above a man. This was the McCoy.

IN THE wagon, it was little better. Sodden canvas allowed a fine mist of rain to beat through when the heavier gusts struck. While no actually wet, everything was starkly, coldly damp. The moan of the wind did not help. Cherry lay wakeful, staring into the opaque darkness. Sadie spoke, and Cherry knew that she was wakeful as well.

"I hate to think of them—out in such a night as this," Sadie said. And while she used the general pronoun, Cherry could guess of whom she was really thinking. And not once had Alamo spoken directly to his wife since that strange meeting.

"It could be worse," Cherry replied. "It's not cold—not to what it might be."

Neither of them spoke again, but both knew that the other still stared upward with aching eyes for a long time.

The memory of it was with Cherry the next morning. Again the rain had stopped, the wind had died to a whisper. There were puddles everywhere, a vast field of mud where the great herd had passed. But a fire was burning, there was hot food. It made a difference.

Again, presently, the herd was plodding north. There was a bit of color in Sadie's cheeks again, a better look to her. Here was discomfort and hardship, but something had happened to her. She was a better. And she proved it by suggesting that she should drive the wagon for a while.

Cherry agreed. There were things which she wanted to say to Alamo, and he had kept himself scrupulously away from the vicinity of the wagon, always riding. There was plenty to do, of course, these days. But not that much.

Saddling a horse, Cherry found him, up near the point. The sky was lightening with promise of clearing. Cherry waved, and edged her horse alongside.

For a few minutes they rode in silence. The curtain of it was like a barrier between them, and one deliberately erected. Cherry wanted to beat it down. Resentment rose in her.

"Do you have to treat her the way you do?" she burst out suddenly.

Alamo looked at her, then—with a face which was wiped clean of all expression. Cherry went on.

"I don't know what's happened between you two, in the past—she's not told me any more than you have. But you said yourself that she was your wife. And she's had a hard time—a mighty hard time."

Still he said nothing. Cherry tried again.

"I still don't even know whether you like it, or not—she's going right along with us. There's nothing else that can be done. And she is your wife—or so you said. Don't you think you owe her something?"

Alamo answered, then. One cold word.

"No."

He said it deliberately, turned his horse with equal deliberation and rode away from her. Cherry watched him go, nd the day seemed grayer than before.

8

THERE WERE two days of good weather, then the rain recommenced. It was sporadic, but frequent enough to keep the men soaked most of the time. More than one cowboy wondered aloud why he had ever kicked about sunshine and a bit of dust.

But it was the unnatural luck of the trail which worried Alamo more than the discomforts. The latter were inevitable, and he had counted on them. There had been bad luck, of course, but far less than could be expected for the first part of a journey; nothing really serious. And since there must always be just so much trouble, somewhere along the way, he grew gloomy. A reminder that their good luck was due to his own good management was not convincing.

"There's been plenty other good trail bosses, which hasn't kept them out of trouble," he said. "Well, we'll keep pushing."

Two men drifted in to camp, late one afternoon. They came like ghosts. The horses which they rode were in good enough shape, since there was plenty of grass, but the men were in

bad shape. Without guns, half-starved. It was their faces which showed it worst.

There was a sort of terror graven there, etched deep into already sunken eyes. It was in their faces like a stain which would not wash out. One of them had a stiff right arm from a still ugly wound, a broken bone crookedly healing. The other peeled off his shirt and showed some of the men the not-quite-healed welts on his back.

"We were lucky, at that," he said jerkily. "We got out alive. There were eighteen of us—drivin' three thousand head of beef critters. We got up through the Nations—it was bad enough. But nothin' to what it was when we got near Missouri."

He fell silent, seeming to shiver a little, though the day was warm. His companion took up the narrative.

"We'd been keepin' watch for trouble—the boss knew it'd come. But there was a hundred men around us before we knew what was happenin'. They told us we couldn't go no farther—said Texas beef brought Texas fever, and the law was keepin' that out of Missouri."

Now it was his eyes which fixed on vacancy, and his companion who resumed again.

"Theyd been playin' with us—up to then. They offered to let us go, if we'd turn back—and leave the beef. The boss started cussin' them—and somebody shot him in the back. We tried to make a fight of it."

"They left us for dead, with the rest," the other man added. "I was lyin' with a dead man sprawled across me, his blood drippin' on me. We managed to get away that night."

It was a grim story, but not a new one. Alamo saw the effect of it in the faces of his crew, reflected in the gravity of Cherry's eyes. They fed the pair, and sent them on the next morning with a gun and blankets and supplies.

No one spoke of quitting, of turning back; they had known how it would be before the start. But there was an added air of grimness which was slow to wear off.

A DAY OF bright sunshine helped. The s o d d e n earth steamed, the world was g r e e n on on every horizon. Spirits lifted like the mist. It would be a good world, if there was only a fair destination which men could travel to, to find a fair market for their herds.

The bitterness in him was growing. It was like yeast, and the more he pressed it down, the more pent-up grew its fury. Sometimes it alarmed him. His hope now was to hold it in check until the time came for action, when real trouble showed. The thing would be hopeless, but he'd at least put up a good fight.

The sun was pleasant. The wagons had circled ahead, had found a camping place, and were busy about preparations for the evening meal. It was usually the job of the trail boss to pick the spot for camp, but Diamond was competent.

He had a fire going now, a big kettle boiling over it, as Alamo could see from the distance. There was a spot of color where one of the girls moved near the wagon. Another little row of colors, moving lazily in the breeze. They had washed their clothes, had stretched a line between wagons and hung them out, taking advantage of the sun.

Alamo sat his horse and watched, lazily. That was a homey scene. It was pleasant to drowse in the warm sun for a change.

He started suddenly, frowning. It was—yes, that was Sadie, on horseback, riding toward him. It was the first time that he had seen her on a horse, since joining the drive. But she rode as well as Cherry, a straight, gallant little figure; and she was coming out to see him.

Alamo hesitated. There was confusion and something close to panic in him. He was minded to turn his horse and ride away, but it wouldn't do. Every man with the herd could see, in this clear, dust-free air. And he'd known, from the start, that a show-down was inevitable; if he hadn't been such a coward, he wouldn't have put it off.

SADIE slowed her horse to a trot as she neared him, t h e n to a

walk. Alamo remained, unmoving. He saw that her cheeks had paled, but her voice ws very quiet as she spoke.

"Do you mind if we talk a little, Alamo?"

He found his own voice unexpectedly hoarse.

"Why no. Go ahead, if you like."

She looked at him, quickly, as if she had hoped for more encouragement, but he was staring stonily past the tips of his horse's ears. Her voice was small.

"That was George Brent, back there, with the wagon, Alamo. He'd seen his wife and children—killed by the Apaches. All that he wanted of life was to get back to his old home in Texas—to die. He never reached it."

That was explanation, and it might be true. Any way you took it, it had been a hard break for George Brent—or maybe not. Now his troubles were over.

"I—I wanted to come to Texas too, Alamo. I—I thought that maybe—"

Her voice trailed off on a hopeless note. She raised her eyes in a quick glance, let them fall again. Alamo's face was stony.

"It was a break for Brent—there at last," he said. "For anybody, these days. The dead have it all over the living."

"Cherry has been very good to me, Alamo—I think that I'd have died, if it hadn't been for the way she nursed me."

Again, Alamo made no comment. The cattle were winding closer, now, stopping to crop the grass, with the knowledge that night and rest were close at hand. There ws no trouble for them which the moment could not solve. Watching them, Sadie felt a little envious. It was so difficult to find words, to talk to this man, desperately as she wanted to. It was, as she had heard once remarked, like pushing the wind.

"Its been a long time, Alamo," she said, tentatively.

"Yes," he agreed briefly. Whether there was anything more in the word, or not, she could not tell.

It was funny, tragic, the way words could not bridge a gap. How they could become meaningless things, like chips flying from a block. But maybe some gaps could not be bridged at all.

Her shoulders sagged. Alamo sat a little straighter in the saddle. *Once is enough,* he warned himself harshly. Only a fool would have to be taught the same lesson twice.

"I—it's nice that the war is over, isn't it?" Sadie suggested. "It was such a horrible, senseless, needless thing."

"The war isn't over," Alamo retorted grimly. "for some people—it never will be."

There it was—the bitterness, the festering hate, welling up, spilling over. She had sensed it, had been afraid of it. But she was trying—she would go all the way, in one last desperate effort. If that did not work—

"I—I'm sorry, Alamo," she whispered. "For—for all that happened. For the past."

It was out, now, a pitiful enough offering, flung at his feet. Alamo's face seemed to grow a little more rigid, more unrelenting.

"You should be," he said, and swinging his horse sharp about, rode away.

9

DISASTER Trail. Others had named it so, knowing its bloody history, the failure and worse which lay at the end—for those lucky enough to ever reach Missouri. Or perhaps there was more luck for those who did not get that far—who met the Indians in the Nations, or any one of the hundred other deaths which lay in wait along this trail.

Brush Creek was behind them; so was the Lambassa. Both had been high, but not too bad. There had been no real trouble anywhere, so far as the cattle were concerned, save those few bad moments in the Colorado. There had been one stampede, when a jackrabbit had sprung out suddenly from behind a bush, right before the eyes of a startled steer. A little thing, but that was all it took when the mood was right. They had swerved and run, and the whole

herd had caught the contagion.

But again their luck had been with them. There was nothing in the way, and the cattle, within a mile and with a bit of persuasion, had been gradually turned a point or so, headed in the right direction. Alamo had waved his hat to let them run.

It had meant an added five miles, that day, and the need for Diamond to pull up from the spot he had already chosen and travel on. But the herd had passed well to one side, not otherwise bothering, and for the next day or so, tired, the excitement run out of their blood, the great bunch had been more tractable than usual.

For three nights, the sun had gone down red, in a blaze of glory. Not tonight. And that morning, instead, it had risen with a gory bone in its teeth, like a running hound. Alamo glanced aloft now, and saw that the stars, bright a few minutes before, were fading. Off in the west came a bubble of black cloud, blowing itself up fast as a boy might do with soap. Getting ready to burst—but not in the fashion of a bubble.

Alamo swung sharp on his heel. His voice cut across the silence as the fiddle droned to silence and men sat and dreamed.

"Saddles! Everybody! Out to the herd!"

They started to their feet, aroused at the unusual incisiveness of his voice, looking up, suddenly aware of the heavier dark, the spreading cloud. There was no wind, as yet, no mutter of thunder, no sparkle of flame in the distance. Alamo would have felt easier had there been. An ordinary thunderstorm was one thing, but that great growing bubble of a cloud, which now had propelled itself across half the sky—it was like a reaching hand—no, a fist.

They moved fast, almost in silence. Two men were with the herd, and as they approached, they saw that the pair had doubled their usual speed in circling, their voices, raised a little, held a note of unease which they could not quite keep out. It changed to relief at sight of the dark figures coming, all the crew. But now the unease was in all of them.

Alamo was tight-lipped, considering. Usually, trail-wise, Diamond sought out a protected place to halt the wagons. One where, if anything did happen, trees and rocks or a defile would break the herd before they could swarm across and over the wagons in dark of night.

This time there had been nothing more than brush, no real barrier anywhere to be found. But it had seemed less necessary than usual. Now Alamo was worried. You never knew where a herd might run, once they started, and he felt it in his bones that trouble had caught up with them.

LIKE AN echo to his thought, it came—a shattering bolt of lighting, ripping out of the black sky above them, yellow-red like the rod of an angry god of war, stretched from horizon to horizon. The crash of it seemed to shake the earth, to stun the eardrums. And as though that had been the signal for release, the storm came with it—howling wind, rain— and, far worse than all the rest, hail.

Such hail as most of the crew had heard tales of, stories which had all the effect of mythology, of legend, but were somehow far removed from the real. Now they had become real. Blasting hail, savage icy pellets as big as doorknobs, pelting at them out of the black and pitiless sky above. With a seeming solid sheet of water in between.

Fortunately, the hail did not last long—only two or three minutes. One of those pellets, hitting right, could stun a cow or knock a man down. Most of them merely hit in the wrong places, bouncing painfully. Alamo took one on his left hand, and had to shift the reins to his right, for the hand was numb. One struck his shoulder, and it was like a thrown rock. His horse was almost unmanagable.

And the cattle, pummeled by these invisible clubs, were in stampede.

The darkness, save for the choking flashes of lighting, was almost an absolute quality. The flares showed a wildly tossing sea of shaggy brown

backs and lifting heads, was reflected back from falling eyes and rain-wet, polished horns. The solid pound of hoofs seemed to rock the earth.

And they were swinging north by east—which was the direction in which Missouri lay. But it was also toward the wagons.

The hail had stopped, but the rain was still a solid wet sheet dragged across them. Cattle were slipping, going down. Sounds like moaning sighs came up when that happened, as the others surged without a check or swerve. The wind rose above the other noises in a gusty savage shout.

Alamo's horse was on the fringe of the wild bunch; he could only hope that the other might be as lucky. Lighting played again, dazzling the eyes, the crash of it right above them lashed the herd to redoubled frenzy. He saw a wagon, saw the cows crash in to it—saw it poise for a moment, wildly teetering, before it went over, like a falling behemoth. The night closed down again.

Another mile, a couple of them. The rain had lost is sting, there was a faint lightening of the sky, off in the west again. The great swelling bubble had burst. Outlines took shape, hazy and ill-defined. The drumming of hoofs were receding. The bulk of the herd had gone past him.

No point to trying to follow them, tonight. So far as they were concerned, there was nothing to do but let them run it out. It would take a day, probably two, to regather the scattered herd. But one of these days would be saved from the fact that they would be a day's drive nearer their destination. None of that mattered.

The thing which mattered, which was still to be computed, was what this night's work had really cost. The numbness had left Alamo's arm, but soreness remained. His luck had been good. He swung his horse, riding now with a dread of what he might find.

ALREADY the clouds were breaking, a filter of moonlight lay across the sodden earth. Here and there were suspicious-looking objects, and he rode closer until he could see what they were. One was a flat rock, another a dead steer. Farther on a weakened animal was unsteadily managing to get to its feet again, It staggered, one leg dragging. Alamo shot it.

He had seen none of the others since the stampede began. But now, on the ground ahead, was a long, slender, unmoving object. Clouds moved between him and the uncertain moon, the dark came back. All that he could tell was that this was one of the crew, stretched there on the ground. Whether alive or dead was difficult to determine.

Alamo gathered him up and managed to get back on his horse. His sense of direction was good, and he knew where the wagons had been. What would be there now, if anything, was hard to tell.

Grim thoughts rode with him as his horse plodded ahead. This unstirring figure in his arms—how badly was he hurt? And who was it? Light would give the answer, probably in no pleasant way. How many more were lying out, not yet found? Or found by wolves, which would be already on the prowl, drawn by sure instinct?

A beacon took form in the blackness, far up ahead. A fire, where the camp had been. Someone was still there and on the job—probably Diamond. That much was encouraging.

The figure in his arms stirred a little, sighed. Relief welled in Alamo. Here was life, at least. He wished that he could see, but the clouds had closed together again, though the rain had stopped. Mud was deep underfoot, the ground as though it had been plowed just before the storm.

His horse snorted, a pair of eyes glared palely at him. A wolf—feasting. He made out the dim bulk, big enough to be sure that it was only a dead cow.

Several dark figures were moving, shadow-like, around the fire up ahead. Some of the crew were getting back. He was close enough now to see that at least one wagon was standing, fire-glow reflected back from its canvas. There was another one. Better than

he had hoped for. One wagon smashed—but which one?

The answer came in Diamond's tired voice, even with the clink of tin dishes beside the fire.

"Smashed it to kindling wood, with poor old Biscuits still in it. Might as easy have been any of the rest of us. Cawfee, Rock?"

"I can use it," Rock agreed. Alamo knew how he felt. The T wagons gone, with its store of provisions. They would be short from here on. But that was not the worst. Biscuits had been caught without a chance. Biscuits, always complaining, half-helpless on the trail except for Diamond. But he had been one of them.

Here was the rim of the firelight. Alamo swung down, the figure stirred again in his arms. He stood taut, startled, for once completely at a loss. It was Sadie.

10

IT SEEMED that Sadie and Cherry had both answered that call to saddles, though he had not intended that they should. Cherry was back, now, and she took charge of Sadie. Apparently there was nothing seriously wrong with her; she had been thrown from her horse, but had escaped being trampled. Warmed and rested again, she would be all right.

Sadie. The woman he had married. And, for the first time in years, he had held her in his arms. Probably he had saved her life, this night. Left out there alone, unconscious, in the storm, with the roaming wolves—

Alamo shook his head. Luck had a way of playing queer pranks. This was one of them.

Most of the riders were reporting back now. All were in but two. Again the sky was lightening, but not enough to do any good. It would take daylight to give a true tally.

The chuck wagon from the T had been hopelessly wrecked as it went over. Biscuits, caught in it, was not a pretty sight. Alamo took a spade, and Roila Ely and Jensen joined him in silence. Just at the edge of the firelight they dug. It was easier to have something to do than to wait for the slow dawn. The mud made easy digging, but that was the best which could be said for it.

Both the others had returned by the time the sky began at long last to lighten. Everyone who had ridden in that wild stampede had survived. Diamond, too, had caught up a horse and gone with the rest. Only the one man who had stayed behind, in a place of apparent safety, had been caught. And that was luck for you. A thing like quicksilver, something you couldn't hold in your hand.

Diamond made his report. He had been able to salvage a little, a very little, from the other chuck wagon. Not much.

"We'll eat more beef, less biscuits—an' more water in the cawfee," he announced. "I'll sling the hash for everybody. Reckon you'll have to like it or starve."

Two wagons, now, pulling across the once-green earth which now had the look of a plowed field. Two, where yesterday there had been three, lonely against the horizon. Cherry had reported that Sadie was nearly herself again. She had looked hopefully, expectantly, at Alamo as she said it, but he only nodded shortly and set out with rest of the crew to gather the herd.

The season was advancing as they traveled north, but despite that, the air held a chill as gray as the day. The wind which breathed across the sodden land was raw.

Ross Martin had a nose, swollen to twice its usual size. A big hailstone had hit him squarely on it. Ely confessed that he had been knocked out by one. He had regained consciousness, still in the saddle, both hands clutching the horn in a frenzied, instinctive grip. His horse had stood, with the reins dropped.

The heavy stones had torn through the canvas of both remaining wagons, doing considerable damage. But since no one had been inside them at the time, it had not mattered too much.

BY NIGHT, most of the herd had had been gathered again. With

the new day, still gray, still threatening rain, they started them moving, Rolla Ely and Alamo watching them file past, making a tally—the first since the start. The figures were surprisingly good.

"I make it ten short of six thousand," Ely reported.

"I'm within three of you," Alamo agreed.

It was more than good. They had started north with six thousand head. Probably a few extra, since half a hundred at the least had perished in the night. It was still the sort of luck to make a man uneasy.

"If I could ever get dry again—an' warm, just once," Tom Dunning said, wistfully. "Seems like I ain't felt comfortable since I c'n remember."

"Cowmen ain't supposed to feel comfortable," Diamond adjured him. "Look at Rock, there. Horse slipped an' fell on him. He's limpin' now, but countin' himse'f lucky that there was plenty soft mud to fall in. Plastered with it, but it didn't bust him up none. And like he says, it'll soon rain enough again to wash the mud off."

Dunning gave a half-hearted grin, gulped down a cup of scalding coffee, and swung to his own sodden saddle. Texas was a vast country. Somehow he'd never counted on it being so big. He was impatient to get out of it, to reach journey's end. No matter how bad it might be, it would be a change. But there was still a lot of Texas ahead of them.

The crease between Alamo's brows was deepening a little with the passing miles. It looked as though they'd live to make it to where the real trouble would start. And now he had a new worry on his hands. It was bad enough for Cherry to be along, but Cherry was half-owner here, and it had been her idea in the first place. Cherry had a plan, whatever it might be, for getting them through in safety.

His interest was impersonal—less than that, he assured himself. But he was rodding this drive, and the responsibility, in the long run, was up to him. Impatience grew in him, so he welcomed it when finally Cherry came riding out, so that he could swing about and join her.

She looked at him, her brown brows arching a little with feigned surprise.

"You don't actually mean that you are taking note that we're still alive, Sadie and I." she asked.

"That's what's worryin' me," Alamo said bluntly. "How long I can keep you so.'

Her eyes grew speculative, softened a little. "Deep down, Alamo, you're the boy I used to know," she said. "You try hard to hide it—but you're not half so cold or hard as you'd like to have us believe."

Alamo jerked a shoulder impatiently. "Just because I'm worried is no sign," he said. "I've never been licked but once—and that was the whole South. When I start a job, I like to finish it. But I didn't see any chance when we started, and I don't see any now. We haven't begun to have trouble, yet."

"I suppose not," Cerry agreed. "The reason why we waited three weeks, Alamo, after the herd was gathered, was because we had word that you were on the way back," she told him. "We figured that, with you, we'd get through."

That they had waited so long for him was news to Alamo, but now he merely grunted.

"We'll get as far as the borders of Missouri, mebby," he agreed. "The one reason I agreed to take on the job, was because you let on then that you had some plan for getting across it, once we got that far!"

Cherry nodded, her gaze on the distant horizon. "I still have,' she agreed, but added no details. "But it's up to you to get us that far."

11

NOW THEY had reached the Trinity. Not a bad river, as rivers went, not in the same class with the Red, ordinarily. But now the weeks of rain had swollen it like a bloated steer. Its waters were swift, sullen, wide. And more rain was falling, as though there

would never be an end of it.

"I'm that wet, an' sour, if you was to squeeze me, I'd squirt lemon juice," Martin remarked dourly, hunched forward in the saddle, a thin trickle of water running off his hat brim and dripping down his nose. "Well, we might's well go swimming, I guess. Cain't get no wetter anyhow."

They shoved the herd in, Rock and Alamo having already made the crossing and returned. There was just one bad place. Out near midstream, where the water ran swift, there was also a sudden drop-off. The cattle and horses could swim, it was the wagons which worried Alamo.

Following his instructions, logs were tied alongside the wagon boxes, lashed to the wheels. That would keep the wheels from turning, but it wouldn't matter so much in such water. They could slide. He hoped that the added buoyancy would keep the wagons from sinking or overturning, and he had given orders for them to wait until the herd was across.

Diamond sat on his own wagon, scantily protected by the flap, indifferent to the rain, puffing at a short, black pipe. He spoke across to where the women watched from their wagon.

"He's worried," he said. "Look how they all go down, once they reach that spot! Duck clean under, most of 'em—then come up twenty-thirty feet downstream. Bad water, out there."

It was true. Horses and cattle and men alike were taking that dunking as they reached the drop-off. It made little difference where they tried to cross, up or down stream. It seemed to be the same, all along. Probably the high water had played a new trick with the river bottom along here. And this was the only good crossing for a long way in either directions, other known ones were not likely to be better.

Suddenly, Diamond's teeth clamped hard on the stem of his pipe. The girls were watching as tensely. The cattle had been making it all right, but now some of them had gotten turned around while under water, were starting to swim back to the shore they had left. In no time they were milling, a confused mass, fed by the brown stream still spilling out from the shore, roughly handled by the savage current of the river.

Alamo and Jensen rode at them, shouting, flailing at noses and horns. It was not easy to turn frenzied cattle, with the terror of the river driving them. Sadie gave an exclamation as Alamo and his horse went out of sight, and did not immediately reappear. Cherry looked at her, and back to the river.

They were up again now, emerging as most of the cattle did. The milling jam was broken, straightened. But half a hundred head had been swept on downstream, into wilder water—half a hundred who had reached the end of the trail.

ALAMO returned, and they saw that it was his intentioin to drive the wagon. Cherry looked at him, and opened her mouth to demur; then she looked across at Sadie, and closed it again, wordlessly.

"Be ready for some rough going," Alamo instructed, and urged the horses forward. Cherry observed that several of the cowboys were a little upstream from them, ready to lend a hand if things went wrong.

Diamond, stuffing his pipe in a pocket, was following them. The wagon went well enough, wheels sliding, until all at once the horses were plunging, swimming, then the wagon lifted a little. Now the logs were helping to lift, to steady it. But as the drop-off caught them, it jerked horses and wagon alike as though they had been chips. The heavy pull was almost too much for the team.

It was then that Alamo showed his skill with horses. He was talking to them, getting out of them a steady effort which most drivers could not have reached. They made it, and the wheels slid on the bottom again.

Diamond was not having such luck. Wagon tongue and horses jackknifed, the wagon heeled, almost going over. But a couple of the crew, coming alongside, swung in, fastening ropes to the upper wheels, with these in

turn tied to saddle horns. It was enough to right things again, to bring them through. Excitment roughed Tom Dunning's voice as the shore was reached.

"Weren't you scared there for a minute, Diamond?" he asked.

The cook shook his head.

"Scared? Me? Why should I be? I knew the rest of you wouldn't let nothin' happen to me. You like yore grub too well."

That, though they were not to guess it then, was the last of the real rain. The final sprinkle had stopped the sun was breaking through the clouds as Diamond cooked supper. Men looked at the blue sky and their spirits quickened. It wasn't far to the Red. Once across that, they'd be out of Texas, and since Texas was the main part of the world, that meant that the big part of the journey was behind them.

Alamo didn't disabuse them of the notion. Let them think so, if they liked. Texas was a land of mighty reaches, of overflowing fields of beef, and of poverty now. But Texas was a land of refuge. Beyond Texas were the Nations, beyond the Nations, Missouri, it was a toss-up as to which was worse.

There was trouble at dark-fall—the last sort that any of them would have looked for on such a day. Tom Dunning had rolled in his blanket, laid down and turned half over, and he cried out sharply, then was silent. Alamo reached him to find him on his feet, to hear a threshing sound which grew still. A faint light of moon and stars was all that showed, but it was enough.

It was a big rattlesnake, finishing its death-throes on the ground. A creature half-torpid from the rain and chill, which young Tom Dunning had rolled against. Sluggish, it had struck wthout warning.

Now, having killed it, the pain and terror which had leaped in that one quick cry were back in the boy's eyes as he stared down at it, his face set. Other men were coming, roused by the cry. The flap of the other wagon lifted.

"Where'd it hit you?" Alamo asked swiftly.

"Here." Dunning indicaterd his left leg, a little above the knee. His voice was not quite steady, but he was fighting manfully to make it so. Only he could not quite hide the fear in his eyes.

"Throw some wood on the fire," Alamo ordered. "Dry wood. We've got to have light."

Diamond was already doing so, not waiting for instructions. Using the scant and precious stock of dry wood which remained to him. Alamo heard Sadie's voice, a little scared sounding, asking what had happened. He was already slitting the levis, showing the tiny, ugly-looking twin punctures. Dangerously high up.

IT WAS Rock who had a rope ready, having brought his own noose without orders. He slipped it around the foot, slid it up near the thigh, pulled it painfully tight and held it so. Dunning was standing in the light of the flaring fire, white-faced, but both legs planted solidly, saying nothing.

Cherry came hurrying, Sadie on her heels. Each of them took one of the boy's hands. No word was said as Alamo placed his mouth at the wound and sucked strongly, spat, and sucked again. He looked at the rude torniquet of the rope, saw what Diamond held in his hand, and took it. A keenly sharp sharp Bowie.

"This is going to hurt, Tom," he said. His eyes lifted for a moment to the boy's white face. "Want to sit down?"

"I—I can take it better this way," Dunning muttered. "Go ahead."

Cherry was blinking. Sadie's face was white, but calm. Alamo looked at them, saw how their hands gripped the boy's a little tighter. He moved fast, hating it, but his hand was steady as he slashed sharp above the puncture, down through it, twice more on the sides—then repeated the pattern corss-wise, so that it was a checkerboard, the blood spurtin across his hand as he worked.

Tom Dunning winced, and stood trembling. He groaned, once, and his hands moved convulsively, in the

clasp of Cherry and Sadie. Alamo handed the knife back to Diamond, not looking up.

"Good boy, Tom" he said. Simple words, but meaningful. He was a man chary with praise.

Diamond jogged his elbow slightly. He held a whiskey bottle, a third full. Alamo nodded. He doubted the efficacy of whiskey in snake bite, though most men swore by it. But the boy was badly in need of the stimulant.

"Take a drink, Tom," he said.

Cherry released one hand, and Tom Dunning tilted the bottle. He drank, and choked, and handed the bottle back. The blood still flowed redly, and at Alamo's nod, Rock tightened the noose a little.

"We'd better get him lying down, in bed," Cherry said. "Bring him in our wagon."

"Sure," Alamo agreed.

They put Dunning to bed, with a candle for light. Alamo stepped out into the darkness. Returning in a minute with a double handful of soft rich mud, he plastered it thickly over the cuts.

"But it—it's so dirty!" Cherry cried out in protest.

"It's clean mud," Alamo said drily. "And it's what an animal uses to draw poison. We'll change it every couple of hours tonight."

Alamo remained there, with both women beside him. The rest of the crew, at his orders, went back to their blankets. Most of them wouldn't sleep well, but there was nothing which they could do.

Alamo himself watched the taut noose, loosening it a little every so often, feeling of the leg below, watching the color of it. Dunning lay quietly, for the most part. But there was cold sweat on his face, which Sadie wiped away, and his eyes were

"I—I feel all puffed up—like I was bloated," he burst out, finally. "I—am I going to die, Alamo?"

"Of course not," Alamo reassured him, and his voice was steaady, full of a confidence which he did not feel. "We've got most of it out. But you'll be sick a spell."

IT WAS, of course, worst for Dunning. There could be no doubt of that. But it was bad enough for the others, waiting, watching. For a time, Alamo had his doubts. He gave the boy another drink of whiskey, because he was badly in need of it. But as the sky began faintly to gray, he knew that the worst was over. With the torniquet removed, the bleeding had stopped, and the worst of the suffering was past. Dunning was falling into an uneasy sleep, but it was sleep.

Cherry stood up, stiffly, as Alamo arose also from where he had sat.

"We'd better spend the day here, hadn't we?" she asked.

Alamo nodded.

"Sure," he agreed. "Give him a chance to rest. He's had a bad time of it."

A day in which to loaf was a rare treat. With the sun shining and the river handy, clothes could be washed. There were plenty of little things to be done. And the knowledge that the worst was past and Tom Dunning would live made them lighthearted.

Alamo slept a little, and looked in on the boy, and saw that Dunning was sleeping again, more naturally now. Sadie was holding one of his hands. Cherry, watching, saw the harsh lines about Alamo's mouth soften a little as he dropped the flap again.

IT WAS on Cherry's advice that Sadie, early in the afternoon, rode out to where Alamo was having a look at the herd. Her own face was tense as she went. With something of the look which had been in Dunning's, after the first shock had passed and realization was in him.

Cherry, watching from the wagon, saw Alamo turn his horse and move away. She knew that nearly every one of the crew saw it, too. If men cussed the boss beneath their breath, it was nothing to what she said, also under her breath. Sadie swung her own cayuse and returned. She was trying to smile, but there was a tremulous droop to her lips as she dismounted.

"It's a nice day, Cherry," she said.

"Here," Cherry said fiercely. "You keep an eye on Tom—he's still asleep.

"It'll do me good—to give him a piece of my mind," Cherry swore. She swung up, spurred.

Alamo saw her coming and this time he did not attempt to run away. Merely waited. Cherry's face was flaming as she came up.

"Last night," she said directly, "I thought that you were quite a man, Alamo Sage. The way you pulled that boy out of it—it was your telling him that he'd live that made him believe it, and I think it was what pulled him through. I thought a lot of you, right then."

Alamo looked at her, and his face was blank again.

"Now you see that you were mistaken," he said.

"Everybody saw it," she blazed. "Why don't you even talk to her, Alamo? You told us all that she was your wife—and since then you treat her as if—as if—oh, if I were a man, I'd delight in thrashing you within an inch of your life! I think that you're the most contemptible specimen of man that I've ever seen—and most men are lower than a worm!"

"I suppose that means you don't want me around any longer," Alamo said evenly. "I'll go, and mighty glad to, whenever you say the word."

Cherry cursed him, then—cursed him as she had never realized that she could do, in a way which amazed them both. She saw the blankness on Alamo's face lighten to a slightly quizzical quirk, and checked herself abruptly.

"You should be flayed alive and boiled in oil, you—you monster! But even if you're a devil, you can't quit and run like a coward. You've promised to take this herd to Missouri, and I'm holding you to it! Though I hope they hang you after we get there!"

12

TOM DUNNING was improving. He had had a tough bout with the poison, but the treatment had been heroic enough to save him. Without Alamo's cool-headed nerve in such a moment, Cherry knew, it might have been a different story, that puncture of fangs had been a bad one.

The Red was ahead—the real border-line between Texas and trouble. What had gone before could be counted on as only a mild introduction to what lay ahead. North, into the Nations, men had flocked—renegade whites, renegade reds, and honest Indians who bitterly resented the continual crowding back, who realized that even here they were in danger of being shoved aside again. A country which had to be crossed, but with plenty of men determined that no one should cross.

There had been a few plesant days, so that dust was once again beginning to mark the slow progress of the big herd. The Red was not too high, though it still flowed swift and sullen. They had reached it at mid-afternoon, and Alamo had given the order to cross. You knew what a river was like when you came to it. But no man could ever be sure of the mood of a river by the following morning.

As usual, Rock and himself had crossed over and back. The wagons would follow, not precede, the herd. There had been a spot or so of quicksand here, and quicksands were hungry where wagons were concerned. After the hoofs of the herd had pounded it down, there would be less risk.

Dunning was nearly well again but he still rode in the wagon. The older hands were beginning to give him a good-natured ribbing which brought a flush to his cheeks. Only that morning he had suggested to Alamo that he was well enough to be back in the saddle again.

"Wait till we're across the Red," Alamo had advised. "There's plenty of trail ahead."

And now this was the Red, with still caving banks where the weeks of high water had been shoving at them, undermining, insatiably greedy. A few trees still washed past with the current. The land was rough and uninviting, like a child's playbox

spilled out and left neglected.

Half a hundred head of big steers had vied for the leadership when the drive had started. During the weeks, unquestioned position had been won by one big red beast with horns two yards in width, thick as a man's arms. Always now he struck out ahead, proud in his position, disdainful of all others, and, like too many leaders, without much notion of where he was going or why. A likely attribute, for those who use a leader for their own puppet.

Now he was in the forefront as usual, plunging ahead, so that the others followed. A horn-tipped head held high above the muddy water while his back cleaved a way and others foamed in the wake. The vanguard reached the far shore, found footing, started to splash up and out. And a rifle boomed from the bank beyond.

ALAMO heard the gun, and his ears automatically sorted out and classified the noise of it. That would be a Leman, a percussion gun of 1850 model. Plenty of those guns had gone west with the pioneers, later to fall into the hands of the Indians. Good guns—and dangerous, in the hands of a marksman.

Whoever held it was apparently a marksman, and no Indian, by the same token. The big lead steer, just struggling for a footing where the bank shelved sharply upward, poised for a moment on both hind legs, front feet helplessly pawing the air. A strangled bawl of rage and pain issued from his mouth, one horn gouged savagely, in a last futile gesture of defiance, into the muddy bank. Then he fell back, and the current, sucking hungrily at him, took on a new and darker stain.

That bullet had been calculated to panic the cattle and turn them to milling, but it had been just a trifle late for its purpose. Others, eager for the mantel of leadership, were already scrambling out. But now other guns were taking up the thunder, and they had shifted from cattle to men for targets.

Godfrey Jensen had been riding point, close beside the big lead steer. He tried to swing his horse about, to pull his Colt's, and the gesture broke in two before it was half completed. He seemed to do the same, folding together, dropping, spilling from the saddle into the water, down into that seething malestrom of hoofs. His horse, riderless, made the bank.

Alamo was just past mid-river, his horse swimming, as the first shots came winging. The day was old, now, and shade slanted along the bluffs on the far shore, staking out claims for the night to settle on. Higher up, at the skyline, sunlight lay sharp and golden.

Half-way between, back a little from the edge of the water, he saw where the shots were coming from, timed them in the next few moments. Old guns, these, slow in firing. But apparently five or six men were back in there, well sheltered, intent on killing.

It was a perfect trap. Probably they had been there when Rock and himself had ridden across and turned back, when they could have dropped them easily. Instead, they had withheld their fire until the herd was well committed to the river, and every man had his hands full. Now it was renegade work.

Posted as they were, they figured to kill every man as he came in range. If luck was with them, they could get control of the herd. If not, they were still in position to cause a lot of trouble and, as they would figure it, to make good their escape under cover of night, if for any reason they should be hard-pressed in turn.

That, as they counted on, would be a hard thing to do. For Alamo to pull his crew back to the far shore, divide forces and try and get across the Red, above and below, there to rout the renegades, would mean leaving the herd to itself. In such water, they would soon start milling, become hopelessly confused, and half the herd might be lost before the sun went down.

Yet to stick with them left the riders open to those hidden guns, with scant chance of shooting [illegible]. Already Jensen was dead. O[illegible] she [illegible] Jack, [illegible] the other

man had been wounded as he got his gun out. A bullet had struck his arm, so that it went limp, the revolver was lost in the river.

ALAMO took his decision, even as the first guns gave him some clue as to their number and position. Hesitation would be fatal. A headlong attack would be costly, but it was their only chance. He turned, lifting his arm, shouting.

"Half of you stay with the herd. The rest of you—come along! We've got to smoke them out."

Pickett had tried something of equal desperation. He had led a gallant charge—and a bloody one. And futile. Alamo had ridden in that line which had set out so gaily with pennons a-flaunt, and bands playing—only a mile to ride, with victory or defeat for an army and a Cause all hanging on the issue. As it did here.

A bullet had stopped Alamo then, half-way across that bloody mile. So that he could, perhaps, live to die here in a river called the Red, with waters splashing crimson. There was one chance—to go out with the edge of the struggling herd, mingling among them until they reached the shore. That way, they would be difficult targets.

Pickett had led gallant men, with a will to do, ready to die if die they must. He too, had a good crew, men who knew what to do, who needed no telling as to how to do it. They were following him, holding their own fire. There was no point to shooting when your adversaries were safely sheltered and out of sight.

Only the steady popping of their guns, the thin lift of powder smoke, showed where they were. A cow close beside Alamo grunted, bawled hoarsely, and collapsed. That had been a miss, so far as he was concerned, But as the distance grew less, the shooting would sharpen.

The river bed was firming beneath spurning hoofs now. Rock swore, and was floundering. His horse had taken a mortal wound. But Rock had grabbed a long horn, pulling himself on to the back of a steer, and was riding it across. Terrified, bawling, bucking, it none the less was chiefly interested in reaching the far shore.

Another man was gone, almost beside him. One moment, Alamo saw him there, the next, the saddle was empty. There had been no other sound, only an empty saddle. Death was like that.

Some of the cattle were in wild confusion, terrified by the drum of rifles ahead, by the things happening among them. As they swung and milled, they cut off half the men who had been following Alamo, forcing them back as well, so that their only chance was to work the cattle, to save the herd and themselves if they could.

Which left the odds twice as heavy for the few of them now nearing the shore. It was still a case of do or die. To turn back would invite more certain destruction, and there could be no second chance if this try failed.

Now the bank was close ahead of him, rising three or four feet above the water's edge, a sharp, straight wall. It gave momentary protection from the bullets, but it was a barrier as well. Alamo found a passable spot, set his horse at it. It struggled gamely, front hoofs pawing, slipping, sliding as the bank caved under it. Lead plopped viciously in the churning waters.

Then the pony heaved, surged on to dry ground. Just behind him, another horse was coming. Two or three others were out of the crush, a little farther downstream. Scant odds, to ride against intrenched men, but here was showdown. Alamo spurred, leaning low, gun in one hand, still holding his own fire.

THE RENEGADE guns were centering on him, trying desperately to stop him. There was always one thing about a renegade. In the pinch, he'd get panicky. It was so now. They were wasting bullets in their frenzy. Alamo lifted his voice in the rebel yell.

His gun was up, now, and he saw the horse which had followed him out

of the river, surging alongside. Heard a yell which echoed his own, high and shrill, caught a glimpse of the rider, and the shout died in his own throat, his own gun wavered.

It was Sadie who rode beside him now, another six-shooter in her own hand.

Shock numbed him for a moment. He'd been sure that Sadie was back across the river, back with Cherry. No telling where Cherry was, either.

Grimness came back to him, steadying his hand. He saw a hat, the edge of a shoulder, sunlight laid along a moving rifle barrel, swinging at them. His own gun shattered, the rifle sagged and fell. A man rose up suddenly, slumped again and disappeared down the sharp slope of the gulch which had sheltered him.

Other guns were taking up the refrain in answer to the savage volley which had greeted them. His own six-gun was empty. Alamo when he saw another empty saddle, the horse running riderless now. This horse which, only a moment before, had carried Sadie beside him.

Something tightened in Alamo's throat, threatening to choke him. Off near the head of the gulch, he had a glimpse of a man on horseback, riding wildly. A small man, with pock-marked face, Pinto Phillips.

Once again, Pinto was the only one escaping. They had been certain that they could not be reached in this ambush, and when the thing had appened, it had been a trap. Pinto had been quick to see that their position was becoming untenable, had left his men to hold the fort while he looked after his own skin.

Under any other circumstances, Alamo would have followed him. Failure to do so now would likely mean a bigger, deadlier trap farther along the way.

But that did not matter now. Something like a chunk of ice was where his heart had been. He pulled his snorting cayuse back, and then he saw her, lying in a little huddled heap, unmoving. Alamo was off and beside her, and he saw the blood almost as he reached her.

Her face was pale, streaked with mud. A face which looked younger, now, than he had ever remembered seeing it. But she was still alive.

Presently he had her in his arms, and was on his horse again. With the danger past, the herd had been straightened out, the wagons were coming across. Alamo rode, his face stony. Cherry took her from him at the wagon, and Alamo left her there. His one question was short, bitter.

"Why did you let her go?"

"Did you," Cherry asked, "ever try to stop her?"

13

IT HAD been a costly crossing. Four men dead, three others wounded, though not seriously, besides Sadie. Another two hundred head of cattle lost.

Cherry's report the next morning, was strange: the wound was not a bad one—or it did not look so. She had dressed it, stopping the bleeding. But Sadie had not recovered consciousness. That was the strange part of it. There might be some other injury, one which did not show. Her eyes were a little accusing as she looked at Alamo.

His own were hooded again, veiled to the world. He looked at her, voicing a silent question. Cherry nodded. "So far as her wound is concerned, traveling won't hurt it," she said. "I don't know that waiting here would help any."

Alamo entered the wagon, staring down for a long moment at the still face on the pilow. Then he pushed back the flap. Cherry's voice was tight.

"There's something she needs more than medicine—when she wakes up," she said. "Something I can't give her."

If Alamo understood, he gave no sign. Cherry regarded him with won-

der. This was not the man that she had known in the old days, the man who had gone away to war. This was a stranger who had returned. Men had said of him that he was hard, capable. That nothing, not even the Yankees, had been able to stop him for long, that nothing could stop him. If anyone could get the herd through to Missouri, he was the man.

That she believed, now, and somehow it frightened her. Not the prospect of reaching their destination, come hell or high water, but the sort of man who would take them there.

Four men would sleep here, on the shores of the Red. Two hundred yards away, in another common grave, four others who had slain them would wait as well for judgment day. There were wild flowers on both new mounds. Tom Dunning had picked those for his comrades. And Ross Martin, who had watched him do it, had hesitated and then plucked a few for the other. His face wore a look a little shepish, a little defiant.

"It's all they'll ever get—till nature takes care of it," he said apologetically. "And I know they sure don't deserve 'em. But mebby they've got mothers—or sisters, or sweethearts, waitin' somewhere—they're all right young lookin'. Folks back home likely had high hopes of 'em. It was them I was sort of thinkin' about."

That was a simple sort of tribute to the good which lay somewhere in most men. There were tears stinging Cherry's eyes as she watched and listened to Martin, and most of the crew, gathered about, seemed to feel about as she did. Only Alamo rode off without a change in a face grown harsher since the day before. His voice sounded unnaturally so as he waved an arm.

"Get the herd to moving!"

THEY WERE across the Red, which meant that anything could happen now, at any time. Not that he expected much trouble for a few more days. But trouble, as on the previous day, had a habit of pouncing when you least expected it. Alamo circled his own horse ahead of the herd, up to where the wagons were moving.

"Stick closer to the herd from now on, Diamond," he instructed. "Even where you can see a long way."

Diamond, joggling comfortably on his own seat, nodded. He too, knew that apparently empty ground could sprout paint-bedaubed warriors like a sudden crop of dragon's teeth.

Alamo himself, having issued the warning, rode on ahead, eyes sweeping the horizon. This was a land where men could hide easily, could lurk close at hand. He looked slowly in a circle, and saw nothing suspicious. And was turning his horse back when a faint gleam caught his eye where none should have been.

He sat motionless, watching. It did not come again. But it could have been sunlight glinting on a gun-barrel incautiously moved. There was something there—something which blended well with its surroundings, but was not of them. An Indian.

No renegade this time, he guessed. And if there was one Indian, with a rifle, there might be a hundred of them close enough to eye his every movement. The fact that there was an Indian with a rifle, keeping so scrupulously out of sight, was sure proof that they were up to no good.

Alamo circled back, passing the word to Ely, to Rock and to Martin. The unpredictable thing about Indians was that they might watch you for days or weeks before attacking. Or they'd pounce fast. The fact that many tribes ranged the Nations, mostly distrustful of one another, argued for speed. Delay could mean that others would be eager for a prize.

Here too, the hordes of the buffalo had ranged a few years back, a brown flood which it had seemed could have no end. Now they were suddenly little more than a memory. Indians, with that memory, would eagerly accept beef as a substitute. Particularly when vengeance could be had at the same time.

Nothing happened that day, not even to Sadie. She seemed to be asleep, but she did not waken. Cherry was plainly anxious. There were new lines gathering between Alamo's eyes as he ate his supper, then posted a double watch for the first part of the night. Men on both watches saw him riding. Whether he slept a bit between times, they had no way of being sure.

The tension was beginning to mount again, following that costly crossing of the Red. Compared to some drives, this had been easy, up to now. No picnic, but no real test of what men were made of. Now those who had forgotten were remembering the other herds, the hopeful men who had set out with them. And the scattered, broken remnants who had returned.

The sky flamed across the east. By noon, there was a familiar feel in the air. By mid-afternoon cattle and men alike were tense, as storm clouds rolled up. The herd was ripe for stampede, and every man was trail-wise enough by now to know it.

Alamo circled back, close to the wagons. Cherry shook her head at him. He swung away, and it was Tom Dunning, riding again, who called his attention to it. The boy's voice was even, but thin with strain.

"I've been watchin' something, off there," he said, and pointed to the east. "Thought at first it might be a wolf—but I don't reckon that's likely."

Following his arm, Alamo presently made it out—it took a good pair of eyes to spot it, close as it was. Indians knew how to hide themselves, even where there semed to be no cover.

"Pass the word along," he instructed. "The storm 'll be here inside of half an hour. When I give the word, everybody be ready to stampede the herd—straight east!"

DIAMOND WAS dropping back, to be behind the herd. The men were quietly shifting to new stations, to be ready for the move. The storm was rolling up fast, thunder beginning to mutter.

It wouldn't do to wait too long—not until some wily savage sensed the maneuver. Alamo waved his hat above his head, his lungs screeched the rebel yell. Other throats took it up. Blankets were shaken out, flapping monstrously in the wind.

Alamo had given orders against any shooting to aid in starting the cattle. Shots would help, but he wanted every gun full loaded and ready. And the herd was ready for a chance to run, eager for it.

The storm, for once, was playing along with them. Rain commenced to spill, thunder crashed overhead at almost the same moment. The big bunch wavered for a few breaths, while hoarse bawls issued from throats and some of them were on the run. The others hesitated, unsure of the push crowding at them. Then they broke, and lined out—east.

Now the herd was in full stampede. Nothing to do but to let them run, to see what happened next—to go gague how well he had guessed.

Alamo's eyes, roving fast, saw the surprised Indians break out from their covert, ponies materialize where men who were uninstructed would have sworn no horse could be hidden. Full three score of them, riding for their lives now as the stampede swooped at them. That time, thanks to the sharp eyesight of Dunning, white man's strategy had been best .

One swift, devastating attack would have been enough to give the Indians all the advantage. Now they were the ones caught. Some of them, riding hard, doing their best to turn the vanguard of the moving herd, were going to make it to the edge, and safety. By now, Alamo was satisfied that there were no others around.

"After them" he ordered, and set the example. These, he guessed, would be Choctaws. With a better look he was certain of it.

Now their one thought was of

escape. For most of their number, it was out of the question. Fleet though an Indian cayuse might be, tireless for stamina, nothing could resist the onslaught of six thousand great horned beasts drunk with their own fears. They ran stiff-legged, the thunder of hooves shaking the earth like a mighty drum. A red glaze held their eyes. Some fell and bawled and choked to silence, while the mass continued to pour across them. Horses caught in the crush stumbled and went down helpless now among those long, rapier-like horns which tossed and tore, which nothing less than other great horned beasts could endure in such a press. Men screamed and fell and were silent too, while the vast hoofed juggernaut rolled like a river.

Less than a dozen of the original war party had won free of the loop flung by the great herd. All those who worked their way out at all, did so on the north. And there was no safety there. Alamo and half of his crew were coming, grimly determined to hunt them down. This was no matter of choice, but of survival.

Alamo had fought for a lost cause himself; he had tasted the bitterness of defeat. In him there was a sympathy for the underdog, whoever he was wherever he might be. The Indian, in the changing scheme of things, was the underdog. He was fighting a cause already lost, clinging to his few remaining outposts with a valor born of desperation.

Alamo knew that, and respected him for it. But war is war. These men had intended to strike them without warning, to wipe them out to the last man—and woman. His with luck, had been the better generalship, here where numbers and natural conditions favored the Indian.

The rain fell steadily. It had set out as a shower, but after the thunder had muttered away, the rain kept on falling. It was still coming down as darkness overtook them, and they turned back. But by then, the last of the stragglers had been overtaken as well. And by that simple difference might hinge success or failure in this drive.

No light even of a cook-fire, burned when they finally reached the camp. There was no massed herd out here tonight, bedded down, being watchfully swung to. It would mean a day or two so spent in rounding them up again, another day in getting them back on the trail. But it had been work well bartered for today; not a man had been lost of the drovers.

There was still hot coffee in the pot. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. Almo helped himself to a tin cup of the black, bitter brew, without sugar. He drank it, looking toward the dark outlines of the wagons. But no sound came from there and he took his blanket, found a spot under the wagon, and rolled in it, dog-tired enough to sleep despite the dank discomfort.

14

A SHOT IN blackness brought him awake. It was followed by a yell, and Alamo rolled out, tugging on his wet boots. He ran, a little confused, for while there was a smell of dawn the faint crimson forerunner of it spilling across the east, it was still dark here, and he was bemused by sleep.

It was Rock who jerked out the news. Having been a foreman over the years, sense of responsibility was strong in him. He had wakened and gone out to have a look at the remuda, more from old instinct than in the expectation of finding anything wrong.

But something had been wrong. He explained shortly.

"I saw somebody skulkin'. Then I made out what it was. Couple of Injuns, stealin' hosses for theirse'ves. One was limpin' bad, the other wan't too good. I took a shot but they got away."

Alamo lost no time, but it took a while to saddle and ride in pursuit, Rock and now Martin with him.

Rock's alertness had frustrated an attemp to get away with the whole remuda, as would have happened in another few minutes.

But a couple of men had somehow managed to survive the stampede. Injured they had chosen the boldest course, working back to the camp, hoping to steal every horse, which would not only insure their escape but would leave the big drive hopelessly stranded here in hostile territory.

Now they were fleeing for their lives. And, as with those of the night before, the train's safety demanded that the Indians be hunted down.

It would be a long chance Alamo saw, as the sun came slanting across the sodden earth. Both men had suffered. Both were without weapons. But they had been lucky enough to get good horses, and they were born riders. For the next hour, the distance between, beyond rifle-shot, held about even.

Then the gap began to narrow a little—very slowly. Pursued and pursurers alike had to slow now with sobbing horses nearly spent. Plodding where a bit of running could have settled it, either way.

It was nearly mid-day before the three white men were able finally to turn back. Their horses had been run ragged, and only the reaching power of rifles had decided the chase in their favor.

Rock looked around, a little uneasily. They were alone in a vast and empty world. Or it looked empty.

"Hope it is," he sighed. "If anybody was to jump us now, we'd be plumb out of luck."

There was no exaggeration there, Alamo knew. Not with their horses so nearly spent. The rest of the crew of course, had not followed them. They would be busy with gathering the herd.

It was late afternoon when they sighted the wagons again, still where they had ben in the dawn. Alamo was a little surprised. He had expected them to be miles beyond. The edge of the herd could be seen now on the horizon, but far away.

THERE WAS an air of emptiness about the wagons as they approached. Only Diamond was there, busy with his usual stolidity above his cook fire. Whatever went on, men had to eat. He looked up as they neared, went back to his work. Rock voiced the question.

"Where is everybody?"

Diamond gestured to the east.

"Gathrin' the dogies," he grunted.

Alamo felt a new sense of alarm, which he could not place. He rode to the wagon, lifted the rear flap and looked in. His throat felt tight as he saw the emptiness. He looked at Diamond, who had turned to meet his gaze.

"Where are they?" he asked.

Diamond gestured.

"Cherry, she—she rode off with the boys, a spell ago," he muttered.

"Cherry! But—but Sadie?"

The cook's face was blank to match his own. Silently he pointed and seeing it, the last of the color drained out of Alamo's. The blood around his heart seemed to be draining away as well.

It was a new, long but narrow mound, sod-topped, very fresh, toward which Diamond pointed.

Weariness gripped him, there was a bitter taste in his mouth. The dregs of it seemed to have settled again, an icy, unchanging lump, in his stomach.

No need to ask questions. The grave itself was answer enough. And what was there to say—what was there that he could say, or that anyone else could say? This was his trail—Disaster Trail; it was living up to its name.

He went across, and stood beside the mound for a minute, and Diamond, watching him, could only guess at what thoughts might be passing through his mind. Outwardly, save for the weariness, there was no change in that now bleak face. A handful of prairie flowers had been plucked and placed here, and they

were still fresh and unwilted.

Alamo looked down at them. *She was deep in Texas,* he thought, and then he turned and gestured. This was alien land, not even friendly Texas soil. Missouri still lay ahead. The wagons had to move.

It was amazing how quickly the moisture could be sucked out of the earth by a hungry sun, swept away by the winds which harped in unending minor key. That day there had been mud. The next day the ground was dry in the morning. By mid-afternoon dust was riding again.

And now the days grew as dry as they had been wet not long before. That one last storm had set its seal on the turn of the weather. The sun seemed to have acquired a new intensity, and there was an added worry to beset the crew—water. Water to drink, for them, and, more than all, for the great herd which moved in an unending stream across the face of nature.

If it had been difficult before to go quietly with such a drive, now it was out of the question with the rising dust-cloud above. A signal which was certain to bring more enemies down upon them.

But for a few days they traveled unmolested. It was a beautiful land, despite its harsh bitterness.

WHEN trouble did come, it was in typical Indian fashion—an attack just before the dawn. It was well planned; the two men riding night watch never knew what struck them. The big herd was scarcely disturbed at all.

No sound came back to the wagons by way of warning. But Diamond was astir, gathering a little of extra wood, and he an old pupil in this sort of school. Instinct as much as anything else warned him. He moved casually and roused Alamo with a whisper, and every man was awake when the shadows converged on them.

The rifles of the defenders moved a red swath in that first wild rush, checking it. It was reformed again, rolled at them in a chorus more terrible even than the wild rebel yell. But six-guns were deadly at close quarters, and the wave faltered, broke, receded again. Gray dawn dispelled the shadows to a sterner reality.

Alamo had taken such precautions as were possible each night, and this had been a good camp ground in one respect. Here was an arroyo, gashed in the now flinty-seeming earth, deep, steep-sided, with a scattering cover of brush through it. Sheer banks rose on either side and at the upper end, and the horses had been driven in here the evening before, the wagons halted at the mouth.

So long as they kept the remuda, they could move. If the horses were lost, theirs would be a hopeless position.

Now the horses were safe. But the great weakness to this position was that there was no water near the arroyo. Next to that, they were alone in an unfriendly land. With no one to look for help. The latter was heaviest in Alamo's mind as daylight gave him a better picture.

They had been lucky enough to be ready, had beaten off the first attacks. But there were a hundred painted warriors surrounding them now, withdrawn a little, holding a palaver. Comanches, as Diamond grumbled beneath his breath. Able fighters, and more than eager for the fray.

"Their biggest trouble is a way of thinkin', same as their grandpaws thunk," Daimond sighed. "Which is lucky for us. If they'd hit doorin' the day, when we was all stretched out, they'd have had us in a plumb bad fix. But they like to surprise you just when you should be sleepin' heaviest. This way, we can last long enough to make them pay for our hair."

THAT WAS the key, Alamo knew —the only key which might unlock a door for them. Courage, with Indians is not predicated, on recklessness nor foolishness. If the cost became too great, it was better sense to withdraw and leave the other side alone, than to pay too much for vic-

tory in the end. White men had observed this trait and called it cowardice; Alamo knew that it was nothing of the sort.

Now it might work again. They had made a good beginning. If they could hold out, long enough to make the price too high, they might cause the others to withdraw. That would mostly hinge on their effectiveness in the next hour or so.

With the rim of the gulch for cover, they could fight back in good shape. Now the attack came again, sweeping at them, like a turning wheel—an endless turning wheel around them, which contracted a little as it moved, spewing arrows, with a few blasting guns and the accompaniment of endless shouts. Off in the distance, the herd, now hungrily astir, raised their heads in mild interest, went back to grazing.

Rifles thundered, the penned-up cayuses trembled in terror. More of the Indian ponies ran riderless. The attack took on a new tempo, swept in closer, individuals leaving the ring to swoop at them. A few reached the rim, two or three leaped down among them. But the six-guns wrought deadly havoc at close quarters, the wheel wobbled, split, and drew back again.

So far, the cattlemen's loss had been three men wounded, none seriously. But again the attack was reforming, and their own dead and wounded, at this stage, only goaded the Indians to greater fury.

Cherry crouched beside Alamo, loading guns. Rolla Ely was on her other side. Her face had lost its strained look of the first moments.

"Promise me that—that if they get the upper hand, one of you will save a shot for me," she said.

Ely glanced at her, his own face troubled.

"Yeah," he agreed briefly. "I hope to tarnation it won't come to that." Both of them looked inquiringly toward Alamo, but he had no reassurance to give them. Something like silence had fallen, but the Indians were gathering now, at some distance in all directions, in four groups. Alamo's voice carried clearly.

"This'll be the bad one," he warned. "We've got to stop them, boys."

It would be so much better if they could resort to a ruse—some unexpected manouver to throw the enemy into consternation. But there was little enough chance for that here, and he could think of nothing—certainly not in time, for now they were coming at them again.

This time it was a four-pronged attack, each group charging straight for them, making more difficult targets, determined to break through. Feathers flaunting in the wind, the twang of bows smothered in the sharper fire of guns. Men were riding magnificently, toppling from their horses in the face of that relentless gun-fire. But the attack came on.

Two of the four lines wavered, broke. The other two were doing better. One reached the brink of the arroyo, painted warriors came spilling over and in. Now it was close quarters, hand to hand. Such fighting as Alamo had seen a few times before.

EXHILERATION gripped him, a lifting of the mood which had been upon him almost since the crossing of the Red. Here was release from the intangibles which you could not fight against. Here was something to come to grips with, not counting the cost, since survival itself was the prize, and there was no choice in the matter.

His rifle was long since empty, and now both six-guns were empty as well. A big Indian was leaping at Rolla Ely, who was down on his back. A war axe raised for the kill, glittering in its arc. Alamo leaped, and his revolver barrel smashed a bloody furrow down on the warrior's scalp. The axe-man collapsed almost on top of Ely.

Alamo snatched up the dropped war axe, charged into a group of Indians who had materialized out of nowhere. He was a fearsome spectacle,

a gory figure of glory, a fighting machine. It seemed to Cherry, watching spellbound for a moment, that here at long last she saw him in his natural element, doing the thing he gloried in.

There was terror in him—for others. The group felt it, fell back in panic as he came raging on. One tried to scramble back up the steep bank, and Alamo caught him, dragged him back. The war axe swung again. Two more were up to the top and running. Alamo leaped up it as though it had been a mound, was after them.

Now the Indians who had gotten as far as the arroyo were all in headlong retreat. Those farther did not wait for them. This was too costly, and here was a fighter that bullets or arrows alike seemed useless against. Alamo caught one of the runners. He ran a few steps more and flung his axe and dropped the other. The battle ground was strewn with them.

Diamond wiped his sweating face and surveyed the carnage philosphically.

"Word of this'll spread," he opioned. "I doubt if ary other redskin'll get in our way across the Nations."

15

CHERRY DID not hear the cook's remark. No such thought came to her. Here was something close to a miracle, a still superior force in full retreat. But she thought that she understood why. All of them had put up a good fight. But it was Alamo who had turned the tide, inspiring terror, in that mad final burst of fury.

His face had lost its flush now, settled back to its habitual stoniness—a look which had grown on it since the start of the drive, particulalry after they had entered the Nations. He was covered with blood from a dozen small wounds, yet none of them amounted to much. Disregarding them, he was busy taking stock of their own losses—small enough by comparison, yet costly when checked against their already inadequate force.

Three men dead. One other seriously wounded. Most of them with at least a momento or two to show for the fray. Only just above two dozen men remaining now, to move the big herd—only two dozen, for the worse fights which would inevitably await at trail's end.

Little was said as wounds were patched, their dead buried. They ate, and moved to set the herd in motion again. It was near noon now, but no one wanted to pass another night or the reamiander of the day near that spot.

Alamo looked up, to find Cherry riding beside him. One of the wounded men was driving her wagon, he saw, recuperating for a day or so. He forced a smile, which seemed strange to his face. It was like opening a long unused door, which creaked at the effort.

"We're still alive," he said.

Cherry nodded, looking at him directly.

"Yes—thanks to you," she said, "I'm beginning to see, Alamo, why you're such a tradition all across the southwest—why you're almost legendary."

Alamo colored like a schoolboy.

"Aw-w, now, Cherry," he protested. "I didn't do no more'n anybody else—"

"It was what you did when everything hung in the balance that turned the trick," Cherry said calmly. "They had us where they could have finished us off, just like that—but the way you stormed among them they lost all stomach for any more of it." Her eyes were calmly appraispraising as she looked at him.

"That was fine, Alamo—I know that it's all that saved us. But, in case there's more trouble—you must not be too reckless, even if you do want to die."

Alamo had been looking down at his saddle-horn as though it was something new and strange. He

raised his gaze now, startled.

"We still have need of you," she added.

SILENCE fell between them for a while. He could not refute her argument, though her discerning seemed a little uncanny. Cherry spoke again.

"Wouldn't it be better if you'd just tell me all about it, Alamo?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, a little hoarsely.

"You know what I mean. About Sadie. It's eating on you, Alamo—wouldn't it be better to talk about it?"

He was silent a while again, but she knew that he was considering it. She prodded a little.

"You introduced her as your wife, Alamo—before all of us. I don't believe that she'd have claimed to be—not if you hadn't said so. She never told me anything about it—though we got to be good friends. But you can't keep too much bitterness corked up inside of you, Alamo. It's corroding you. How did you ever happen to marry her in the first place?"

Flies buzzed about their horses. Little, tormenting black flies, which were aggravating the cattle, causing small incipient stampedes which might easily run into one big one. Alamo did not seem to notice them.

"I suppose you've a right to know," he agreed finally. "Though I've never talked to anyone else about it—ever."

Cherry was silent, and he went on.

"It was about three years ago. I was a captain then, and we were on the border— Country that didn't really belong to either side, is what I mean. It was risky business for everybody."

"I can understand that," Cherry agreed quietly.

"I didn't mind that part of it," Alamo went on. "In fact, I guess, I rather liked it. I was still young enough to dream, in those days—and sure that the south would win, in the end. And then—one day—I met Sadie."

He slapped with sudden viciousness at a fly, went on.

"You know how pretty she is. Well—she was a Yankee, as I knew well enough, and I hated Yankees. But she was prettier than ever—and in trouble. I was sorry for her."

"How in trouble?" Cherry asked.

Alamo spoke between his teeth.

"She told me that she had a baby—and that she was sick, dying. Her folks were off in another state, and they were pretty stern. But when she was dead, she wanted to be able to send the baby back to them, so that it wouldn't die. And she said that she couldn't do that if it didn't have a name. They'd let it die before they'd take it, that way."

Cherry shivered. Somehow she could picture what his words conjured up. Here was trouble presenting another face—but always, it seemed, a grim one.

"That's what she told me," Alamo said. "She asked me to marry her, so that the poor little brat could have an honest name and her folks would remember her kindly. She showed it to me—a little girl, mighty pretty, but awful thin. She made me believe that she'd be dead in a few days, and so I—I was soft-headed, then. I helped her out. I married her."

Cherry's eyes were shining.

"Soft-hearted is the word, Alamo."

He shook his head violently. His voice was harsh again.

"Soft-headed," he growled. "All she did was to make a fool of me. I found out, soon enough, that she was not dying—nor likely to. And that the baby didn't belong to her; she'd just used it to trick me into makin' a fool of myself."

Cherry's eyes widened. This was a turn which she somehow had not expected.

"But—but she must have had a good reason, Alamo. For wanting to marry you. Did you stop to think of that?"

"Did I?" His laugh was bitter.

"Sure, she had a good reason—and I wasn't long in findin' out what it was. Her brother was a captain, too—a Yankee captain. More than that, he was one of the damndest slippery fellows we ever had to deal with. The Confederacy wanted him—mighty bad. And it seems that we had him, right then—he'd been caught under another name, and not in uniform. Which meant, of course, that if we found out who he was, he'd face a firing squad."

Cherry scarcely breathed. The recital continued.

"She'd known that he'd soon be found out. Which he was, just about then. And then I found out why she'd been so anxious to marry me. She admitted it all—that she'd done it just to save her Yankee brother. I was in charge, then. She said that she didn't believe I was the sort who'd let my own brother-in-law be killed."

Again there was silence between them. A breeze blew the flies away, but the lines of tormnt between his eyes were deep and sharp.

"What did you do?" Chrry asked finally.

"Do? What could I do? Like I say, I was a soft-headed fool, in those days—and I suppose he was my brother-in-law. If I'd taken action, the way I was supposed to do, as an officer, he'd have been shot that same day. I waited, not quite decided, but not takin' the action I should have, and that night he escaped.

"You shouldn't blame yourself too much for that," Cherry said.

"Shouldn't I? Even if my best friend was killed, while he did it?"

Now some of the implacable bitterness in him was understandable. And it was also easier to understand why Sadie had kept so scrupulously silent concerning their past.

"What about her?" Cherry asked finally.

"I rode away—hopin' never to see her again," Alamo said shortly. "I never did—until here on the trail."

"Did it ever occur to you, Alamo," she asked. "That she might have had another, deeper reason than she ever told you—for marrying you in the first place?"

Alamo looked at her, his eyes a little startled. Then, seeing the misery in them, Cherry was almost sorry. But now, silent once more, Alamo had swung his horse short about, was riding toward the herd.

16

THEY HAD crossed the Canadian and the Arkansas. Most of the Nations lay behind them, Missouri itself was close up ahead; they had come to the real gate of trouble.

Daimond had been an apt prophet. That bloody battle which the Comanches had fought and given up as too costly a job had been the last sign of Indian trouble. Apparently the word had spread. Certainly it was that, day after day, there had been nothing worse than the dust, the heat, the endless myriads of insects, the lack of water, or good water when any was found—the steadily declining stock of provisions, small stampede, and all the rest which was every-day routine on the trail.

Most of that lay behind them now. Their wounded had all recovered, and those of the original force who were left were in good fighting trim. Ready for showdown. This was the land where disaster really hit the men of Texas who dared venture so far from home.

They were beginning, now, to see increasing signs of it. Two days back, they had come upon the remnants of an outfit—tire irons, the iron running gear of two wagons, roasted in the flames of their own burning, cold now and twisted under the sun. There had been other signs there too, even less plasant to look upon.

Today they had met a man who crawled in the grass, with a look of terror deep-seated in his blood-shot

eyes. He crawled because he was afoot and because he was afraid, but most of all because he dared not stand upright and show himself in any case, nor could he if he dared. The soles of both feet had been burned and left to fester.

He was in Cherry's wagon now, cleaned, his wounded feet treated, fed, but still with that look of a hunted animal.

There had been two score of them, he said, with a big herd. They too, had had the luck—call it good or bad as you liked—to get this far. They had been fighting men.

He of the forty was left alive. He had been tortured, for no good reason. The trail boss, owner of the herd, had been suspected of having a cache of gold along as well, though why any man out of Texas would be suspected of having gold was a thing beyond sane comprehension.

That had been the cause—or the excuse. Now one man was left. Sleeping uneasily, muscles twitching, jerking. Whimpering in his throat.

Alamo rode, eyes on the herd, or on the wagons, his eyes bleak. He'd been a fool to bring them up here, knowing how it was. A weak fool, once again, to yield to the entreaties of a woman. Here was disaster waiting for them, and death. And worst of all, Cherry was with them.

It was too late to turn back.

THERE WAS a rounded knoll, a hill which topped the monotony spread round about it. Diamond had driven near its base. Cherry, riding alone now in her wagon, had chosen instead to drive to the crest of it, had halted there to look about. The sun showed the stained and torn canvas in all its bleakness.

It was hardly a sensible thing to do. The hilltop was visible across the miles, the wagon on it clear to be seen. Alamo, looking toward it from nearly a mile away, saw how it was outlined there. He caught a gleam, as though Cherry had paused to look at herself in her little mirror, and it in turn had caught the sun.

Not sensible, in a hostile land. Still, what difference did it make, with the dust of the herd like a pillar of cloud, off a little at the side? But no protection in that cloud. It was no wonder that she liked to get off there, up where there was a bit of breeze and the air was clear for a while. Now the wagon was moving on again, following where Diamond and the chuck wagon led.

The cook had a hard time, these days. It was a test of genius to serve up anything eatable, and to make it palatable to tongues which had known scant variety for weeks was even harder. Diamond occasionally managed it.

He had varied his stews from beef, with jackrabbit, prairie chicken, sage hens and antelope. The cowboys had aided in securing the provisions. He had found roots which took the place of vegetables. He had done his best, but he was scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Now Rolla Ely had swung over and was riding alongside Cherry's wagon again, the two of them laughing and talking. Alamo watched with resigned eyes. Once, long ago, he'd had dreams—when he was young enough and fool enough to dream. Now he knew better. Maybe, seeing how she smiled at Ely and laughed with him, seeing the devotion which had been so dog-like in Rolla since the first day of the drive, it was better so.

Remembering that mound, lonely in the limitless land, he knew that it would be better for him once the end had come. That would settle things. But he owed it to Cherry, to Rolla Ely, to the others who had followed him to this land to do the best he could. To put up a good fight.

Tom Dunning was as well as ever. He bore a criss-cross pattern of scars on his leg, but the leg did not trouble him, and his eyes were alight with anticipation of what was still to come. Love of life and the hope of it were something which did not easily down; common sense might tell you one

thing, but hope took no such answer.

IT WAS time to stop. Diamond had already found a place and was starting his fire. There would be another hour of daylight, for the days had grown long. But when night came down, there would be no moon. An empty land—but how long would it continue empty in the dark? This night? Another one? The odds were all against it.

Diamond had outdone himself tonight, as though this was a sort of festive occasion, this nearing the end of the trail—or as though he had a feeling that they had better eat and drink while they could, for tomorrow might be too late. Alamo wondered if the latter had been in his mind. There was a sort of wintry humor in the cook's eyes as he watched them eat, but he offered no explanation.

It was Rolla Ely's turn to ride night guard for the first half of the night—Ely and three others, for now the watch was doubled again. They saddled up and faded into the closing dusk, and the sparks from the cook fire began to fade. Alamo's patience waxed thin.

"We're close to Missouri," he said. "And by that same token, close to show-down—of one sort or another."

"I know," Cherry agreed. She had come to sit on the wagon tongue beside him, and the reflected gleam of the dying fire made an elfin fantasy of her hair, brought out the soft vivid color of lips and cheeks. Her eyes seemed to look into the flames and beyond, as if there she might read the answer to a riddle.

"And, whatever happens, Alamo—you've done a grand job," she added. "I want you to know that I appreciate it."

"Everybody has worked hard," he said. "There hasn't been a quitter among them. I'd hate for them to get this far—and all for nothing, or worse than that."

"I know," Cherry agreed. She did not lift her eyes from the fire. "What you want to know is what we're going to do, now. You've been very patient, Alamo."

He waited, and presently she spoke again.

"In the morning," she said. "I'll tell you. All of you. I—I think my plan will work."

17

ALAMO LAY on his blanket, but sleep did not come. He tossed the blanket aside and stood up. Old habit dictated that he catch up a horse and circle the herd, but instead he turned and set out on foot; he felt like walking. Off a quarter of a mile was a dark blot, where a few trees clustered about a big rock. It was partly instinct which led him that way. If there were any prowlers spying on the camp, they would find that a likely course.

He neared the small grove, and nothing stirred, no false sound was on the night. Long silence was a heritage of the land. Silence, lonliness, and emptiness. The things which had filled his life.

He paused, and then he heard it—a soft voice from the far side of the grove. His scalp prickled, for he knew that voice. It was Cherry's.

What was she doing, talking to some one out here, at this hour? Rolla Ely? That could be, of course. But why go to all this trouble for a secret meeting, when they could talk undisturbed at almost any time they chose, and without exciting suspicion?

It was a man's voice which answered, faintly familiar, yet not quite so. Not Ely's; nor did it belong to anyone of the crew. Alamo was closer, now, moving around the edge of the trees, careful to make no noise. He had no qualms about evesdropping in such a situation. Though he was badly puzzled that Cherry should be involved in any such meeting.

He could hear words, now—but only enough to distinguish about half of them; not enough to make sense. He started to move nearer, and the voices stopped, and he froze.

But they had not heard him, nor been alarmed. They were separating, Cherry turning to ride back to the wagons, the other man fading into the night in the opposite direction. He had come just too late to really learn anything.

She would explain everything in the morning, of course. But he could not put down the new unease which was in him, the new suspicions festering in his mind.

MORNING allayed his suspicions somewhat. The dark always had a way of making black imaginings worse, of distorting a sane mind. By daylight he was able to cast it aside. Cherry was more cheerful looking than he had seen her since they had left the Red. There was added color in her cheeks, a sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

She called himself and Ely, once they had their breakfasts stacked on tin plates, and they went a little aside with her. Now she was going to tell them at long last. Alamo wondered if she would tell also about that meeting last night. If she did, he'd know definitely that there was no reason to distrust her.

"Alamo, you reminded me last night that we're getting close to Missouri," she said abruptly. "And I promised both of you, before we ever started on this trip, that I had a plan in mind which I thought would insure us getting safely through to market. I know you'be been wondering, all along, why I never told either of you, who are most concerned. It's been good of you to take me on faith."

Rolla Ely's face lighted a little.

"Shucks, Cherry," he protested. "We've known you had a good reason, and that was enough for us."

Speak for yourself, Ely, Alamo thought, but he said nothing aloud. Cherry went on.

"You're going to have to trust me just a little longer—if you will. I'm more certain than ever that we're going to get through all right. But I think that our chances will be better if you're willing to do as I say, on faith, and without knowing too much about it. Maybe that sounds funny, but that's the way it seems best to me. I think you'll understand, and approve, before the week is out."

She looked at both of them now, a little challengingly, red lips curving in a provocative smile. Alamo's face was unchanging. His suspicions of the night were back with added force, but there could be no profit in telling her what he knew, not when she did not choose to tell. If she wanted to deceive them, she could still find the way to do it.

Ely had swallowed the bait without a doubt. "Sure, Cherry," he said. "Anything you say's all right. What do you want us to do?"

"It's fairly simple," she explained. "And I certainly appreciate the way you boys are willing to trust me. What I want, Rolla, is for us to divide the herd up today—since we each own a half of it, it won't be necessary to try and divide it by brand, or anything. Merely split it in two. You take your boys and your bunch and go on ahead. We'll wait here until along in the afternoon, then follow."

Puzzlement was on Ely's face now. In some circumstances, there could be merit in two herds, and he could see that. But here, where their every movement was certain to be known, where trouble was sure to lie athwart their trail, it looked dangerously like folly to split their forces in two. That would only make it easier for their enemies.

There was puzzlement, but still no doubt. Ely hesitated a moment, nodded.

"Why, sure, Cherry, if that's a part of the idea," he agreed. "We'll do it."

Cherry's voice, for the first time, sounded a little strained, her voice a little tremulous. She laid her hand on Ely's arm for a moment.

"That's a part of it," she said. "I—I hope that everything works out all right. I think it will."

She looked at him now, for the first time. "What do you think of it, Alamo?"

"It's your scheme," he said shortly. "I hope it works. Anyway, it's our only chance."

Her smile brightened a little.

"It's awfully good of you—both of you," she said. "You're letting your breakfast get cold, Alamo."

IT WAS Ely who explained the new plan to the crew, as they were finishing their breakfast. Alamo saw the blank looks on their faces as they waited for more, for the reason

for all this. When it was not forthcoming, he saw the mounting suspicion take the place of blankness. There was something funny here, something sinister—to divide their forces, just when a united front was most of all necessary.

They looked at Alamo, and when he merely gave the order to split the herd in half, he could see the thoughts passing through their minds. But they were all caught in the same trap, and they knew it as well as he did. It would take a miracle to get them through in safety, and if there was to be no miracle they were lost already.

The scanty stock of supplies was divided, part being loaded into Cherry's wagon. Ely would take the chuck wagon, and his men would miss Diamond's cooking, particularly since Biscuits was no longer with them. But in any case it would not be for long. There was added grimness in that thought.

Diamond would ride a horse, between stops. Since the herd was already strung out of its own accord, it was easy enough to split it roughly, leaving the half to graze unmolested. Alamo and his own men, now down to a dozen, sat and watched the others draw slowly away, moving toward the horizon—going on to Missouri.

Cherry sat in the wagon and watched them too, then went inside as though she could not bear the sight. One of the men swore, and turned to eye the horizon in other directions with suspicion. He looked back at Alamo, and the bleakness in his face was not encouraging. The hope that had been with them only the evening before was gone out like a candle in the wind.

18

TWICE, while they loitered there, Cherry came out of the wagon and started toward Alamo. Twice she halted indecisively and turned back, and now there was something in her face which had not shown there before. As if, now that the thing was done, she felt qualms, but could not decide on a change.

Alamo watched her, his face wooden. He did not ride across to talk to her. A little after the sun had reached its zenith, he waved his arm, and the half-herd remaining—still a vast bunch—was urged into motion. A new leader had to be found, since the steer which had taken that place after the death of the other leader, was up ahead now, with Ely's T bunch.

Dust was still visible where the others moved, but they were out of sight. Riding hard, men could overtake them in an hour or so. But it was their job to move with these cattle, and, like them, probably to the slaughter, Alamo reflected—all alike as dumb beasts.

So far, there had been no sign of trouble, neither here nor up ahead. But now the weather was changing again. There was the threat of rain, and the oppressive, muggy heat of the afternoon was a good indication of storm.

It held off, however, until they made camp again and supper was out of the way. It was a silent meal, in contrast to the jollity which had prevailed the evening before. Men ate, eyeing the sky, the darkening horizon and one another, with anxious eyes. Alamo more than once caught Cherry looking off where the other herd had gone, with that same look in her eyes.

But she said nothing. No one did. But friends were somewhere up ahead—Texan men, neighbors of the long trail. The two outfits had gotten along remarkably well together.

Now the storm was building up. There was an itch of curiousity in Alamo as to how Ely might be fareing. He would have liked to prowl again tonight, even though his sleep had been brief and troubled the night before. To ride and see for himself. But the cattle, knowing now that they were divided, and with the storm at hand, were doubly restless. Every man would have his hands full here tonight.

The sudden dark was upon them as the black clouds rolled overhead and broke in a splashing welter of lightning and rain. For half an hour there was a continual crash as of heavy artillery, and only the fact that

the herd was bewildered kept it from breaking into a run. They huddled together, as if anxious to stampede but almost afraid to do so.

Rain lasted another hour. There would be no dust tomorrow. The air rolled fresh and sweet with its washing, the muggy heat had gone out of it. That was a relief, and Alamo was dog-tired now. He slept, and the men on watch reported no disturbance for the night.

There was encouragement in that. New hope again with the new day. They got under way, glad to be free of the choking dust. Two or three men were whistling—Dixie. Others took it up.

Midday, and the sun shone hot again. Now it looked down on what had been the bed-ground for the other herd the evening before. That was easy to tell, for a herd left its mark, which even rain could not readily wash away. But here were other signs of where the herd had bedded —ominous signs.

ALAMO, scouting ahead, sighted them and rode faster. Rock, coming along on point, saw and joined him. The wagon was behind the herd today.

For a long moment the two men sat their horses in silence, looking down. Here it was. All the suspicions, the fears of yesterday come true. Here was the end of the trail for half the men who had ridden up out of Texas, for those who had gone on ahead with Rolla Ely only the day before.

The washed-out ashes of the cook fire could still be seen. Sprawled partly in them was Lynch, who had been named as cook in the place of Biscuits. There were three bullet holes in his back.

Off a little way was Pitt, who had been a cheerful man and fast with a gun. A charge of buckshot had struck him, nearly blowing his head off from his shoulders.

The others were there—scattered about as they had died. And the herd was gone.

It had happened, of course, when the thunder storm had struck. That had afforded perfect cover for the attack, and the steady rumble of it had drowned all sound of the gunfire, so that, back at the other camp, they had heard no distant echoes of the slaughter.

For that was what it had been. A slaughter, men jumped suddenly and slain without a chance. Their postures showed that they had tried to put up a fight, but had had no chance. Alamo saw the look on Rock's face, and the old bitterness was stronger in him.

Others of their own crew were starting to come up now, taking a look. One or two swore, in strangely husky voices. Mostly they merely looked in a dreadful silence.

This was the sort of thing which had overtaken others on the trail. Almost everyone who had been brave enough, or foolish enough, to come up from Texas. Disaster.

Alamo dismounted, leaving his horse to stand. He started moving from dead man to dead man, looking more closely. There was no sign of Rolla Ely, so far. Off at some distance, however, were two or three dark blotches in the grass. Some men had been riding night-herd when death had overtaken them.

Rock had swung off that way, on horseback. He came back, reporting the names of the dead. Ely was not among them.

Hope had almost died in Alamo, that he might find even one man alive. Now he knelt down suddenly. Here was Ira Knapp, and he moaned feebly, calling for water. One man who had been left for dead—as was easily understandable.

He had not less than three bullet holes in him. Most of the life had run out of him. It would all be drained before the day was done. But they brought water and did what they could, and presently he drank a little, choking, and managed to raise his head at sight of friends.

"They jumped us—just at dark," he whispered. "Didn't give us a chance. Must have been fifty of 'em —at least. One was Pinto. Another feller had black hair—with a streak of white runnin' down the middle."

The same old story. Only here was a new and ironic twist. A new variation of the double-cross. Alamo could

not doubt it any longer. These men had been murdered, their half of the herd taken. But though the force was ample to swoop down upon them and repeat, though they had been amply close, and though the outlaws could not have failed to know of them, nothing had happened to the southern half of the herd.

Rolla Ely, who loved Cherry, had been sent ahead with his men to die—sent as a sacrificial offering. The mockery of it made a laugh rasp deep in Alamo's throat. He choked on it, and clamped his lips tightly. Here was nothing to laugh about!

"We didn't—have a chance," Knapp repeated. He sighed, and closed his eyes.

Rock was looking about, nodding his head, his lips moving a little. He turned a puzzled face toward Alamo.

"Twelve," he said. "But Ely ain't among 'em."

IT WAS true. Alamo hadn't thought of that before, shocked as he had been by it all. Twelve dead men. Eleven had ridden with Rolla Ely, twelve in all. But Rolla Ely was not here.

He started again, looking more carefully. It had been a hasty inspection before. The fifth man that he found now was the stranger. He was dressed like any of the others, and he lay partly on his face in the grass, so that Alamo had not noticed the difference at the first. Moreover, he had died most unpleasantly—more so than had appeared at the first casual look.

At least half a dozen bullets had made a sieve of him, from both front and back. And there was something else which no bullet had caused. A knife wound, as though a Bowie had been flung by an expert, into his back. Then casually retrieved by the owner.

They turned him over. A youthful enough face, which looked as if it had known how to laugh—in the long ago. A short, fine beard covered it, and blood was matted in this now.

One of the outlaws, apparently. But killed like the others, and from all appearances, by those of his own bunch. That was a little queer.

There was something else about him, but Alamo couldn't place it. A faintly familiar look, as though once, somewhere, long ago, he had seen this man before. Which might have been. Plenty of men had come up from Texas. Some of them had joined with this legion of lost men.

The sound of wagon wheels reached them and they turned, a little guiltily, as though all this was something of which they should be ashamed, to let a woman see it. It was a picture of such awful carnage—and these men had been their comrades and all the way up from Texas. All the way to yesterday, and last night they had died, alone.

The certainty that they too, would have died in the same way if they had been here, did not alter it. These men were dead, while they still lived.

CHERRY was urging her horses faster, a dreadful anxiety on her face. It had gone white and bloodless, but she came on, steadily. Then she stopped, and got down, climbing over the big wheel. Tom Dunning hurried to help her.

Her lips were strangely stiff as she thanked him. The men looked at one another, helplessly. She stood for a moment, looking about, and then covered her face with her hands. Dinning spoke, a little unsteadily.

"We—we ain't found no sign of Rolla Ely. He ain't here."

Cherry lowered her hands, and looked at him, and then she turned and looked at Alamo. The look in his face seemed to chill her.

"Oh, it—it's dreadful—horrible," she gasped. "I—I didn't th-think—that anything like this w-would happen!"

She'd have to say that, of course. But it didn't sound convincing in Alamo's ears. She came a little closer, and looked down at Ira Knapp, who had just died. She moved a little, and saw the stranger, and stared at him with the same strange and dreadful intensity. Alamo thought for a moment that she was going to faint, but she did not. She turned instead and stumbled back toward her wagon, and Tom Dunning went to help her.

"Unhook the horses," Alamo in-

structed him. He gestured to the others. "We'll stop long enough to bury them."

Rock looked at him then, curiously intent, and the others who had come up seemed to ape it.

"And then?" Rock asked.

"Then we keep going," Alamo said grimly.

There was a slow nodding of heads. And something more. Suspicion had been driven out, for a little while, in the greater shock of the thing. Now men were thinking again—putting two and two together, inescapably. How the herd, the crew, had been divided, the day before, and these men sent on ahead—to their death. The fact that nothing had happened to the rest of them—yet.

He had seen suspicion beginning to mount the day before, when the strange order had been issued. Now it was back with crushing force. A black and ugly doubt in men's minds, which they hated, and for which they they hated themselves. Yet a doubt which persisted and grew, fed by the thing which had happened here.

Doubt of their employer. Of a woman who issued strange orders, but did not explain them. Who had sent the man who loved her ahead with these others. To what sort of a fate, God alone knew. The fact that he was not among the dead was small reason for encouragement.

They all knew Rolla Ely—knew his simple honesty and integrity, and that he would not desert his men to save his own skin. Nor would he be party to any scheme which would sacrifice them. With Rolla Ely, you could be sure of that.

And it was known—too well known—that these border wolves sometimes took prisoners, trail bosses, owners, men of importance. Some men just were not lucky enough to die in swift battle or ambush.

They made a common grave. There in what amounted to an alien and a hostile land. The men hesitated when they came to the stranger, as to whether or not he should be placed with these men from Texas. It was Alamo who decided that.

"Why not?' he said. "He died with them—and likely he feels akin to them, considerin'."

Cherry had come out again, her face very pale. He saw her look up at him, but now he could tell nothing from her face. She turned about and went back to her wagon, stumbling a little. Now no one offered to go with her, not even Dunning.

The thing was done, and the cattle prodded on to the move again. On to whatever lay ahead. With the wagon wheels creaking a mournful dirge, fit accompaniment for the grim thoughts running through every head.

19

THIS WAS the strangest part of the trail. A sort of anti-climax, as though the war gods mocked. It was a beautiful land in its outward seeming, with early summer like a gossamer veil across it. Not far beyond, now were towns and cities and the settled country, and the thing called civilization. Here was the turbulent land, but they moved untroubled and unmolested, while the land remained empty and a fake peace brodded above it.

And with every passing mile, tension mounted, and suspicion grew blacker. For Ely and his crew had found no such peaceful passage.

It was late afternoon when a couple of riders came out to meet them, men who rode calmly and apparently without fear. But there was no bluster in them, only a natural interest in the herd. They dressed and looked like men of the towns, and it was soon apparent that that was what they were.

"You roddin' this outfit?" one of them asked Alamo. He nodded comprehensively toward the herd, waving a pudgy hand. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles which gave his round face a solemn look.

"I'm Garson," he added. "Bill Garson, my friends call me. This is Les Hill, my pardner. We're cattle buyers."

Alamo shook hands, introducing Rock, who was with him.

"You'll want to talk with the boss," he said. "She's back there in the wagon."

He observed that neither man

seemed surprised at this information. It was as though it were the most natural thing in the world that a herd should be owned by a woman, that she should accompany the drive in person. Or as if they had heard all about it already.

"Be glad to," Garson agreed. He grimaced a little, removing his glasses and polishing them with a blue bandana. "Not many cattle come up here any more, for honest buyers to get a chance at. We sure want a chance at these."

"There was another herd ahead of us, yesterday," Alamo observed, watching the effect of his words. "Did you see it?"

Garson shook his head.

"Nope," he denied. "Heard of another bunch. Seemed it had been disposed of, 'fore we got wind of it. Don't reckon we'd have had a chance there, anyway."

That not too ambiguous remark passed without comment. They swung back to the wagon, the cattle buyers shrewdly observing the herd as they went along. Hill commented.

"Better than average, for longhorns," he observed. "Guess we're in luck, for once, Bill."

"Anybody's luck ought to be good, once in a blue moon," Garson grunted. "Mebby our's is changin'."

Alamo could not quite figure them. They had the look of honest men, which was a rarity in this country, from all that he had ever heard. Yet if they were honest men, what were they doing here? More and more it had the look of a pre-arranged deal, in which they had been allowed to go through because Rolla Ely and his men, and his herd, had been deliberately sacrificed. Of all the endings which he had been prepared for, this was the most outlandish and the least pleasant.

THE CATTLE buyers doffed their hats respectfully to Cherry, asked a few pertinent questions. Garson removed his glasses to polish them again.

"You're lucky," he said bluntly. "Mighty lucky to get through at all. A lot of 'em try it—mighty few succeed. But sometimes there's a combination of good management and good luck that work out. Allow me to congratulate you."

Suddenly he became brisk.

"They look good. And we'd like to get them. We've got our own crew, to take 'em off your hands, if you sell to us. And we'll pay top price. Thirty apiece. That about right, Les?"

Hill nodded.

"Suits me," he agreed. "Cash on the barrel-head."

Alamo figured swiftly. Ninety thousand dollars! It was more money than Texas had seen in years. It would mean salvation for the Rio Ranch, new hope for all of Texas when the word spread that a herd had gotten through. Providing, of course, that they ever managed to get back to Texas with the money—and their lives.

That was the catch. And in any case, the smell of this deal seemed now to rise to high heaven. Cherry was nodding acceptance.

"It's a deal," she said. "With two conditions. You take them over—now; and hold the money for us for a few days, till we're ready to start back."

"Why, sure," Garson agreed. "There's a town, up ahead about three miles. We'll have the bunch there tonight. And you can get such supplies as you need."

Town! The word had a strange, almost magical sound. There had been no towns across this waste of land through which they had come. Even the few remote trading posts which had been there before the war had vanished with the lean years. It was incredible that a town should be so close.

And Ely and his crew had been within a few hours of all this when disaster had struck!

Hill swung back, to take word and return with their own crew, who would take over the herd. He rode, apparently without fear, and that in itself was significant. Garson remained with the wagon, as cattle and wagon again moved ahead, and he added a word of explanation.

"As I reckon you folks know, this is a mighty lawless country," he said. "Couldn't be much worse, I guess. But we're tryin', hard, to sort of

clean things up, so honest folks can go without bein' in fear of their lives. Took a lot of protestin', but we're beginnin' to get some results. Soldiers arrived at the town, only this mornin'. You can see the diff'rence already. Reckon we've lost a couple dozen of our citizens in the last three-four days. They've pulled out for other parts."

That could account for the confidence which they showed now in riding abroad—or a part of it, at least. But the thing which had happened only last night was too close and too fresh to make this seem wholly true.

A ripple of excitment had run through the crew, at news that they would reach town tonight. Eagerness was in them, coupled with a vast disgust. There had been respect, even affection, up to the day before, when the big herd had been divided. All of that was as completely gone now as the men who had ridden with Ely.

DIAMOND was driving, now. Cherry was back inside the wagon, busy about something. Probably primping in anticipation of the town, Alamo reflected derisively. That was the way with a woman. In view of all the rest, it as the thing to be expected. He could see the same thought reflected in the faces of the othere. Even Tom Dunning's face had lost some of its youthfulness in the last two days.

Now they could see the town, with barns and big corrals on the outskirts. A small town, with a number offalse-fronted buildings, many of them saloons. A town where their arrival was exciting more than passing interest. A Texas herd, coming in this way, was an event.

The cattle buyers crew were coming out to meet them now, to take over the herd. It still might be a trick, but Alamo didn't think so. In any case, it was none of his business. He had done what he had agreed to do. Here his responsibility ended. What happened from now on was no concern of his.

Garson swung back to the wagon. He polished his glasses once more and brought out a legal-looking document.

"Here's the contract, for everybody to sign, makin' it legal all around, and stipulatin' that the money is waitin' here in the bank in town," he explained. "And I expect you'll be wantin' a little hard cash for now, mebby. One of the boys brought out a thousand dollars."

He opened a small, weighty sack, dipped his hand in it and held it up for all to see—silver and gold coins, gleaming in the sun. Eyes lighted avidly at sight of it. Not paper money, but real hard cash. It had really taken the sight of it to make them believe.

Cherry pushed aside the rear flap of the canvas, jumped lightly down to the ground. Eyes widened, narrowed a little again at sight of her. She had changed from the calico dress which she had been wearing for the last few days. But now she was dressed, not in any finery dug from chests and brought up from Texas, but in the same blue jeans and boots which she had been wearing that first day when Alamo had sighted her.

"That will be fine," she agreed, and flashed a brief smile at Garson. "Where do I sign? Here?"

She wrote her name clearly, passed it across for Alamo and Rock to sign as witnesses. She handed the bag of coins to Alamo.

"I suppose the boys will be wanting some money," she said. "Pay them some, and take some for yourself. And some for Diamond to get a few supplies with, of course."

"Don't you want some of it?" Diamond asked. Amazement still gripped him.

"Not tonight," Cherry said briefly. She blinked rapidly for a moment, her face puckering like that of a small child, then it was cold and calm as his own again. "We've been lucky—more than we deserved. But I've still got a job to do.

THE HERD was still moving—away from them now, since the wagon had halted. The new crew was in charge, a score of men who quite plainly knew their business. The buyers, their part of the transaction completed, were going back to town as well, promising to be on hand if anything was wanted in the next few days.

The crew were gathered here now

eyeing the money expectantly, eagerly, though some of the sullenness was still in their faces. Alamo counted it out—in gold and silver pieces.

"I'll give you seventy-five dollars apiece, tonight," he said. "More when you're ready to start back to Texas." He hesitated, then, because he knew the eagerness in them and the weakness, and because he was trail boss, he added a word of caution.

"Better watch it, boys. A dollar won't buy much here. Down in Texas it'll look big as a wash-tub."

Cherry had watched the operation in silence. Now, as they started to turn away, she spoke.

"I suppose you boys are pretty eager to get in to town and relax a little," she said. "and I don't blame you. I'm not trying to stop you. Only—well, I was talking to Mr. Garson. It's well known around here that the outlaws have a town of their own, off about fifteen miles west of here. Of course, there are a lot of them there—and I've no right to ask any of you to risk your lives again.

"I'm not doing it, either. Only—we've still got some unfinished business there, don't you think?"

For a moment they looked at her in amazement. But faces did not soften as they began to get the drift of it. They hardened instead. And it was Martin who answered, bluntly enough.

"We signed on to bring the herd to Missouri—and this is it," he said. "Now we're through. Come on, boys."

He turned to his horse, sidestepped alongside it for a moment as the cayuse moved skittishly, swung up into the saddle. The others were following his example. Even Tom Dunning, though he hesitated and looked back, once. Then they were riding, fast, for the town.

Alamo watched them go. He stole a look at Cherry, and saw the hurt in her face, the steely glint which replaced it again as she fought for control, biting her lower lip hard. There was a little scorn in her eyes as she glanced at him.

"Well?" she demanded. "Aren't you going with them?"

Alamo hesitated. The bitterness was deep in him, and, more than ever, he knew that he was a fool. Always a man was a fool when he allowed a woman to lead him. But he shook his head stubbornly.

"When I get ready," he said.

"Of course," she agreed. She looked at him anew, her eyes softened little. She opened her mouth, as if to appeal, or explain—then closed it again. She turned instead to her own saddled horse, swept up the reins and was in the saddle and away, all in a moment. Riding west.

Alamo overtook her. She looked at him with scorn in her eyes.

"Well?" she asked.

"What the devil are you up to?" Alamo rapped.

"Rolla Ely is maybe still alive," she said. "I—I'd hoped that the others would remember that. And that he's one of us. So long as he's alive—well, I'd rather fight—and die—than touch a penny of that money and go back to Texas—remembering."

She spurred again, and for a moment Alamo sat and watched her go. It was madness, and he was bewildered and confused. She was going to the outlaw's stronghold, alone if need be—and that was suicide—or worse, for her. And going with her could only mean that it would be suicide for him. Of all the mad caprice of the trail, this topped it all.

Even with the crew behind them, they'd have had little enough chance. The crew had refused to follow her again. He had made up his mind to the same. But now, face set a little harder, he spurred in turn, overtaking her. It was madness, but he might as well be a fool to the end.

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CHERRY looked swiftly up as he raced alongside her, and as swiftly down again. Alamo saw tht her face was streaked with tears. But she kept riding, steadily, into the sunset, not even looking at him again. Riding like a man, with a six-gun buckled about her waist.

Behind them was the town, out of sight now. With soldiers there, men who had come to bring a bit of law and order to a land held in renegade

thralldom. No use to appeal to them, of course. They would have their orders, and it wouldn't include suicide. That was left for footloose fools from Texas.

His mind was confused, one part of it believing, the other refusing to accept. The evidence of what had happened, even to them getting through without a shadow of trouble, and the sale of the herd—that was the most damaging of all. What it added up to was the double-cross, and he had seen it worked from the start. So had the rest of the crew.

Yet what Cherry was doing now was contraditable. Making fools of men—and sometimes even of themselves. She was a gallant little figure, riding west. He knew that he must be wrong, for his mind insisted that he was.

But his heart told him that he was right, that Cherry was right. Since he was riding with her, it was easier to believe. But even now she did not offer him any explanation.

The evenings were long. Birds sang now as the light softened about them, the prairie was transformed. Here was none of the savage thunder of lightning and storm of the evening before. Yet men had died and now lay buried, only few miles from here. And they two—wild mockery as it all seemed—were riding to avenge them.

Here was more broken, rougher country, low hills and a few trees. And all at once, rounding a shoulder of hill, they met three men riding, jogging unhuriedly. Alamo could see it in their faces that they were as startled by this meeting as he was.

ONE OF them was Pinto Phillips. Pinto whom he had failed to hang when he had the chance. That had been a costly mistake. Pinto was still the laughing, devil-may-care adventurer, a little better fed, considerably better clothed than before otherwise not changed at all. His pock-marked face showed surprise, then a sort of insolent sureness as he surveyed Cherry.

Pinto was one of the killers who had struck Rolla Ely's crew the night before. Knapp, dying, had testified to that.

He had also mentioned another man, with night black hair and a streak of white in it. This man rode in the center of the trio now, and the silver hair gave him a strange and arrogant look. It was as though a bullet had scraped his scalp at some time, and the hair, returning, had come in white.

The third man was ordinary enough. Only the upper half of his right ear was missing.

It was Pinto who recovered himself first. He lifted a hand in easy salute, mocking as always.

"This is a pleasure," he said. "Our luck improves, Whitey. This is the girl herself, Cherry Vegas. Didn't I tell you she was the fairest flower of Texas?"

"You did," Whitey agreed. "And for once, you didn't exaggerate. And this is Alamo, I suppose?"

"Who else? He's always at heel where she goes, like a well-trained dog. But don't underestimate him, Whitey. He's dangerous."

Whitey shrugged.

"I've heard of Alamo, before ever I did of you, Pinto," he said.

There was a moment of silence. Even the birds, full-throated a few moments before, had suddenly fallen quiet. It was Cherry, unexpectedly, who broke it.

"You'll be mocking when you die, won't you, Pinto?"

For just an instant, Pinto looked startled. Then he smiled and bowed again.

"I hope so, fair lady," agreed. "That is my ambition. And to what do we own the honor of this visit? For I assume, since you were riding this way, that you were coming to see us?"

"You're right," Cherry agreed. And now her face was as cold, as washed of emotion, as Alamo's. "I was hoping to meet you—and Whitey. I wonder if you could tell the plain truth, for once."

"Isn't she charming?" Pinto murmured. "So direct! And yet so ladylike! What is it you want to know, sweetheart?"

"Is Rolla Ely still alive?"

"Entirely so—for the present,"

Pinto agreed. "We've found it worth-while to keep him alive, for a while. In fact, once we all get back to town, I'll be happy to let you see for yourself."

There was threat as well as promise in that. They had been a little startled at first, but their apprehension had vanished, now that they were satisfied that Cherry and Alamo were alone. It was plain to them than the crew had refused to come along. And the odds, as they saw it, were at least two to one.

Alamo they did not underestimate. He was watching them, silent, always dangerous. And Cherry had a gun. But they were three who lived by their guns, and they asked no better odds. They intended to take Cherry into camp with them, voluntarily or otherwise, but alive—and whether she rode of her own free will or under compulsion, it would be all one in the end.

As for Alamo, the choice would be up to him. If he chose to give up his gun, he could probably come along, alive—for a while. That would suit their mood well enough. But they would just as soon kill him here.

"We intend to see," Cherry told them. "But I doubt if we'll go with you."

"Oh?" Pinto's brows arched. "And why not, charming lady?"

"I don't like killers," Cherry said flatly. "Nor double-crossers. And you, Whitey—you double-crossed and murdered my brother, as well as killing the rest of Ely's crew."

She said it calmly, dispassionately almost. Alamo flicked a startled glance at her. Her brother! Now he understood, and suddenly a new understanding began to come to him.

HE HAD thought that the voice of the man with whom she had conferred in the darkness, the other night, was somehow familiar. And he had been moved again today, looking on the face of the murdered outlaw who had been with Ely's crew, with the feeling that somewhere, some time, he had seen this man. Now he knew. Dave Vagas.

Cherry had told him, back in Texas, that first day, that Dave was dead. Now he was beginning to understand that, too. Dave Vegas had been a hot-headed man. During the turbulent years of war, he had run wild, as so many others had done. Turning renegade.

His was a record, beyond doubt, which would keep him from ever returning to his home. Cherry had classed him with the dead.

Yet Dave Vegas had been a Texan, and once a Texan, always a Texan. He might be forced to live here on this wild strip, but his loyalty would still be to his home and his people. Probably he had managed to send word back by some Texan whose life he had managed to save, word to Cherry, knowing how desperately hard-pressed she would be in these days of poverty.

It was all clear now, clear with the suddeness of sun coming up out of the night. Dave had promised her that, if she would bring a herd up here, he would meet her and arrange to get it safe through to market. Probably he had been confident that his own lawless companions would do hat much for him and for his sister.

It was not a thing about which she could talk, of course. But Cherry had had no doubts. They had come up the long trail, and she had met Dave the other night, and the plan had been agreed upon.

Just why the herd was to be split, and Rolla Ely was to go on ahead. Alamo did not know. It had all the look of treachery, of deliberate double-cross. But now, though still not knowing why, he was as suddenly convinced that he, and all the crew, had been wrong there. Cherry had trusted her brother, and Dave had worked no double-cross. He had had some plan, probably some agreement with the outlaws, in mind. It was they who had double-crossed him.

The fact that Dave had been murdered last night was the final proof of that. Perhaps he had made some deal with these wolves which they had at first intended to keep. Even in the lowest men, there is always some remaining fibre of decency. Dave was an outlaw like themselves, and he had a sister.

But Pinto had come among them, with some tale of treasure which they might as well have for themselves—and lusting for vengeance on the whole outfit. He had persuaded Whitey and others to the double-cross, probably without too much effort.

Apparently Dave had become suspicious, particularly when a bunch of men had ridden out the evening before. He must have gone along to try and stop them, or to hold them to their promise. The result had been that he died with the others. But at least he had died like a Texan, fighting to keep his pledge.

It was all clear enough to Alamo now—now that it was too late to do any good.

THE ODDS appalled him, but not as they had done before. Whitey had colored a little at the charge which Cherry had flung at him. Now he shrugged.

"You're right," he said. "It's the way we wolves live—by murder and the double-cross."

His frankness seemed to amuse Pinto.

"Give the devil credit where it's due," he said. "It was my idea—and Whitey did insist on letting the rest of you go through unmolested. That wasn't my idea."

Whitey eyed him coldly, but after a moment he shrugged again.

"Next thing, we'll be fighting, Pinto," he warned. "That would be foolish all around."

Somewhere, the man had been a gentleman, Alamo guessed. As well as a born leader of men. Like Dave Vegas, he had come down the trail to this. But he was still a leader. Pinto nodded.

"You're right, Whitey," he agreed "And I'm well enough satisfied, the way it's working out." Again he bowed mockingly to Cherry. "Did you say that you wanted to visit our fair city?" he asked.

Cherry eyed him, saying nothing for the moment. It was the third man, silently watchful up to now, who spoke.

"We've palavered long enough," he rasped. "Up with your hands, the pair of you—and no foolin'."

Here was the show-down. Alamo had been expecting it. So far, none of them had made any false moves. All had been very careful to keep their hands safely back, for they knew what a sudden motion could precepitate. But Cherry and himself had to be disarmed, or killed, and the man with half an ear missing was of different temper from these other two, and his patience had run out. Plainly, he had no doubt of the outcome.

Alamo would have preferred it otherwise, but Cherry was here, and there was no choice. And he knew her determination to be as great as his own. There was just one thing—and whether it was good or bad was not easy in such a moment to tell. The others would not readily shoot at Cherry.

The words were barely out of the other man's mouth when Alamo went into action. He kicked his horse to make it buck-jump sidewise, allowing the reins to drop so that both his hands were free. And then, once again with that flow of motion which had bewildered others before now, he had not only the one visible gun in his hand, but both hands clutched guns—and both were bucking to the shock of exploding powder and rocketing bullets as he brought them up.

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THE ODDS were long, but he had lived by such odds of late. Some day, he supposed, he would die by them. But there was no feeling in him that this was the moment.

He had first to concentrate on Pinto, as a man of known danger. Next on the truculent owner of the half-ear. That would leave him wide open to the guns of Whitey, but war was that way. And this was war.

It was over with almost as quickly as it had begun. Such things usually were, in the very nature of things. Seldom was there a long, wild flurry of shooting, for the men on one side or the other were too good for that. Only tenderfeet and fools could af-

ford to waste powder.

There were still loaded shells in his guns, and bluish smoke sharp in the nostrils, made little waving tendrils from the hot muzzles of them. He was still in the saddle, and death had passed him by.

Alamo turned, and looked at Cherry, and he saw that there was a gun in her hand, too, and the smoke from it made a pattern with the rising plume from his own guns. And now he knew why Whitey's one shot had gone wild, why Whitey had gasped and dropped his gun and clutched at his stomach, and then had folded like a jack-knife while his horse plunged wildly and tumbled him from the saddle. And all before either of Alamo's guns had ever shifted toward him at all.

The cayuse of the half-eared man had run farther, with its burden dragging by one foot stil hooked in a stirrup, before the fallen reins had snagged in a tangle of brush and brought it to a trembling halt. Pinto alone still sat there, that mocking smile seeming graven about his mouth.

But his hands were empty, the guns having sliped from them as if a burden too great to be borne. And now Pinto opened hs mouth, but no words came. Instead, blood gushed suddenly from it, and he tried to raise a hand as if to check it, and again he failed. And so was dead.

Alamo looked at Cherry again, and now the red flush of battle had faded from her face, replaced by a deadly whiteness. There was shock and horror in her eyes as she looked on the trio who had so lately faced them, and Alamo spoke swiftly.

"Thanks for sidin' me, Cherry. Nobody could have done it better. And I reckon you've got an apology comin'. There were some things—I just didn't understand."

The words had a calming effect on her. After all, she was Texas-raised, not new to the border.

"You did rather well yourself, Alamo. And even if you didn't understand—you came along with me."

"I didn't know about Dave, before," Alamo nodded. "Reckon this sort of evens for him."

"Will you—get his foot out of that stirrup?" Cherry asked. "Before we go on?"

So they were going on. He'd known it all along, of course. What they had learned here had only confirmed that. And nothing which had happened would shake Cherry's resolution, where Rolla Ely was concerned. It had been a trap into which she had sent Ely, though she hadn't guessed that. Nothing else mattered now but to make amends, if it could be done.

THEY RODE on, while the sunset faded and nght came down. It had been luck's smiling face which was turned toward them in that last meeting, that only the trio had ridden together. But when a town with a hundred or more men in it was reached, they could hardly hope for such luck.

Possibly, by waiting for late night when the camp slept, they might effect a rescue. There was a chance.

Here was a rolling country of easy gentle hills, a stream meandering through its tiny valley, soothed by its own hushed murmur. They were on a well-beaten road now, and around a bend the lghts of the outlaw town shone from half a mile ahead. Outwardly, and in the half-light, it was like the other town had been, like any town on this turbulent border. Nor were its habitants at any pains to conceal it.

Now there came the moon, silvering the hills, golden here in the early summer night. And in the town itself, under this ample lght, there was more than the usual stir of activity. They could see it as they came closer—men moving about or lounging in the square at the center of the town. This square was flanked by a trio of saloons on one side, a big store opposite them, the ends of the street open. Hitching rails on either side accomodated only two or three saddled horses.

They left their own horses, off the road and concelaed by brush and trees near the creek. With all the interest

centering here in the square, it was easy to approach without attracting attention. And now they could see something of what was going on.

Rolla Ely was standing there, surrounded by a jibing ring of men. He looked spent, badly used. But he stood with head up and looked back on them like a Texas man. Off a little way stood the chuck wagon which had come up from Texas, the wagon which had gone on with the divided herd only the day before.

Alamo could tell that it was the same wagon, since he had seen it so often. Otherwise he would have been in doubt. The canvas top was off, the box had been lifted off the running gear. The wagon itself was in no shape to run, now or later. It looked as if it had been picked to pieces.

A man came out of one of the saloons, wiping at his mustache with the back of his hand. A little man, standing hardly shoulder-high to Ely, an incongrous figure here in this town. His huge, bristling mustache had the look of the frontier, but all the rest of him shrieked denial. He was beardless, and he walked with a mincing gait. His clothes were elegant, the garments of a man of Boston or Baltimore, not of the land beyond the Mississippi. His boots were highly polished, free of dust.

The buzz of conversation died as he approached. Men watched him and looked expectantly to Rolla Ely, and they made way respectfully as the little man advanced. He wore no gun, outwardly at least. But there was no slightest question as to who was boss of this wild bunch.

He stopped in front of Ely, and his voice was velvet with politeness.

"You look tired, Mr. Ely," he said. "Tired. Have the boys been a ltle rough?"

Ely did not answer. He straightened his drooping shoulders a little, and Alamo, with Cherry crouching beside him, felt her fingers close convulsively on his arm.

"Bring a chair for Mr. Ely," the little man commanded. "Is this any way to treat guest? And no doubt you're hungry. You are hungry, are you not?"

Still Ely made no answer. But a chair was brought from one of the saloons, and he sank down on to it. And now, at the little man's orders, a meal was hastly brought him as well—an excellent meal, served on good dishes, all set on a tray. The little man himself handed it to him.

"Eat," he said. "Take your time. We'll wait that long for the boys to get back. They would be disappointed, otherwise."

ROLLA ELY hesitated, then he ate the meal. The crowd seemed to be enjoying it, as though this was understood to be preliminary to a better show. The little man returned to the saloon, and he did not reappear until Ely had finished the meal. Then he paused before him again.

"I hope you're felling better now," he said. "And in a more reasonable frame of mind."

"It was good grub," Ely acknowledged. "But I've told you before, Jones, that you're barkin' up the wrong stump. And there's nothin' I can tell you."

"Christopher Napoleon Jones," the little man corrected him sharply. "And think carefully, Mr. Ely. Pinto Phillips is very sure that your wagon contains that which is worth our while—but it is scarcely worth the price you put upon it. Perhaps the boys were a little playful—it should be a warning. Our patience is just about exhausted. There will be nothing playful in what is to come, I assure you, if you persist in refusal. Nor will we wait any longer for Pinto and Whitey. The boys, I need scarcely remind you, are getting impatient."

At this, a chorus of assent went up from the oddly patient crowd. There were nearly a hundred of them gathered here now, Alamo estimated—and it was plain that there would be no chance of helping Ely while they slept.

He had been trying to figure out a way to help Ely, but he could see no chance which offered any possibility of success. They might, if it came to the worst, save him from torture with a mercy bullet. Which would be

a dubious sort of help, and would bring the pack down upon them in turn.

Ely merely shrugged as Jones looked at him. Someone jerked the chair suddenly our from under him. He sat down heavily on the ground, started to get up, though better of it, and remained sitting.

Jones stepped forward and kicked him sharply in the stomach. Ely grunted, his face twisting with pain, and Cherry, beside Alamo, smothered a little cry. The little man's face was suddenly contorted with fury.

"Get up!" he snarled. "Stand before your betters!"

For answer, Ely spat, deliberately. On to one of the polished boots.

Alamo tensed. So did the crowd, while beside him, Cherry's fingers bit deep into his arm. For an instant it seemed that Jones would leap upon his victim with both feet, or worse. Instead he drew back a little, his twisted face grew calm again.

"We have tried to treat you as a gentleman, Mr. Ely," he said. "To give you every chance. You persist in a senseless refusal to tell us where that treasure is hidden. Even in the face of what Pinto Phillips has told us. But our patience grows thin. This is your last chance to speak. Short of compulsion. And if we use it—"

He stopped, shrugged significantly. Ely looked at him, something of amazement in his broad, good-natured face.

"I've told you before that we ain't got no treasure," he said. "You'd ought to know that, same as you should know that Pinto was just pure vindictive. Don't you now that there's nothin' in Texas but beef? If there was, we'd never come to a country like this."

CHRISTOPHER Napoleon Jones drew a lacy white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his fce, his huge mustache, with it. Alamo decided that he probably believed Ely, but that, if anything, increased his resolution for what had been in his mind, and that of the crowd, all along. He pointed to the wagon.

"Bring a wheel, boys," he said.

A dozen of them sprang eagerly to do his bidding, while a savage murmur of anticipation ran through the group. Here was the sadistic sort of cruelty of which too much had been heard, even down in Texas.

The big wheel was brought, laid flat on the ground. At a gesture from Jones, half a dozen men grabbed Ely, picking him up, then laid him out on the wheel, face down, stomach unpleasantly across the big hub, hands and feet wide apart on the rim.

"Get the hammer and spikes," Jones ordered. "And take off his shoes."

They were going to crucify him to the wheel.

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ALAMO'S HAND was on his gun, but still with no very clear plan of action in mind. The sensible thing would be to give Rolla Ely a mercy bullet, to save two for Cherry and himself, and to kill as many of the others as possible while insuring that they should not take them alive. It seemed the only way, in an impossible situation.

That this sort of thing was nothing new among the wolves was shown by the swift preparations. Alamo had heard of men crucified in this land —some only tied to the big wheels, which were set rolling, then the men left to lie as the wheel might fall—either upon the wheel, or with it resting upon them, there to linger until death brought a merciful release. But not all were merely tied.

Spikes, a sledge-hammer, were being brought. Ely tried to struggle, but was helplessly held. One of his boots was already being tugged off, flung aside.

And then Cherry was no longer beside him. As Alamo realized that and looked about for her, he saw her walk boldly into sight, from down the street, start across the square. If he had ever doubted before that she was an actress born, he knew it now.

She walked unhurriedly, head held high. And she was smiling—a bold, reckless smile. She was not even glancing toward the wheel, nor the activity there. Instead she walked toward where Christopher Napoleon

Jones stood watching, a little to the side.

She had said no word. But it was as though a magnetism drew all eyes. Men stopped whatever they were doing, to turn and stare. Those grouped about Ely stopped their task and straightened a little. Most of them deserted the wheel entirely and turned to watch.

Cherry was still walking toward the little man, her smile all for him. And he was watching her with bold, admiring eyes. The business of a moment before was all but forgotten.

They knew her, or guessed that they did. And that she had come to parley for Ely's life. This was all the sort of show which they enjoyed.

Alamo moved fast. He circled, darting across the open end of the square, but there was no need for caution. All eyes now were on Cherry. The thought of trouble, here in their own stronghold, did not come to any of them. They were lost in amazed admiration for the moment, and the one man who had remained at the wheel, to guard Ely, was no longer interested in his job. He was tying Ely's hands together, wrapping the rope hastily about the rim of the wheel itself, doing even that mechanically, his eyes on the other and more interesting scene.

It couldn't last long. But Cherry was saying something, though Alamo had no time to listen. Flattery from a beautiful woman could bedazzle any man, at least temporarily. Jones was bedazzled now, and the others with him.

Alamo reached the wheel, for now the remaining man had turned away. Men stood not ten feet away, their backs to him, and Alamo moved boldly. A slash of his knife cut the rope and as Ely straightened he thrust a gun into his hand, pushed him toward one of the horses at the near-by hitch rack.

He knew that Cherry would know how they were progressing. This left him now with only one gun, and Alamo liked to have both hands full at such a time. He could still see no way out, but they coud give them a good fight.

Openly now, he moved up to the close-packed group, crowding deliberately. His hand reached down and emptied a holster, and now both hands were full. He stepped back a little, and his voice rasped like a drill sargeant's.

"There's twelve different kinds of death here—for whoever wants it first!"

"And here's six more—you little toad!" Cherry's gun was in her hand, covering the startled Jones, like an echo to Alamo's words. She darted forward, was quickly behind Jones, her gun jammed hard at the back of his neck, while the others gawked in sheer amazement, and swinging, saw themselves covered from three sides. For Ely had moved fast too.

IT WAS the neatest trick that Alamo had ever seen, and there had been plenty in the turbulent years. Audacity and effrontery had caught the wolves flat-footed, but still he had no real hope of the outcome. The odds were too great, and these men rode with danger.

Still, it gave them a chance. The thing now was to keep moving. You could do no less than to play out your string—particularly when you had a woman like Cherry to side you.

The Napoleon in Jones had wilted like a flower in the frost. With death at his neck, the man was an arrant coward.

Rolla Ely was in poor shape. The mistreatment which he had received for hours on end, that vicious kick in the stomach, had all taken their toll. But the meal he had eaten had helped, and now he was buoyed up by excitement and hope. He swung his horse alongside Alamo now, and he led another horse as well.

Alamo needed no second invitation. He swung to the saddle, controlling the uneasy cayuse with one hand, keeping a gun continually on the crowd. They pushed closer to Cherry, and she shoed the quaking Jones toward them. Not a word had been spoken.

Even the outlaws stood, hushed now, uneasy, but fearful for their boss. What happened then was not what Almo had expected. Ely

reached out. His gunbarrel cracked viciously against the skull of Jones, then, before the little man's legs could give way, he had grabbed him, lifted and flung him like a sack of meal cross the front of his saddle.

Cherry was already up, behind Alamo. It meant a double load for each horse, but with their own horses waiting that would not matter so much, if they could get that far. Tempers were mounting dangerously now, some gunman would soon be risking a try for his iron. That was inevitble, for it was their nature, and the first shock of surprise ws giving way to a cold fury.

"This way," Ely said, surprisingly, for he had never been the man to take the lead in anything. He plunged his horse head, not down the street from the way they had come, but in the opposite direction. There was nothing but to go with him. A gun cleared leather, and Alamo, seeing the motion, fired, saw the man stagger as he tried to lift it up, stumble, regain his stride and keep upright, but the gun was a faint dull sheen against the dust.

That had checked the others for a moment. Now they had a building between them, and restraint would be gone. But Ely was pitching Jones off to the ground, was swinging his horse sharp about and up to the door of the saloon. Then he was climbing down.

"I won't be long," he promised, and was in through a door and gone. Alamo shook his head in amazement. By moving fast, they had had a fighting chance to get a head start. Now it was gone. Luck was a fey creature. You had to treat it well, or it would desert you, go over to the other side without a qualm. It looked to him as though their's had run out.

MEN WERE coming, now, swarming around the corner of the saloon, startled at finding them still here. Alamo flung a couple of quick shots at them, and Cherry did the same, forcing them back. The shadow of the building favored them here, but it wouldn't for long. What was Ely up to?

And then he was back, carrying a gunny-sack, climbing laboriously on to his horse again. He jerked out a quick explanation.

"Pay for my herd!" he said.

Gold—which would almost surely be the price of their lives. A poor bargain, viewed in that light. But Alamo couldn't blame him. There was grinding poverty in Texas, and Ely had risked the trail to Missouri for gold. He had seen his men murdered around him, had suffered indignities and been on the verge of doom himself. All for the price of his herd. Now he intended to have it.

Held a prisoner here, he had evidently used eyes and ears to good advantage. The thing, in its way, was simple enough. The herd of the T had been stolen boldly, sold again with equal boldness and promptness. Most of the buyers of this border would ask few questions when a herd was offered to them. Business had been built that way, with a two-way split. Profits had been enermous, the business flourishing.

Evidently this gold which had been received for the herd had been flaunted before Ely's eyes, but had not yet been divided. Alamo's admiration for the man grew. And after all, were it not that Cherry was in this with them it would be as good a way to die as any.

They spurred away, but now bullets were beginning to pepper at them from the vantage-points, most of the outlaws keeping back out of sight as they fired. Others would be getting their horses, of course. It might be that some of them were sending their shots wide on account of Cherry. There was a strange mixture of chivalry and less admirable reasons in such men, but none of them had scored a hit, so far. Now their horses were really running.

Here were their own, where they had left them. Cherry sprang down and on to her own horse as they paused. She gave Alamo's cayuse a cut with a quirt, sending it running. Down ahead, the moonlight lay in a bright dangerous swath where they must ride.

The drum of hoofs was loud on the hard-packed road behind. Most of the lawless legion were mounted now, were taking up the pursuit. Luck had stayed with them, long enough to get

a start, to get away from the town. It had been a chance in a hundred, but Cherry being with the had probably accounted for it.

Now it was a chance in a hundred that they could go much farther. Sheer nerve and excitement had buoyed Rolla Ely up for the first few minutes. That effect was wearing off, and the beating he had taken was having its way. He swayed drunkenly in the saddle, forced now to clutch the saddle-horn with one hand to keep from falling. The sack he had managed to tie fast, but he was like a spent swimmer.

And the others were gaining. Not many of them, but a dozen horses out of the mass. Enough faster cayuses to swiftly overtake them. Here was the creek, wetly asparkle. Beyond was open country, without shelter.

Alamo turned in the saddle. Maybe he could slow them a little. But before he could fire, he saw Ely lose his grip, sway, and topple. His feet did not catch, and he hit the road.

Instantly, Cherry was off her own horse, kneeling beside him, a soft little cry in her throat. Alamo pulled up. This then, was the end.

23

HE HAD wondered, more than once, if Cherry loved Rolla Ely. There had been no doubt, at any time, as to how Ely felt about Cherry. But she had given no sign that Alamo could see about herself. Rather she had been aloof and withdrawn or, when friendly, more mocking than attainable. Through it all, Ely had been patient, like a great lost dog, tail-wagging, hopeful for a kind word, a pat on the head.

Now the answer was plain. Cherry cared. Alamo had guessed the truth when she had started out alone to try and save him, in a foolhardy venture. Something more than desperation would be back of that.

Alamo's arms lifted now, both guns stuttered out of crimson mouths. A horse in the vanguard plunged sidewise, into the path of the others. There was confusion for a moment, a little more caution, but they were coming on again—only now, with the main body of riders cuaght up again, they were spreading out for the kill.

Rolla Ely could ride no more. And it was too late to load him on and ride with him. Such advantage as had been with them while the others saddled, was running away like the quick-silver waters of the creek.

And then it came again—that drumming pound of hoofs on the hard-packed rod. Alamo swung about, startled. Not that it mattered much, in any case. But he hadn't guessed that any could get behind them so soon. Or it might be another group riding in.

It was. A group of wildly yelling, shooting Texans—and his heart climbed to his throat and choked him before he could swallow it again, for these were men of the Rio, Ross Martin and Tom Dunning and Joe Rock and the others, who had rideen side by side with them from back beside the Concho.

The surprise of it, the savagery of their attack, was enough to check the onslaught and send the renegades back on their heels. Then, at sight of Cherry and Ely and himself, the Texans had closed in, swift hands had boosted Ely up ahead of Cherry, the group had formed about them, and once gain they were riding, back for a town where the law had come.

It was a chase, across half a dozen miles. But this was not a fight to the liking of the wolves. Not in a running gun-battle with men from Texas, with guns like that of Alamo Sage lining back at them. Theirs had been an easy living here on the border, a bloated living. With the odds always carefully stacked in their favor, and bullets crashing out of ambush and night when attack was made. That was the renegade way.

They slowed, and stopped, and turned back, for there was no profit in it, and dead and wounded men were along their trail. And the town, with soldiers in it, was not too far ahead. Besides, there was a better way—the proven method they had used before. These who had won up from Texas had to return to Texas, and it was a long trail back.

Some such thought was in Alamo's mind as they sighted the lights of

the other town again, but he knew that now he would be glad to see men in blue again, a sight he had believed must always rouse hate in him. Yet this was a big land, bigger even than Texas—a vast country which belonged to them all. And when law came again to it, it would be a good land—for such men as Rolla Ely, with a woman like Cherry by his side.

THE CREW was silent as they rode, glad of what they had done, yet ashamed of their earlier hesitation which had brought them so belatedly into the fray. Yet chance and that hesitation had timed it well. Had they all gone together at the start, probably none of them would be coming back. Luck was a fickle jade, but sometimes there was warmth behind that inscrutable smile.

There was a doctor in town, who looked at Ely and pronounced him in a bad way. He had taken a bullet wound the night before, though it had not been too noticeable, and had only been crudely bandaged. That, together with the ill-treatment, had made a sick man of him now.

"A couple of weeks in bed, and he will be coming along all right, barring complications," the doctor said. Whereat Rolla Ely raised his head and swore.

"Two weeks!" he said. "We're startin' back for Texas in two days. Stay here a week and we'll never get out of Missouri alive."

"You'll never get back there alive if you try it sooner," the doctor warned, and left him. Ely lay with closed for a few minutes, fighting for breath. Then he beckoned Alamo closer.

"Spread the word," he said. "That we'll be here two-three weeks. *But we're pullin' out in a couple of days!* You know it's our only chance."

Alamo knew it just as he knew that Ely knew. Argument here would avail nothing. There was as much money in that sack which Rolla Ely had recovered, as Cherry had received from her herd. The outlaws had been frustrated, humiliated. But they would not take a thing like that tamely. Their only chance, and that was slim enough, was to start back for Texas before the trail wolves gathered through the Nations, while they thought them still here in town. To wait was to die.

It was Cherry who decided it,after a conference with Ely.

"Get the wagon ready," she instructed Alamo. "Diamond can drive it. Rolla can stay in bed, and I'll look after him. We can slip out of town at night, travel by night for several days, and make good time. With the rest of you keeping a lookout. We'll get back to Texas."

Ely had insisted that he could straddle a horse, but that was out of the question. This other would be slower, more conspicious, the wagon wheels leaving a trail across the prairie which could not be hidden. But it would give Ely a fighting chance for life. And the men would fight hard to get that money, and themselves, back to the Concho.

Two days in town, after long months on the trail. Two days, spreading the word that they would be there at least another two weeks. Luck was with them again. A dark, moonless night, with the threat of rain in the air. They pulled out, a silent cavalcade. The rain commenced at dawn, as they camped back in a clump of trees and brush, hidden from chance observation. Rain would wash out sign of the night's travel. It would also mean mud, making a trail the next night which could not be concealed.

Their ruse had worked, the first night. Nothing disturbed the day. But there would be men in town who would carry word of their departure. This one day of grace was the best for which they could hope.

The rain ended with the afternoon. There were rifts in the clouds when they moved on. Faster now, despite the continual jolting of the wagon. Ely tossed with fever, but he did not complain. Cherry sat beside him, wiping the damp from his face, giving him a drink, smiling at him. There was little comfort for her, perched on a stool, in that swaying, jolting Conestoga.

There was one advantage. Guards

could see for long distances during the day, a thing impossible by night. Alamo himself was on watch the next afternoon when they saw them—riders in the distance. Full half a hundred of them.

THEY WERE back in the Nations now. Lawless land. With the trail plain and easy to read, pointing to them. Diamond studied the distant riders for a minute, cast a look at the sun, and spat.

"We'd best be on our way," he opioned.

Alamo agreed with him. They'd keep ahead until the dark came down. It was not likely that they could lose their pursuers under cover of it, of course. The canvas-topped wagon was easy to see, the mark of the wheels impossible to disguise. But the dark could be friendly, and there was no choice.

As the wagon swung into sight, there was momentary change in the close-riding pursuit. Then they settled down again, unhurried. It would be a long chase, but their speed was greater than the wagon could make. And there was no hurry, from the raiders' point of view.

Rolla Ely lifted a flushed face and complained querlously.

"Get me a horse," he said. "I can ride."

"Leave us both," said Cherry. "There's no point to burdening all of you, for nothing."

"We're headin' back for Texas," Alamo said harshly. "All of us. After selling the cattle, do you think we'd quit now?"

No quitting. But as the dark came down, the steady advance of the riders had cut the distance separating them to a third. The heavy team jerked the wagon along at a painful trot, but that was not enough. Texans didn't quit. But a cause could still be lost.

No time, now, to stop and cook, to eat. Only a short pause for water as they crossed a tributary of the Arkansas. There was gold in the wagon—a fortune, back in Texas. A fortune up here as well, a magnet which drew men on to murder.

But here was luck, of a sort, which Alimo's guile made the most of. A bunch of half-wild cattle, several hundred of them. The remnants of some trail herd which had never reached trail's end. They showed in the night, and came to their feet with heads held high, nostrils flaring, ready to spook. But memory of horses and the creatures who straddled them was still with them, and presently, with a little urging, they went ahead, and the wagon moved in front of them.

An hour of that, with the wheel-marks beaten out by hoof-marks, and here was another stream, and dry, hard ground beyond. The herd kept on, following a straight course as they chose, the wagon managed to stay in the creek for a quarter of a mile, downstream, sheering off from its old course. Then to continue at right-angles, east and south.

That, as Alamo had hoped, made a puzzle for the others. One which lost them in hour or so. But there had been little hope in him that it would hamper them for long. Like their lobo namesake, they could follow a trail of blood.

It would postpone showdown not avoid it. He swung his own horse to the top of a rising bit of ground as the night grew old, and only the stars were faint in the high blue above. And there, a dim and shadowy object moved, still like a creature nosing its way along the trail.

Now the smell of dawn was faint in the air. Birds were waking, as though this would be like any other day, not a time of massacre. Rock and his horse merged out of the gloom and came up beside him.

"Another hour," Alamo said.

"Dawn," Rock agreed. "And no good place to make a stand. No—"

His voice fell a note, rose again with controlled excitment. He leveled a long arm, pointing.

Alamo saw it then, as well—another earth-bound creature which seemed also to follow a trail—horses with riders, shadowy figures, riding for the dawn-time of attack. Of massacre. Even as they watched, the east grew lighter, and then the two forces

seemed to converge, to merge. Across the distance came the faint sound of gun-fire, the still fainter echo of gobbling cries—the voice, perhaps, of Cherokee or Apache.

They looked at each other, and swung their horses. Likely enough the tribesmen had first sighted the wagon. But there were more scalps to be had this other way. Enough to satisfy hate-frenzy. They'd cross the Arkansas before they camped, and the trail lay open to Texas.

24

ROLLA ELY rode in the saddle again, a little pale, thinned by thirty pounds from his weight of early spring, but with Cherry beside him and a look of content on his face. It wasn't far, now, to the Red. And beyond the Red was Texas.

Alamo rode, apart from the rest, as he had come to do increasingly of late. At first it had been habit born of necessity, to keep a vigilant eye out for enemies. Now, as the need for that lessened, he continued it of choice.

It had been a lucky trip—for those who were returning. Rolla Ely had declared his intention of paying double wages to every relative of the crew who had gone north with him, though there was no precedent for such an act. He and Cherry had been more generous with the others than even their original bargain. And for Alamo, as trail boss, the man who had taken the herd north, it had been beyond generousity. Only that morning, Ely had approached him with an offer of partnership.

"I'll be marryin' Cherry," he explained. "That'll give us a mighty big outfit, a passel of cattle. And now we've the money to do things right, to make money with. Providin' we can still get the herds to market. As big a deal as that, I need a pardner that can do things. You. It'll be a tough proposition. Same as this was. But you can do it."

"There's plenty of trail bosses you can hire," Alamo said harshly.

"Sure. But plenty ain't enough. Ordinary men, good men, can't quite cut the mustard. Besides, the way it stacks up, we'd have no outfit now, if you hadn't taken us through this time. I'm only bein' fair."

That was it, of course. He was a painfully honest man, Rolla Ely, and though he meant it well, the thing was a raw sore, rubbed with salt, for Alamo. He had swung apart by himself, not too graciously, and his thoughts were bitter.

The matter of taking more herds north wouldn't be too bad. The railroad was building west, as had been planned back before the war. Soon there would be a steel rail to the markets of the east. And towns far west of Missouri, out in the Kansas country—away from the renegades who had fattened on blood for so long. Risk there would still be, but things would improve.

With it all, and such a partnership, there would be a fortune. But what was money? It would not bribe a bullet to turn aside, even though aimed from the meanest gun by a nameless savage. Nor would it buy any of the things which really counted.

He'd been wrong, back a while—he could see that now. Wrong about Cherry. He'd classed all women as the same, in his unforgiving bitterness. And the case of Cherry had seemed the most flagrant of all. Yet he'd been wrong—completely, terribly wrong about her.

So it might be that he had been wrong about Sadie as well. Cherry had suggested as much to him, once. He hadn't believed it, then. Now he wondered. But the realization that he might have been only added to the bitterness. For there was a by-now grassy mound, somewhere here on the edge of the Nations. And any hopes he had ever had were buried there.

HE STARTED, seeing Cherry riding alonside. She pointed with outstretched arm.

"There's the Red, way ahead, Alamo. And Texas beyond."

"Yes," he agreed. "You'll soon be home."

"We'll soon be home," she corrected. "Texas is yours as much as mine, Or Rolla's, Alamo. So is the T and Rio. We want you to remember it."

She saw the resentment about his knew was rising, speaking quickly.

"If you ride fast, Alamo, you can cross the Red before sundown. And mouth, checked the retort which she off a little way, down river on the southern bank, there's a small ranch. Some friends of mine live there. Why don't you ride down there, Alamo—tonight?"

He looked at her, minded to refuse, puzzled. But too often had he refused others out of sheer ungraciousness, and there was a quizzical light in her eyes. He had no idea what she meant, but it would do no harm to find out.

"Just as you say," he agreed.

"We'll all be there—tomorrow," Cherry added, and called after him. "Good luck!'

He had no notion of what she might mean. But one thing he had learned. It was hopeless for a man to try to understand a woman. Better just to accept them, and let it go at that. And a nameless excitment was mounting in him as he reached the Red,

It lay, a sheet of placid silver, today. All its turbulence and froth forgotten. His horse splashed in and on across, and this was Texas. And as he turned south, he saw a rider in the distance, and for some odd reason his heart thudded oddly in his breast.

Not until he came closer could he believe it. For there was a mound in the Nations, lonely and deserted. But that was Sadie, there on a horse —one of the horses which had been with the remuda on the way up trail. Sadie, looking a little hesitant and confused and frightened, and very lovely.

She sat there, in the splashing glories of the sunset, not retreating, not approaching. Until he rode up, his face working, still not quite believing.

"Sadie!" he whispered. "It—it is you! I'm not dreamin'!"

"It's me—Alamo," she agreed, in a whisper to match his own. "If—if you want me.'

"Want you?" he said hoarsely. And then he was out of the saddle and had her in his arms at last, as she came down from her's as well.

"I've been a fool," he said finally. "Always a fool. And worse than I ever guessed, before."

Her smile was radiant—with health now, and with promise.

"Everything's ahead of us, Alamo," she said. "That's what counts."

Gradually he understood. How, convinced at reluctant last that she could never win him, that it was Cherry he loved, Sadie had persuaded Diamond, who was her abject slave, to make that sod-topped mound. So that she could ride away—where, she had neither known nor cared. But that mound would be a sign to Alamo that he was free.

It was Cherry, learning of it, who had told her where to go, to this ranch south of the Red, had counseled her to wait for their return. It was all simple enough, when there was understanding. And love.

"I've loved you from the first day I saw you, Sadie," he confessed at last. "Though I've always been too proud and blind a fool to admit it. But now you know."

"Now I know, as I've known all along, that you were a man worth waiting for, Alamo," Sadie said. "I tricked you into marrying me—knowing that a proud rebel like you would never marry a Yankee—I tricked you because it was the only way to get you—and I didn't want to live without you! So I guess, since the war was still on then—that makes me kind of a rebel too, don't it, Alamo?"

Gallows Gold

by Rex Whitechurch

A True Story

WILD JIM Banker had forty-eight hours left and that was all. Half a year ago the doc had said that he might go sooner, or even go the limit, but six months was all the time he had left. So the big cattle driver smiled, sighed, and looked hungrily at the beautiful world. He would have to leave, and wondered what was the best use he could make of the remaining forty-eight hours of life. He wasn't very strong and he'd put in some long hours resting in the sun.

Forty-eight hours. Wild Jim knew the doctor was a specialist, and men of his caliber weren't wrong, as a rule. Riding his piebald up to the rail in front of a saloon, Jim slowly dismounted. Then he stomped down the broad walk toward the express office where there was a checking stand. He wanted to check his saddle carbine.

The Saint Joe-Emporia stage had arrived about an hour ago in a swirling cloud of dust. A young woman was leaning against a rear wheel crying softly into a handkerchief; and startled, Wild Jim Banker stopped. Over his broad bony face moved an expression of sympathy. The neatly tailored young woman was alone and nobody was paying any attention to her. Jim saw she had flame red hair and light gray eyes and a freckled face. He put his carbine under his left arm, reached out his right hand and touched her gently upon the shoulder.

"Something bothering you ma'am??"

"Yes," she said. She looked quickly at him. "But there isn't anything you can do about it. It's too late. The sheriff said a mob entered the jail and took my brother out to hang him. There's about fifty of them, and the sheriff says they're mean."

Jim Banker knocked dust out of his levis. He pushed his hat back on his head. In his dark blue eyes a strange light began to shine. He did not know what he was thinking about exactly. But he felt sorry for this kid."

"Which way did they go?" he asked solemnly.

She pointed east, and Jim saw a flurry of dust rising behind a horde of mounted men.

"I loved him so," she said. "Last week he sent for me. I came all the way from Saint Joe, Mo. We were going to homestead out here." Tears welled up in her eyes again. Her slim pale hands fluttered to her throat.

"What was your brother supposed to have done?" Jim's eyes surveyed her. Slender, deep-bosomed redheads were rare in any country around these parts. In this depleted cow country they just simply did not exist. Jim hadn't seen her equal in all his thirty-seven years. But he wasn't thinking of her as a matured young woman. He saw her as a kid, a kid with big sober eyes that were wet with tears, crying for her brother.

"That man—the sheriff I mean," she faltered, "claimed Robert held up the stage. They didn't find anything on him to prove it except for some brand new twenty dollars gold pieces which had just been minted in San Francisco."

"Shucks, ma'am, that ain't proof," he said.

But he didn't wait to talk to her any more. He ran toward his horse. A few seconds later, Wild Jim Banker was rushing east, spurring his

nag. He headed straight for that cloud of dust. He rode through thick curtains of it. He knew the cordon of lynchers was not far ahead.

Jim Banker overtook the cavalcade as they were in the act of putting the rope around the young suspect's neck. There was an ancient cottonwood spreading its naked gray branches over the road. Jim reined in, his horse lathered.

"Drop that rope!" Jim's voice carried a sinister, dead weight. He sat his mount about twenty feet below the mob. The hot red sun gleamed on his weapon. "Take her down off that limb, and keep your hands away from your guns. You've got th' wrong sow by the ear. That tenderfoot didn't rob no stagecoach. It's a rank miscarriage of justice. Ask me how I know and I'll tell you!"

"We ain't askin' you nothin', mister." A man with a heavy beard thrust himself forward. But his hands were shoulder high. That menacing rifle barrel might start spurting death any minute and they didn't know in a close-packed group such as they were, who'd be the victims. "This feller done it. He's got the new-minted gold in his pocket, or did have. Ten of them twenty dollar gold pieces. I reckon that's proof enough.

Jim Banker laughed. He laughed loud and long and blood stained his chin. His protracted fit of coughing that always followed such mirth, lasted too long and racked him from head to heels. But he kept the carbine steady.

"Untie that boy's hands," Jim said. "You men do what I tell you. I'm the man you want. I ain't lettin' no innocent boy die for me. You hear that? You hear what I said? I robbed th' Emporia stage, not this young tenderfoot. And here's my evidence to prove I ain't joshing you."

Five brand new twenty dollar gold pieces on Jim's palm, gleamed and sparkled ominously in the sunlight. "Reckon that's as much proof as you've got again' him. Now let him go. Then you can swing me, bein' you're dead set on holdin' a necktie party."

There was a stunned interval of silence. Then one of the men released the boy. Jim saw the noose lying on the ground, forming a big O. It was a motionless serpent with a big head lying on the roadside. And he now knew that his neck was getting closer and closer to it.

"All right, men," Wild Jim Banker said, "here's my guns. Jist go on with the nuptials so that none of you be disappointed."

Wild Jim could think of no quicker way to die. He was cutting short his 48-hours, but—what good would the gold do him now. Huh? Why that robbery had taken place a week ago. He'd been saving the loot in the strong box to spend in this last 48-hours.

That was the way James A. Banker, real name Rodlove, died, near Lawrence, Kansas, that fall afternoon in 1870. There was no question about his guilt. Before he died, he directed the men to the hiding place of the loot. Banker was a roving cattle driver and had served with Qauntrell and the James Boys. A doctor was found near Lawrence who admitted that he'd diagnosed Jim's case as consumption and had found one of the man's lungs entirely disintegrated. He'd warned Jim that he had not more than six months left and advised him to seek rest in the sun.

The big bandit hero of many a ballad followed his doctor's advice. Only the night before he'd lost two hundred dollars of the swag in a private poker game at the hotel with young Robert Wright. The boy's story of how he'd won the tell-tale gold was not credited as true and Jim Banker had spent the morning asleep under a tree quite a distance from town. Ironical as it was, it was not any more ironical than the mob's act of hanging a man who was as good as dead when they slid the noose around his neck. Celebrated in ballad and story, Jim Banker soon became a legendary character and his story is to be found in more than one ancient Kansas newspaper.

I let my hands slide down the long, hairy body . . .

A DISCIPLE OF KOO-POO

By Floyd Day

There we was, with the choice of either bein' et by lions, or rottin' our existences away in jail . . .

DOGIES is me and Cactus' line but bein' the law don't onderstand our motives on heppin' these dogies to greener pastures we're layin' low fer a while, Sich bein' the case we ain't reverse to substitootin' or branchin' out in other endeavors. This we've done.

And Lady Luck's herdin' me and Cactus along a mighty pros'pus trail. But I gits a crawlin' in my craw that this Lady Luck is soon gonna give us the jilt. Yuh cain't allus be at the top of the wagon wheel and I figure we're ready fer the revolushun goin' down, what with Cactus skinnin' ol' Doc Koo-Poo outa his medicine wagon and outfit.

'Course I ain't sayin' it was luck concernin' them cards Cactus hauled outa his sleeve to beat ol' Doc. But all that Koo-Poo medicine in brown bottles was shore luck. It ain't in Cactus' make-up, though, to kinda court this Miss Lady Luck gentle. No suh, he pushes her like it's ma-

trimony or bust. But all the time I ain't fergittin' that me and Cactus is still wanted over Bisbee way fer a little job of separatin' some dogies from their relashuns.

Cactus is wound up like one of them eight day clocks, atickin' away at a big crowd conjugated at the back of our medicine wagon.

"Ingrowin' toe-nails yuh got?" he spiels pointin' in the general direction of an ol' billygoat lookin' prospector. "This Koo-Poo'll vamoose the pain and straighten 'em ut like a steer's horn."

I know a sale when I see it so I sashays over with a bottle of this bilge water and collects the buck.

"Ah!" Cactus bellows like a hongry calf chargin' its mammy after it's been lost in the bresh all day. "Here's a gent right heah on hobble-sticks. Yes, suh. A bottle of this Koo-Poo will bloat yuh with health. Yu'll throw them hobble-sticks higher'n a star, mister."

When Cactus said 'star' I warn't shore my peepers were focussed. So I blinks them three-four times and shore 'nuff there was the star awright perched shiny and deefiant on the ol' geezer with the hobble-sticks. It shore looked like bad luck to me and I tries to make Cactus ease off kinda and mebbe pick another sucker. But he shoves me askitter, actin' high and mighty.

"Hobble right up heah, pardner. If a bottle of this Koo-Poo don't make yuh throw them pine slats away ....yes, suh, we'll do jist that. Nawthin' to lose; all to gain. That's our guarantee."

Me, I could see the sheriff's face change from summer to winter, but he hobbles in closer and fishes fer a buck.

"A extree special bottle for sicha a distingust gent," Cactus blabbers on fer show, and steps behind the canvas wagon top fer a bottle on a shelf. It was special awright. I could see that quick-like.

"Not that un," I says to Cactus and makes a grab fer it. It warn't hard fer me to recognize my coal oil bottle 'cause I'm, the gent what builds the fires and does the cookin', when we eat.

But Cactus was already handin' it down and graspin' the buck. "Thank yuh, sheriff. Tell yore friends and pass the good word around. Yuh kin take a swig of it right now, Yes suh." And there ain't a quibble in Cactus' frog-soundin' voice.

I was glad the mules was hitched to the wagon, and I sneak 'round to the front, climbs up on the seat and unties the reins, ready fer the sprint which I know is comin'. I kin see what's goin' on in the back and begin to ease off the brake when I hear —"Whoo-oo! Razzmataz a'mighty! I'm pizened!" I see a pair of crutches shootin' by comet-like and the sheriff floppin' on the ground like somebody'd fished him from a crick.

"Hold on, Cactus!" I yells and hiyies to them sleepy mules. They come out of it like a rattlesnake done struck 'em and we're haidin' fer the open prairee. The only thing I'm hopin' is that somebody'll light a match around the sheriff and destroy the evidence.

Bullets is singin' like yellow-jackets, and bottles crashin' and dancin' like they was afflicted with St. Vitus. I whales them mules across the rump and scorches 'em with some special words I save fer jist such occasion. Good thing it's night to kinda hide us. I could see pistols winkin' back yonder but it warn't no winkin' matter when they spat against the wagon.

Directly I hears a groanin' and loops the reins 'round the brake rod and crawls back to find Cactus. He's down in the wagon bed, bottles dancin' around and hoppin' him on the haid. I drags him to the front and he opens his eyes, pinnin' them on me, scoldin'—like.

"Whatcha sittin' there fer?" he askes, plumb serious. "Give the gent the bottle and git his buck."

I smacks my lips tryin' to hold back the disgust. He's out of his haid, I can see, but that ain't onusual. I says, "Mister, it's yuh what needs the bottle."

He blinks and says, "But I ain't got a buck."

That's down right disgustin' to me

so I pulls a cork from one of them bobbin' bottles and hands him the bottle. "It's on the house," I says.

Well yuh kin say what yuh please 'bout Koo-Poo but it shore got merits. Cactus takes a he-man swig and goes into a contorshun coilin' hisself like a side-winder. Directly he settles down sober-like, and I'm all fer raisin' the price of Koo-Poo to two bucks.

"What happened? Cactus asks meek.

I expound it all to him and he blinks innocentlike, but I knowed that was one of his tricks.

"We gotta ditch this prairie sled," Cactus says climbin up on the seat beside me. "We'll have a posse on our tail now fer shore."

"Well, we ain't 'xactly standin' still," I tells him and smacks the mules again. The wagon's a-bouncin' and groanin', and Cactus is sittin' straddle it saddle fashion.

"Jist the same," Cactus says, "we gotta make faster tracks. This wagon is holdin' us back. We gotta leave it and fork these long ears."

It sounds like wisdom to me and we pulls the Koo-Poo wagon into a mesquite thicket and leave it. The moon is up and we kin see better. But them mules ain't saddle broke none and fer a few minutes me and Cactus puts on a jamboree. Bein' as we got bizness elsewhere we ain't tol'ratin' no foolishness. Finally we straightens out on a horizontal co'se.

IT'S DAYLIGHT when we come to a town tagged Screwworm. It warn't much to look at but it was a place to light. Ain't no life stirrin' 'cept a mangy dawg what comes up and sniffs us then tucks his tail and gallops off. There's deep wagon ruts in the main street and my eyes follow these ontil I see where a wagon circus is set up with a big canvas tent and some red painted wagons kinda drawn in a circle. I gives the town the once over. It's a cowtown awright jedging from the saloons which is crowdin' each other. We ties the mules out back of one of these which is called Maude's Stall. Then we moseys 'round front, flaps the batwings and bellies up to the bar. There ain't no hoomans in sight so Cactus, impatient when he's confronted with refreshments, hammers on the bar with a silver buck what's burnin' his pocket. Directly a bald headed, cross-eyed hombre stumbles from a back door yawnin'.

"Aint cha got sense 'nuff to go home?" he greets onfriendly and calls us names what ain't fit fer print. "This here's a 'spectable town. Lease way this early in the mawnin' it is."

We ain't dispootin' his claim none, but Cactus points out, "We's respectable citizens. All we need is a mawnin' eye opener."

Crosseyes waddles in behind the bar. "You with the circus?" he inquires, but I cain't tell who he's talkin' to.

I was gonna say, "What circus?" cautious-like. But not Cactus. He's always gotta open his big mouth, and he did.

"Me?" he says jabbing his chest with his thumb. "Why, I'm the lion tamer of the outfit!" That's jist like Cactus, he's gotta be the most influential of anything, which is awright with me.

"You don't say?" Crosseyes squeaks, lookin' directly at me.

"Ain't me," I tells him right quick. "Aint catchin' me in a cage full of tomcats."

"Ain't nawthin' to be afeared of," Cactus boasts. "I SLEEPS with 'em. Keeps me warm nights."

"Where wuz yuh last night?" Crosseyes asks pointedly, and I looks to see if he ain't sportin' a depooty badge or somethin'.

But Cactus ain't tongue tied none atall. He's right eloquent on occasions and he comes back. "Why I was sleepin' with my cats, same as I allus does."

"Funny," Crosseyes says suspiciously. "They was round last night lookin' fer the jasper what does the lion act. Said he'd skipped outa the country with the trapeeze girl. Everybody was upset 'cause there was no show."

Cactus looks at me blank-like knowin' he's done put his big foot in his mouth again. I ain't doin' much

better when I says, "We jist come in to take his place."

"Now that's different," Crosseyes says, an' actin' right friendly plops a bottle on the bar. "I like a circus. So you're the lion tamer, eh?"

Cactus pours hisself two stiff ones 'fore I kin get to the bottle. While me and Cactus is arguin' over the bottle I hears Crosseyes say:

"Mawnin', Mr. Wailey," and hears bootsteps behind us. "Yuh circus folks is early customers. Jist met yore new lion tamer here."

I turns to get a fuller look at this Mr. Wailey and he's shaped like a barrel with a pair of feet portroodin' out the bottom and a brown derby restin' on top. I looks at Cactus and he's edgin' fer the door.

This gent Wailey is scrutinizin' us with a pair of shoe-button eyes that ain't missin' no tricks. "Lion tamer, eh?" he says, and starts lickin' his chops.

"Gents," Crosseyes introduces, "this is Mr. Wailey of Blarney and Wailey circus."

We nods, but I can see that Cactus ain't a-tall interested in lions no more, and we start fer the door.

"Jist a minute, friend," Mr. Wailey calls, but I don't like the reflection he puts on 'friends.' "Yuh lookin' fer jobs?"

'We got one," Cactus lies to him.

"Ah," he says, "but I kin give yuh two. One fer each of yuh."

That was right sportin' of him, but I kin see Cactus is thinkin' of them lions and he says, "One's all we kin handle fer the present."

'But yuh told me yuh was a lion tamer," Crosseyes butts in.

"Did I say that?" Cactus asks innocent-like.

"He ain't jist right today," I pipes up. "He got hit on the haid with a bottle last night....."

"I need a lion tamer," Mr. Wailey says. "Ten dollars a performance. We got a show scheduled this afternoon. Whatcha say?"

CACTUS' face is turnin' white, jist like he'd washed it, which he ain't done since I knowed him. He shakes his shaggy haid. "I gotta ask my boss first. We'll ride out and see 'im. Come on, Windfall," he says to me.

We goes out and around the back where we left our mules, but they're gone!

"Respectful town, is it?" Cactus mutters and smokes the mawnin' air with his vocabulary. "Now ain't we a sliced pickle."

I says, "I feel like a sliced pickle after ridin' that razor backed mule." And I warn't relentin' none about the mules.

"But we gotta git out of here," Cactus says, and I kin see he's plump worried. He hauls off and kicks a empty bean can. "I ain't waitin' here fer that sheriff to show up. 'Sides, I ain't figgin' on doin' no stunt like that gent Daniel I read about one time, goin' in a lion's den."

"Well," I says, "we ain't on no famine either. Let's chunk some ham and aigs inside us and we kin arbutrate better."

That suggestion meets with his approval and we prowl around ontil we find a beanery. When we're through, the gal what waited on us is leanin' on the counter with her tongue hangin' out and suckin' in air. We'd had three heppins of ham and aigs and flapjacks with eight cups of coffee.

"Now we kin arbutrate," Cactus says as we walk out to the street. I'm stuffed like a feather bed and fumblin' to get the two top buttons of my britches hooked 'cause there's plenty of folks stirrin' around now. Hosses is tied to hitchracks and the sun is warm makin' me feel lazy. I'm thinkin' mebbe we oughta find a straw pile to flop in. I mentions this to Cactus and right now we're searchin'. We locate the livery stable, and bein' ain't nobody 'round to molest us we scamper up to the hay loft and stretch out. Warn't long even 'fore Cactus' snortin' was music to me.

But it warn't music to the gent standin' over us with a pitchfork.

"Git outa here, yuh bums," this bowlegged little gent is sayin', and meanin' it 'cause he's jabbin' us with that fork. We don't argue none with him, jist git. But we ain't no more 'n out the stable when I grabs Cac-

tus by his shirt tail and hauls him back inside.

"That sheriff has ketched up with us," I tell him, pointin' to the three men on horseback. He peeps 'round the corner and ducks back bug-eyed. Jist then I feel the pitchfork through my britches and look down to see if it ain't comin' plumb through me. I let out a yell and am in the middle of the street as the sheriff and his two depooties ride by. Cactus is right behind me and it warn't seconds 'fore I knowed we was recognized, 'cause bullets is bammin' and kickin' up dust 'round us like raindrops. We ain't lookin' back as we make turns around buildin's and come out in the open. I was wishin' fer that razor-back mule when I spies the big canvas tent and hammers toward it. I'm thinkin' I'm really hoofin' it but if I hadn't of dodged jist then Cactus'd run right over me. I hunches my haid and takes after him like a hound dawg after a rabbit. We ain't no mor'n inside the tent when I ventures a look up jist in time to see Cactus rollin' on the ground graspin' fer wind. He's done run smack dab into Mr. Wailey, and Mr. Wailey ain't budged a inch.

"You boys shore are in a rush fer them jobs I see," Mr. Wailey says calm as a corpse.

Cactus is tryin' to git up on his wobbly laig like a fresh born colt, but the bump ain't slowed his tongue none.

"We're lookin' fer a place to hide," he gasps to Wailey. "We're playin' sheriff and robber. Me an' Windfall is the robbers today. Couple hombres playin' sheriff lookin' fer us." Cactus had a silly grin on his face and I figgered he was out his haid again. "'Side that loses," Cactus goes on, "buys the drinks. You got a good place fer us to hide, Mr. Wailey? Kind of a favor we're askin'."

I'll say this fer Mr. Wailey's credit, he swallows that tale hook, line, and sinker. "Shore boys," he agrees, "Right this way." And he herds us to a wagon, one of them red and gold painted ones with carved jiggers on it, and opens the back door. "In here," he says givin' us a shove. The door clangs shut and it's got the familiar sound of a jail door, and I'm wonderin' if we ain't been tricked. It's so dark in there I'm feelin' like I been dropped in a tub of axle grease.

Cactus says, "Ain't nobody gonna find us heah," which is what's worryin' me.

I fumbles around with my hands outstretched and gits hold of some hair and says, "Whatcha got yore hat off fer, Cactus?"

"I ain't got my sombrero off," he says, and quick-like I realizes he's behind me. I gits a funny feelin' in my stummick like them aigs has hatched out, and I let my hand slide down a long hairy body. There's a low growl and I'm retreatin' full force. But I'm limited in my territory and trip over Cactus.

"Yuh gone loco?" he asks.

I feel somethin' hot blowin' on my face and I says to Cactus, "Stretch yore hand out."

"Lemme outa heah!" he croaks. "There's a lion in heah!"

We beat against the door but it ain't givin' none and directly there's a scratchin' on the door beside me and derned if that lion ain't catchn' on to what we want and is hepin' us.

"He ain't got no teeth!" Cactus enlightns, which is good news. "I had my hand in his mouth." I'm, thinkin' that's better 'n havin' his haid there.

"Yuh kin have him fer a playmate if yuh done got that friendly with him," I says.

It ain't long 'fore I hears a noise outside the wagon and I see the whole side of the wagon droppin' down. I looks out through the bars and there's Mr. Wailey standin' outside with a long black stogie in his teeth.

"Howdy boys," he greets, jist like he ain't done us a dirty trick. We're noncommital.

"I sent yore sheriff away," he says, "but he's comin' back. I told him I'd be on the look out fer yuh. He says he's a real sheriff and he ain't playin'. Said he's gonna find yuh dead or alive. He was right hostile." Mr. Wailey was puffin' away on that cigar like one of them big smoke-stacked engines struttin' up the side of a mountain. "But the sheriff won't find yuh," he went on. "If yuh take

the job I'll make shore of that. Yuh kin see Nero there ain't harmless. Ain't got a tooth in his haid. I'll put yuh in a get-up that nobody'll ever recognize yuh—not even that sheriff."

Cactus is takin' a daylight squint at this Nero lion and he says, "It's awful considerate of yuh, Mr. Wailey," but I could see he was more scaird of the sheriff than of Nero. So he turns to me and says, "We'll oblige 'im, won't we, Windfall?"

I'm thinkin' of that ornery sheriff myself. "I'm susceptible."

MR. WAILEY warn't lyin' when he said nobody'd recognize me and Cactus. There's Cactus in a red uniform with yallow trim and I'm rigged out in a night gown affair with laigs in it and a putty nose that keeps crossin' my peepers. We git our instructions from Mr. Wailey and when the crowd gits corralled I spies the sheriff and his two depooties sittin' on the benches with other folks, but he ain't payin' me no never mind, which I'm mighty happy fer. The lion cage is set up right smack in the middle of everything. Nero's stretched out in the middle of the cage snorin'. I catch a glimpse of Cactus struttin' out in that uniform and I stop to watch him. He opens the little gate of the cage like it ain't nawthin' onusual. There's a runway goin' into the cage which I reckon is for Nero to use.

The crowd cheers and a couple galoots fire off their six-shooters, and Cactus is bendin' and bowin' like one them opree singers we'd seen in Tombstone one time. You'd think he owned this spread the way he's carryin' on. Then I see Mr. Wailey waddlin' out and he starts bellowin' like a mad bull.

"Ladees and gentlemun! Blarney and Wailey Circus presents fer yore innertainment the world's greatest lion t a m e r. . . . Professer Muzzleguts!"

Cactus has a long whip what he goes to crack at Nero who is now beginnin' to show a little life. But Cactus ain't never had nothin' to do with a whip and it gets tangled round his feet and he trips hisself. Nero cocks his haid at him and trots off to take a seat on a stool and yawn. I'm lookin' back up at the sheriff to see if he ain't superstitious, but he's sittin' there crackin' peanuts and he ain't no wiser'n a frawg in a snake's belly. I'm smilin' behind that putty nose about how clever me and Cactus is when I hear a commoshun over in the lion cage.

"Wow!" I hear Cactus, and spins around to see him goin' up the bars like a squirrel up a tree. Then I sees the lions. Not one—but four!

"Windfall! Git me outa heah! We been tricked!"

I take three leaps and I'm beside the cage. Them three new lions is growlin' and roarin' like they's hongry and they're gazin' up at Cactus hangin' on the bars. My adams-apple is gone on a indeependent spree and I ain't got no control of it.

"Open the gate and let them lions out!" Cactus yells to me. But I ain't hankerin' none to mix with 'em. They ain't a-tall friendly like Nero, and one of them springs up high and comes back down with a mouthful of Cactus' britches.

"He's exposin' me!" Cactus screams accusin'ly, and I'm thinkin' he oughta said, "He's disposin' me," but grammaw ain't nawthin' between me and Cactus and he's the awnly pardner I got. I'm gettin' kinda mad now about this trick Mr. Wailey has played on Cactus, and I barge into the cage gate and fling it open.

Cactus turns loose his holt on the bars and lights runnin'. Them lions is stunned with our act—but not fer long. Me and Cactus is hotfootin' it fer parts unknown, and them lions think its a game of tag. But I know this is one game me and Cactus had not oughta lose. I look back as we race from the circus tent and them lions is right in our tracks kinda lopin' along. But they ain't deceivin' me none 'cause I'm travelin' and cain't see nothin' but a blurr as me and Cactus race by the spectators, who is yowlin' like tomcats in a alley. We hits the main street runnin' neck and neck. Far as me and Cactus is concerned it's a dead heat but I look back and see we ain't winnin' the

race 'cause them lions is gainin' now, and behind them is three hombres horseback. Sweat's in my eyes but I kin tell its the sheriff and his depooties. It looks like coffins fer me and Cactus, and I'm beginnin' to see no sense to gettin' all tired out fer my own funeral, and slows down.

"Whatcha waitin' fer?" Cactus wheezes.

"I'm lookin' fer my second wind," I says. "My fust one's all used up." But I change my mind completely when I feel a hot wind at the seat of my britches and bear down on my laigs again. I whirls by Cactus and he looks up surprised.

"Whose that?' he calls.

"It's me."

"Didja get yore second wind?"

"Naw," I fling over my shoulder, "but that lion's breath is down right sickenin'." Just then I hear a deep growl, followed by a rippin'. I glance over my shoulder and there's Cactus runnin' in his underware. I think that's a good idee and start unbuttonin' my britches. I let them slip down thinkin' I kin jist step out of them. But I miscalculates. I'd worn them britches so long they has an attachment to me and they hangs at my boot tops. Then I'm down on the ground eatin' dirt and gnawin' mesquite.

"Cactus!" I yells. "Wait a minute! Let's talk over some stradegy!" All the time I'm buryin' my haid like a gopher makin' a new hole. But I ain't got the knack fer diggin'. I hear shots behind and dares to raise my haid, hopin' I don't git it bit off. I'm plumb surprised when I see the lions has given up the chase and is fightin' over Cactus britches. But the sheriff ain't givin' up so easy. He and his two depooties is thunderin' down on us just as I kicks outa my britches and takes out after Cactus. But it ain't no use now. Cactus is barely trottin', and my laigs is plumb ornery.

"Dad blame yore sidewinder hides," the sheriff bellows as he ketches up and throws his gun on us. I look the situation over and resigns myself pronto to a seige of cell life. But not Cactus.

"Howdy sheriff," Cactus greets him jist as though he'd met him on his way into a saloon. "I see yu're shore lookin' fine."

"Dad blame right," he says, "and if yuh resist the law anymore I'll see that you get ninety-nine years of hard work."

I ain't likin' this hard work part and I says, "We're shore willin' to oblige."

He holsters his gun and acts right friendly fer a change. "Where yuh hidin that Koo-poo medicine?" he wants to know. Me and Cactus ain't answerin' because its evidence against us. The sheriff snaps like a turtle and lifts his gun like he means business. I figgers now that it ain't no use antagonizin' him, so I starts pointin' back across the prairee.

"Back yonder," I says.

"I want a bottle of that bilge water fer a friend of mine," the sheriff says. "He's flat on his back and I reckon Koo-poo 'll git him up. It shore fixed me jist like yuh boys said."

"Then yuh ain't wantin' to take us to jail?" Cactus asks faintly.

"Gawd no," the sheriff says. "I jist want another bottle of Koo-poo."

'Takes off warts, straightens toe nails, removes or grows hair, mends bones," Cactus sing-songs, and I kin see he's right back corrallin' some more trouble fer us. I'm walkin' back lookin' fer a gent to go 'round half nakid 'fore a bunch of folks he's sellin' Koo-poo to.

★ Judgment ★

by Arthur Leo Zagat

John Rand figured he could make the murder of his partner look like an accident, but . . .

IT WAS the ingrained habit of a a woodsman, John Rand supposed, that brought him up the steep bank so silently. The underbrush did rustle a little; but that slight sound was covered for Pete Colt by the sound of his axe for it chunked on steadily, not stopping even when Rand was close enough to peer at him through a screen of leaves.

Rand did not quite know why he didn't push through that screen, why he crouched there, rigid, watching his partner.

Long years of prospecting had weathered Colt's complexion to the essentials of skin and bone; but though Pete's hair fell in a white mane to his shoulders he could still swing an axe with the best. There was something almost of joy in the way he went at it, and Rand knew why that was. He knew it was because the birch Pete was cutting down was for the cabin they'd live in while they worked the rich gold strike they'd made at last.

Chunk. The axe bit its wedge deeper into the wood. *Chunk.* It thudded against the close, dark greenery of the forest and to Pete Colt it must have been a lonely sound, for as far as he knew there was no ther human within half a day's journey. *Chunk.* Pete could not know that John Rand was not far down the stream whose banks here were rotten with yellow gold, that John was not paddling hard toward Barkerton to file their claims.

Chunk. The gleaming bit sank helve deep. A chip flew and the birch shuddered with almost human agony through all of its white height.

John Rand's eyes slitted. Abruptly, he knew why he'd chosen to return for the bag of provisions that unaccountably had been left out of his canoe's lading, although he easily could have shot enough game with the revolver at his belt. He knew now why he'd slipped so stealthily behind Pete, why he crouched here now, his thigh muscles quivering.

Pete slashed a final blow into the cut. The tree leaned majestically, and slowly, and now faster as the old man gauged the fall and stepped back just far enough to avoid the farthest spread of its boughs.

Rand's fists pounded hard between his shoulders, hurled him forward again under the down-rushing trunk.

The birch's crash was thunderous. Then there was no sound except John Rand's triumphant laugh. That, too, thinned—ended. Rand stared at the face that was all he could see of Pete Colt. Sunlight striking through the tree's still threshing leaves flickered on closing eyes, on gaunt, hollow cheeks. The face was so utterly without life, yet somehow so accusing..

Pete Colt was dead.

Panic whirled Rand from that face, sent him down the bank, stopped him! He stared at a footprint in the soft earth, his footprint.

He fought the panic down. He must use his head; he must take care of that. He must brush out the tracks he'd made climbing the bank and those he'd make climbing down again to

the canoe. He imposed calm on himself, imposed crafty shrewdness; then he was obliterating the spoor, obliterating all signs that might bring his crime home to him.

IT WAS done. John Rand knelt in the bottom of his canoe and plunged his paddle into the stream. He blanked his mind to the recollection of the gaunt, accusing face under the birch leaves' green shudder, permitted himself awareness only of the swift rush of water.

His canoe was swift, fairly leaping downstream between the high

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banks and between the pathless woods into which only a chance hunter ever penetrated. The gloom of the forest closed in on the stream, and its brooding silence. Wet-black boulders fanged out of the rushing water; sudden whirlpools sucked at the canoe's nose. Rand fought the stream's tricks with consummate skill, and fighting them found himself able to think clearly again.

What he had done was done and there was no use regretting it. Regret it? Why? It was all Pete's fault. It was Pete who'd suggested that they stake partnership claims rather than individual ones, arguing that in this way there would be no ill-feeling if one stretch of bank proved out richer than another. It was Pete who'd suggested that John Rand file the claims because he was the younger and would make better time to Barkerton.

And it was Pete who'd forgotten to put the provisions sack in the canoe.

Funny the way it had worked out. Pete was dead now, and John Rand was a rich man, twice as rich as if he had made the strike alone. The law said that a dead man's share in partnership claims reverted to the other partner if there were no heirs, and Colt was utterly without kith or kin. There was nobody to care what had happened to him except the Law, and Rand had made himself safe from the law.

When he returned, the inevitable stampede of gold-hungry men at his heels, he would find his partner under the birch, dead for five days. John would be appalled by the old man's fatal carelessness, but the others' envy of him would be doubled by the doubling of his fortune.

All right. The thing to do was to forget all about what he had done. Not forget it—cast it utterly out of his mind. He had left Pete Colt this morning, hale and hearty. That was all he knew, that was all he would ever know.

THE DUSK began to seep out of the forest, and out of the gray sky. Shadows appeared on the water to simulate rocks, and the rocks were like shadows; John Rand knew he could go no further till dawn.

He scowled, driving the canoe for a bit of shelving bank, where the trees retreated to leave a small, grass-floored clearing. He had recognized a lightning-blasted oak and he knew he would not dare light a fire to show where he had camped. That would place his night camp only a half days paddle from the claim and he didn't want to have to explain why he had started so late; explanations would be dangerous.

Rand reached the little craft, drew it safely up, stretched his big-boned frame.

"You made slow time, John."

Rand's hand flashed to the gun in his belt as he whirled to the voice. There was no one there to have spoken, no one at all was in the misted clearing. But the voice had been so clear, so distinct; high-pitched and cracked and a little querelous as Pete Colt's voice always was.

Bah! Rand himself had spoken aloud, as one gets in a habit of doing, alone in the woods. That was it, of course that was it.

He was tired; dog-tired. No wonder! He had left the claim at dawn. Had eaten nothing—

"Murder will out."

John Rand's flesh, his bones, gathered into themselves, so that his mackinaw and corduroy breeches hung loosely on him. His shaggy brows beetled over eyes that stared into the woods, pupil-dilated eyes darkly clouded with terror.

Something moved among the black tree bulks! Orange-red flame jetted at it from Rand's gun, into a swirl of wraith-like ground haze. Rand could see only a little way into the woods, but it was far enough for him to know there was nothing there. To know that Pete Colt was not there.

How could Pete be there? Pete lay dead under tons of wood, miles upstream.

(Continued On Page 84)

(Continued From Page 83)

Was he sure? Dead sure? Rand recalled that he hadn't looked once at the body under the tree, all the time he had worked to obliterate the marks of his presence. But what of that? If Colt hadn't instantly been killed he was inescapably pinned down. He *would* be dead before anyone saw him again.

Even if, by some miracle, Colt were unhurt and had gotten free, he could by no imagining have reached here through the woods and he had no canoe. This was the only one they owned between them.

John Rand laughed, and shivered at the sound of that laugh. The shivers ran through him, and a damp chill penetrated to his very marrow. He was cold—a fire would warm him, fire would give him light. No matter what it might mean later on he must have a fire!

Streamers of dry bark hung raggedly from the lightning-killed oak. There were dead twigs low enough down for him to reach, and the spring freshets had thrown up three arm-thick branches. Kindling and firewood were ready to his hand, he would not have to go into the woods for them.

Why should he be afraid to go into the woods?

RAND DIDN'T answer that question, he didn't dare answer it. He built his fire hastily, too hastily. His fumbling, nervous fingers were clumsy, and by the time he's rasped into flame the match from the metal box he fished out of his pocket, by the time the first layer of twigs had caught, it was full dark.

But it was cheerful. It was warm John Rand laid his revolver on the ground, close to him, and squatted over the fire. It warmed him and he was no longer afraid. He looked deep into the flame, and the bright heart of it was a bright nugget of molten gold. Gold would buy swell clothes for him; a house on 'Frisco's Nob

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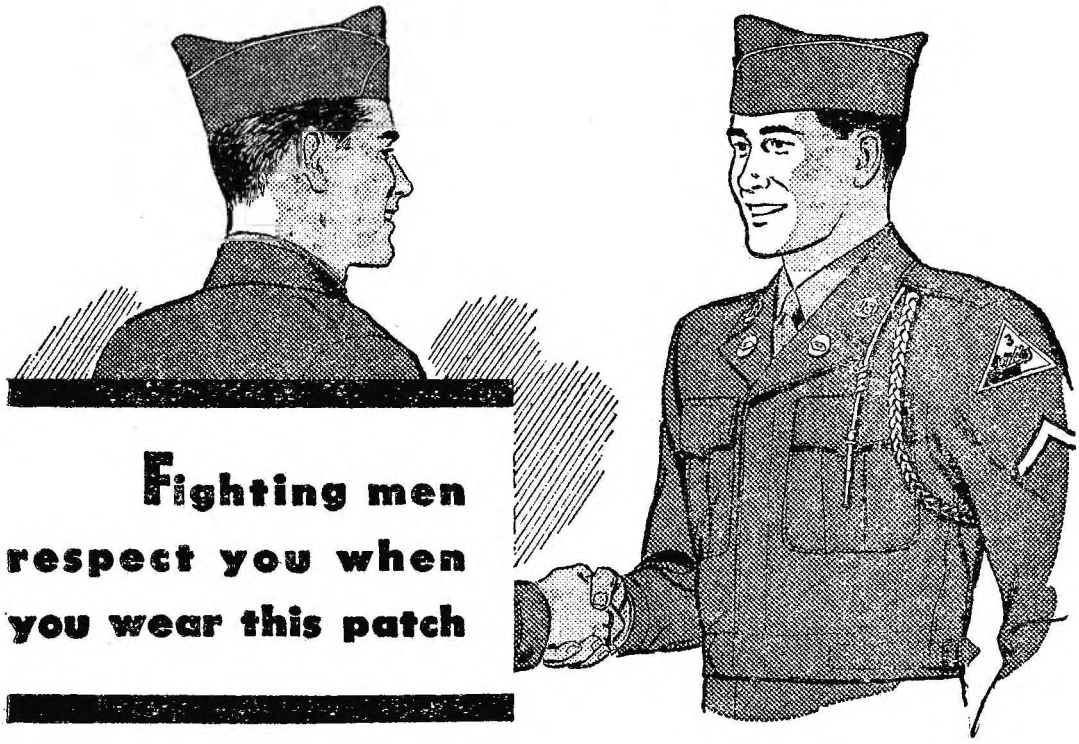

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CAREERS WITH A FUTURE

U. S. Army and U. S. Air Force

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Hill where only the wealthy lived. It would buy a woman for him; a white-skinned, red-lipped, deep-breasted woman like the one who had pulled her silk skirts daintily from him that time on the ferry from Oakland . . .

He would work the claim for a year, and then he would sell it. He would travel. He would . . . There were so many things he could do with the gold.

"You lived only to search for it, Pete," he muttered. "You wouldn't have known what to do with it."

"I might have died in bed, John. I might have died between white, clean linen sheets."

Rand snatched up the gun as he twisted to the voice. The blue barrel snouted pointblank at a weazened small figure squatting across the fire from him, as Pete Colt had so often squatted.

"You can't kill me twice," Pete sighed. *"Not twice."*

The firelight flickered on Pete Colt's face and his leathery cheeks were gaunt, hollow.

Rand had never before noticed how deep-sunk Pete's eyes were. He had never noticed how much like a skull Pete's head was, a skull gruesomely crowned by a mane of hair that was pure white even in the wavering yellow-red of the fire.

"You are frightened." Colt's fleshless lips parted in a grisly smile. "You needn't be frightened of me. I bear you no ill-will for what you have done. Where you have sent me there is no such thing as ill-will. There is only justice."

JOHN RAND heard the rustle of wind in the leaves. He heard another faint sound. *Chunk.* It was very distant. *Chunk.* It seemed to come from far up the stream. *Chunk.* It was like the sound Pete Colt's axe had made, biting into the birch that was to kill Pete Colt...

"You don't believe me, John. But you will believe me when you hear

the message I have for you. The warning. You planned well, but something happened you couldn't know about, and couldn't guard against. A couple of men who have been cruising timber came down the stream about two hours after you left. They saw me, and my body was still warm when they got to me. So you see, John, you have got to get to Barkerton so quickly that no one can figure out the possibility of your having left *after* I died instead of before.

"Listen." The apparition stabbed a gnarled finger into the blackness, pointing upstream. *"They're coming now!"*

Rand's head twisted to look. Twisted back. Pete was gone! Rand was alone with the fire. He was alone with terror.

He jumped up. "Gawd!" The monosyllable spewed from between his cold lips. His hands fisted, so tightly their nails cut his palm.

Chunk! The axe-sound was nearer! *Chunk!* It wasn't the sound of an axe, it was the sound of paddles chunking into the stream. The timber cruisers hadn't stopped long at the camp. They had done what they could for Pete Colt and now they were paddling fast to make up for lost time. They would get to Barkerton before Rand...

No! If they could chance the rocks in the dark so could he. No two men could paddle as fast as he. He would drive through the night. He would make up the hours he had lost. That would place this fire as having been made at noon today. It would place him here at noon and instead of betraying him it would make his alibi all the more certain.

Rand scooped up handfuls of dirt, slammed them down on the blaze. It was quenched. He threw himself to the water's edge, frantic with the need for haste. His hands closed on the canoe's gunwale, shoved it free of the bank's clutch. He leaped in, snatched up his paddle.

The current took the craft, swung it. Rand dipped his blade, dipped again.

Something had hold of the canoe,

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something that would not let it go. A scream burst from Rand's lips as a pallid spot in the darkness took form as Pete Colt's face...

A rock sliced open the shell. Rand screamed again, and then he was swamped by a swirling, insensate turmoil of brawling water. It pounded him against stone, battered him...

A BEAM of white light scythed the forest darkness.

"Hey!" Hen Corbin exclaimed. "What's that?—Gees! It's a man, caught on a rock. He's—hell, I guess he was a man once. He's nothin' but pulp now."

"There's what's left uv his canoe," Tim Sanders jerked his paddle toward a mass of splinters. "What in the name uh Satan d'yuh think the damn fool thought he was doin', tryin' to run the rapids at night without an acetylene lamp like ours?"

"I dunno. Maybe..."

"Hello there!" A thin, querelous voice threaded the darkness. "In here. Here's the clearing where I told you I'd meet you."

The white beam swung, picked out of the night a wiry, white-haired figure astraddle on the bank, a lightning-riven oak behind it.

"Wuz that yuhr partner yuh wanted to locate?" Sanders queried as the bow of the timber cruisers' craft grated on the shelving shore.

"I got here just in time to see the crazy galoot shoving off." Colt's leathery face grimaced, as if in grief. "Before I could yell he was smashed up. Guess my little surprise didn't work out like I meant it to."

"If yuh hadn't made us set you on shore back there an' wait a while so's yuh could sneak up on him, we'd of got here in time to save him. He did not have the luck yuh had, us coming along in time to chop yuh loose from that tree yuh got caught under. Nor what we had, gettin' to file claims next tuh yuhr discovery stakes."

"No," Pete Colt sighed. "John Rand didn't have no luck. None at all. No more than he had judgment."

Bum's Luck

by E. L. Kibbe

A BUM stole a pie one day, during the gold rush era of Virginia City, Montana, with astonishing results.

"Bummer Dan," they called the good-for-nothing, and the way he managed to get by without labor, in a mining camp where nearly everyone was a hard worker, at first amused, then irked the miners.

One day Bummer Dan was caught red-handed in the act of stuffing himself on a pie he had stolen from a cook shack. This, the miners decided, was too much; Bummer Dan would pay.

They escorted the protesting gent to a section of the gulch where nobody had ever dug, because the formation didn't appear favorable. They thrust a pickax into his unwilling hands, and ordered him to get busy.

Bummer Dan's reluctance was overcome by curses and threats, and the party left him digging, half-heartedly.

"Keep diggin'!" was their parting command, "We'll be back right pronto!"

Return they did, to find Bummer Dan sitting nonchalantly on the edge of a good-sized hole, pouring gravel back and forth from one hand to the other, gravel that was threaded and crossed with yellow-nuggets and dust.

Bummer Dan's Bar carried the highest percentage of gold ever discovered in Alder Gulch. It was as close as possible to the Mother Lode.

THE END

THE REAL WEST

MAN OF MYSTERY

by Lee Thomas

BUCKSKIN Frank Leslie was truly a man of mystery. Nobody seems to know much about his early life, and history picks up his story as he rode into Tombstone, Arizona, around 1880, when that roaring mining-camp was in its wild heyday. Now, sixty-five years later, legend and rumor have become mixed in the passage of time but one thing seems to stand out clearly—Buckskin Frank Leslie was a killer.

Slender, good-looking, he was proud of himself, and his destiny. He started tending bar in the Oriental Saloon, and now and then he dropped a word or two about the Plains, where he had presumably hunted buffalo. He earned his nickname through his fancy vest. Most bartenders wore the proverbial black-serge vest; Frank Leslie wore a skin-tight, yellow buck skin vest. He spent ten years in roaring, lusty Tombstone. Then he spent seven years more in Arizona; only instead of working at the Oriental he worked for the great territory of Arizona—with a pick and shovel at the Territorial Penitentiary at Yuma.

First he killed a man named Killeen. The fight centered around Killeen's pretty wife, who decided Buckskin Frank's company was more suiting then her husband's. Killeen decided otherwise and was foolish enough to express his opinions to Buckskin Frank. Tombstone, the town that boasted it "had a man each morning for breakfast," dined double that day, for it had Killeen for "supper."

Buckskin Frank married the widow and moved ahead through Tombstone's lower stratum of society, that which consisted of gamblers and saloonmen and hanger-ons around the many bars. After that, nobody cared about his past—where he was born and raised, where he had been before coming to Tombstone. They just wanted to keep out of the range of his six-shooter.

John Ringo, the cowthief and badman, was still unimpressed. He challenged Buckskin Frank and they had words; this did not, though lead to gunplay. John Ringo left and a few hours later was found dead out in a gulch. Some citizens claimed they also saw Buckskin Frank ride his horse into the stable behind the Oriental, the bronc flecked with lather and blowing from a hard ride. A few minutes later, a cowboy brought in word of John Ringo's death.

Buckskin Frank was questioned about his part, if any, in killing Jonn Ringo, "I was just out exercisin' my hoss," he said. "He stands aroun' the stable too much an' I was runnin' some of the ginger outa him." He moved down the bar. "What'll yours be, miner?"

John Ringo's death was listed in official records as a suicide and the mystery around Buckskin Frank continued to grow. In the spring of 1882 he had some words with a man—a miner—and killed him. The mines were still pouring out their millions in silver and Buckskin Frank and the others were too busy trying to get more than their share of the bullion. What was the death of an-

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other man? Boothill, so the better element said, was growing as fast as the town.

Buckskin Frank moved through the saloons, a quiet young man with a babyish face adorned by long, drooping mustaches. Mrs. Killeen had been forgotten and shoved into the discard and by now he had some other lady love. Most of the time he tended bar in the Oriental or the Bird Cage. Sometimes he gambled; he was a good man with the pasteboards. A few times, so the oldtimers say, he had ridden with John Ringo and his outlaws, who had their headquarters close by. Maybe he had ridden with the longriders and maybe, during a raid, he had quarreled with Ringo—a quarrel which led to Ringo's death. But this latter statement was, so the oldtimers said, mostly conjecture. Riding a horse was work and Buckskin Frank's recored shows he was very allergic to any physical exercise more strenuous than navigating a schooner of beer across a bar or lifting an ace out of a pack of cards.

AT THAT time Tombstone was the toughest town in the world. Roughnecks from all over the world came to bask in its warm sun and to gain a living by not working, and Buckskin Frank was one of the shining lights of the lower elements. He was the type of man that many Tombstone matrons pointed out to their little sons with, "When you grow up, don't be like him." But that didn't bother him. He was vain and egoistic and he did much to make the aura of mystery that surrounded him grow bigger and thicker.

Then he had a run-in with Billy Claibourne.

Billy was just a wild kid—not more than twenty—and to him John Ringo was a god, a model to follow. When they found John Ringo dead, a bullet through his head, young Billy went hog-wild. The wound had no powder-marks around it, a thing that most self-inflicted bullet wounds

boast, and this convinced Billy Claibourne that Buckskin Frank had murdered his hero, despite the bartender's protests to the contrary. So Billy decided to call Buckskin Frank Leslie.

He rode into Tombstone one sunny afternoon. Buckskin Frank was tending bar in the Oriental, and Billy headed toward that emporium's well-oiled swinging-doors. Billy took two quick, fast drinks of whiskey and it burned confidently deep in his belly, stoking his desire for gunplay. He and Buckskin Frank had words and the bartender got the bouncer to throw the cowpuncher outside on the plank sidewalk. This accomplished, the bouncer walked back, rubbing his hands together and grinning, and Buckskin Frank treated him to a free drink, on the house.

"That young feller means trouble," an old man told Buckskin Frank.

Buckskin Frank nodded and kept pouring out drinks. Outside, Billy Claibourne got to his feet, cursing the bartender violently. This accomplished, he wobbled down the street, and proceeded to get himself into the same condition as the swing-doors of the Oriental—he got well-oiled.

History records that this was the worst thing the cowpuncher could do. A man needed perfect coordination of brain and shooting-finger when he went against Buckskin Frank—and whiskey has a way of wrecking a man's gunspeed. Buckskin Frank had a holster that ran on a swivel; all he had to do was lift the nose of his gun up, even though it were still in leather, and shoot from the hip, the bullet coming through the tip of his holster. And he was sober.

Claibourne walked behind a bar and got a Winchester rifle. He went down the street, walking rather unsteadily on his high-heeled boots, jacking a cartridge into the barrel. He stationed himself on the corner of Allen and Fifth Streets and hollered for Buckskin Frank to come out of the Oriental, just across the street.

"He's out there, Buckskin," the old

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man stated. "I tol' you he'd come back. He's out t'kill ye."

The bartender had his gun in a drawer. He untied his apron, hung it on a hook, pulled the gun out of the drawer and walked out the side door. He came in from Claibourne's side and was within a few feet of the man when he called to him.

Here historians and the tongues of old timers vary. Some claim that Billy Claibourne got in one shot, his rifleball hitting the planks at Buckskin Frank's boots; others stated, in all sincerity, that Buckskin Frank did not give him a chance, shooting him down from behind. They all seem to agree on one thing, though: five bullets tore into Claibourne and when they had quit coming, the cowpuncher was plenty dead. Probably Buckskin Frank only had five cartridges in his six-shooter. Careful gunmen usually kept the hammer resting on an empty chamber in the cylinder of their guns.

Buckskin Frank came back, put his six-shooter away, and tied his apron around his slim waist. "What will it be, miner? Whiskey or beer?"

A hanger-on came in, panting. "Claibourne's dead, Buckskin. They're totin' him into the undertaker's."

Buckskin Frank nodded and kept on tending bar.

THE LOCAL law was watching him close, hoping to get some evidence on him. He was arrested. Buckskin surrendered peacefully. His testimony at the coroner's inquest cleared him: he had shot, he claimed, in self defense. He ran a slow gaze across the six man jury letting his eyes linger momentarily on each man. Maybe that hard gaze helped the jury-men make up their collective mind. Yes he had acted in defense of his life; yes, he was free again. He walked out and went back to tending bar.

The veil of mystery deepened. Who was this man who was so deadly with his weapons? Rumor had it that

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he came from a rich family—that he was an outcast from his circle because of choice and wildness. Rumor had other stories, too; some were realistic and could possibly be true, others were too wild, too fantastic to have any concrete foundation. And Buckskin Frank made no move, stated no words, that would clear up the mystery surrounding him.

He moved through his circle—the gamblers and lower form of Tombstone life—a big man in a small, hard environment. Now men were very considerate in calling him, for a man who would shoot from behind was more than dangerous—he was, by instinct and choice, a wanton killer. But still, some adventurous souls, fired by ambition and whiskey, would call him.

He said once, in his dry way, that he was not superstitious—he had, he stated, killed thirteen men to date. He decided that thirteen was not an unlucky number for him. Later he was to find out that fourteen was, for the fourteenth person he killed was not a man, it was a woman.

Her name was Diamond Annie. Perhaps she had other names, among them her real one, but upon arriving in Tombstone, she had taken the handle of Diamond Annie. She had taken a shine to Buckskin Frank, too.

She had a "'husband" already; Buckskin Frank disposed of him,acting in his usual efficient manner. The "husband" went up the road to Boothill Cemetery. Whether he was carried feet first or head first is not recorded but records do show he was planted deep in Arizona and weighted down by Buckskin Frank's lead which was, of course, fired in "self defense."

Buckskin Frank's life with Diamond Annie was a hectic affair. Diamond Annie left her "profession" and she and the gambler bought a ranch. Here they argued and drank while a cowboy ran the outfit as best he could. One day the cowboy came home and Diamond Annie lay dead, killed by the gun in Buckskin

Frank's hand. The gambler then pumped bullets into the cowboy, dropping him on the floor.

His plan was simple. Although Diamond Annie did not have a first class reputation around Tombstone, she was still a woman—and some of the Tombstone denizens, even some of the toughest, had scruples against killing a woman. He decided he would lay the blame for her passing on the shoulders of the cowboy and he would claim that he killed the cowboy to avenge the death of his beloved.

A deputy, Bill King, was sent out to take Buckskin Frank into jail. The local law now had all the evidence it needed; Buckskin Frank was already on his way to Yuma, in the eyes of the law. Bill King had some misgivings but they were all killed when he and his two men met Buckskin Frank riding into town.

"I killed that cowboy who worked for me," the gambler said. "I come into the house just as he got done killin' Diamond Annie. I come in to give myself up."

He handed over his six-shooter. King, amazed at his good luck, jagged into Tombstone with the gambler, his two men following. They came in the office and there Bucksin Frank saw the man he thought he had killed. He tried to get away but they dragged him back into a cell. He drew life in Yuma pen.

HERE AGAIN mystery enters the life-story of Buckskin Frank Leslie, for he only served seven years of his sentence and then he was released. Rumor held it that, during his term, the publicity given his case was read by a wealthy woman in California, who contacted him through the mails. One letter led to another and each letter led closer to love. She came out to visit him, leaving her husband.

Another rumor—and this seems the more logical—is that a group of Tombstone people, through a petition, got him released. Maybe they wanted him to return to Tombstone and kill some more undesirable citizens, thereby saving the law the cost and danger of that task. Anyway, Buckskin Frank limped back to Tombstone.

He came into Bill King's bar. The former deputy, expecting trouble, was ready for anything. But Buckskin Frank, most of his dapperness gone, pale from his long term behind bars, only ordered a drink.

"I'm goin' into Mexico," he stated. "This town sure has gone to the dogs, huh?"

King stated that it had. Water had flooded the mines, writing in swirling eddies the death of the silver mining. With the mines flooded, people left Tombstone.

"An' they cain't pump the water out?"

King told him they had tried, but it came in just as fast as it was pumped out, although many pumps were used.

"Not much of a burg now," he said slowly.

Tombstone never saw him again. Now and then, word trekked in through various channels. Buckskin Frank was in San Francisco—he had married the woman who had written to him in Yuma—he was in Alaska, cashing in on the gold rush.

Rumor said he had changed his wild ways and gone back to his supposedly rich parents. Changed his ways? Tombstone citizens—those who were left—snickered at that. Can a pinto hoss change his color?

Nobody seems to know how, or where, Bucksin Frank died. Some claimed he went down in a Mexican revolution; others he died in the Klondike. But they all seemed to agree on his manner of death.

He had, they said, been killed by a bullet. And that summation seems the most logical. For he had used his gun plenty, and reason confirmed he would use it again. And when a man's gunspeed slowed down, somebody got him.

But nobody has penetrated the mystery surrounding Buckskin Frank Leslie's death.

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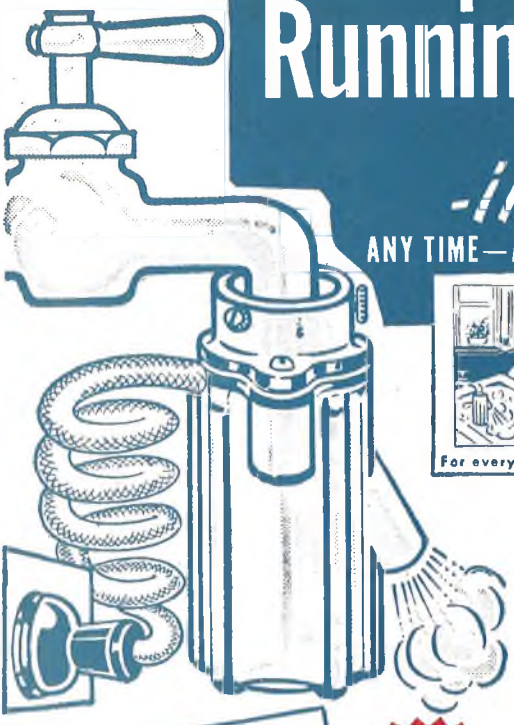

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