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JUNE

WESTERN

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NOVEL**



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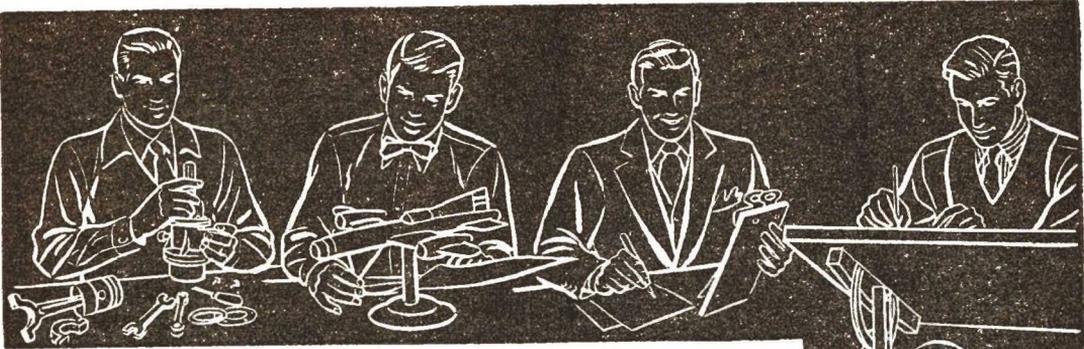
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1949

BLUE RIBBON
WESTERN

NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

Two-Bit Rancher

by CHARLES N. HECKELMANN . . . 6

Bitter in Bill Raven's heart was the realization that not only did he stand alone, but that when Sue Bigelow decided to take action, she would turn against him and play into Goodwin's hands!

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Sam Teel hadn't actually sold himself; no, rather he'd given his honor away!

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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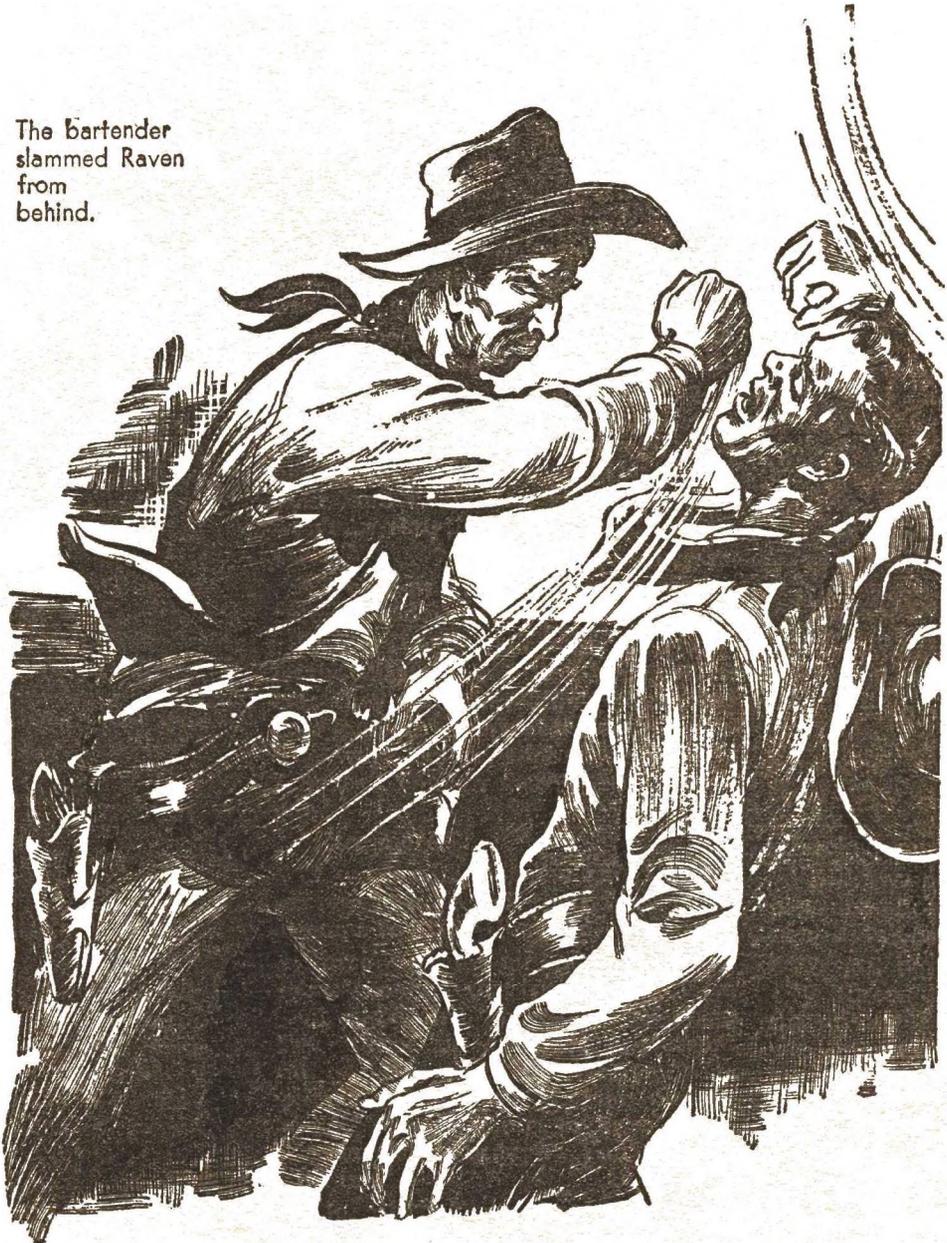
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QUICK-TRIGGER NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

Complete in This Issue

The bartender
slammed Raven
from
behind.



Two-Bit Rancher

by CHARLES N. HECKELMANN



Trouble was no stranger to Bill Raven, and when he hurried back home to find his brother dead and his holdings menaced by the ambitions of an old-time enemy, Josh Goodwin, Bill knew what to do. But he hadn't counted on Sue Bigelow saying: "All you care about is fighting, Bill Raven," and taking sides against him with the polecats who aimed to wipe out all the small ranchers in the section.

IN THE MIDDLE of a long, hot afternoon Bill Raven came out of the foothills north of the cowtown of Bradley, in Western Wyoming, and rode down the last grade toward the broad avenue of gray dust that was the town's main street. He was a tall, heavy-boned man with alert, gray-blue eyes and a roughly planed face that had been deeply tanned by summer's sun and wind.

The sweat-streaked flanks of the horse, the faint ring of yellow foam that had dried around the animal's mouth, showed that horse and rider had journeyed fast and far this day. Yet just as the rider permitted no sign of the deep-seated weariness that was in him to appear on his face, so the gelding moved out strongly along the trail in a swift, high-stepping canter. They were two of a kind—that rider and the horse beneath him; strong and clean-limbed, with a look of hard competence about them.

Raven leaned forward imperceptibly as the outlines of the town took shape before him. Beneath the blazing sun the false-fronted wooden buildings that faced each other across the rutted street looked drab and beaten. Here and there, horses stood hip-shot at hitching racks that lined the edges of the plank sidewalks.

Everything was the same. The town still had the appearance of drowsing in the sun; the usual idlers perched on chairs or cracker boxes on the hotel porch. A chap-clad cowpuncher led a horse out of the livery, paused to let the animal drink from the watering trough, then swung into the saddle. Another man emerged behind him and followed the same ritual. Then both riders pushed their mounts into the street and came toward Raven.

He watched them with a careful intensity, noting packed bedrolls strapped behind the cantles of their saddles. They were ten yards away from him when the lead rider pulled his mount to a sudden halt and said: "Bill Raven! What are you doing back in Bradley?"

Raven squinted at the speaker and his companion before he recognized them as riders from Sue Bigelow's Long Bow ranch. Then, as his mind returned to the question that had been put to him, the thin, rapier-like scar that ran down his right cheek from the corner of his eye to his jawbone turned white and a hardness that was never far removed took hold of his features, molding them in severe, sharp-edged lines. "I'll give you one guess," he said.

Tim Johnson, looking older and more serious than Raven ever remembered him, cuffed his hat back on his sandy head. "It's too late to help your brother now, Bill. He's dead."

A GAIN THERE was the white flicker of that scar against the dark background of Raven's face. "There's still the man who killed him."

"No good," Johnson demurred. "Harry Dale is a gun-slick; he carries two cutlers and he's a blue streak with both."

Bill leaned toward Johnson; the slanting rays of sunlight that touched Raven's cheeks revealed the tell-tale bruises of man a rough-and-tumble fight. He was a somber, unsmiling man—a man with the look of trouble about him. "One question," he said. "Did you see the fight?"

"No," Johnson replied. "But it was a fair shake, we've heard."

"How fair?"

Johnson shrugged, not liking what he saw in Raven's gray-blue eyes. Meeting those eyes he thought he had never seen anything so cold and relentless and implacable. He stared over his shoulder, fidgeted with the reins in his hands.

"That's only your shadow behind you," Raven said.

Johnson colored. "We're pulling our freight. Better do the same."

"Why?" The question was snapped like the crack of a whip.

The Long Bow puncher scrubbed his jaw nervously with the palm of his hand. "Things are getting too hot for small spreads," he said.

"Go on."

"Well...." Johnson paused. "We hired on to punch cows, not to burn gunpowder, and it's the powder-burners that the country is fitted for right now."

The two range riders kept watching Raven, saw his big hands resting on the pommel. Hands with calloused palms and heavy knuckles covered with scar tissue. But it was the square, fighting jaw, the tough-boned face that told them they were looking at a man who didn't know the meaning of fear.

"Don't let me keep you," Raven said abruptly.

He lifted his hand, still unsmiling, and kicked the gelding into motion. There was a slow-burning rage in him, a rage that had been growing ever since he first read Pinto Henleys letter—the letter that had impelled him to throw over his job as trouble-shooter with the Union Pacific Railroad in Julesburg, Colorado and ride headlong to Bradley.

The letter rested in his shirt pocket now. At every movement of his left arm the much-folded paper crackled



Bill Raven



Sue Bigelow



Josh Goodwin



Bull Bronson

in the pocket, reminding him of Chuck Raven, his brother, and of the job he had to do here.

He rode on past several saloons. In front of the *Ace High* a man stood near the bat-wing doors intently regarding him. Raven ignored him, yet out of the corner of his eye he saw recognition leap into the man's eyes. Afterward the man wheeled and plunged back inside the saloon. In a moment, news would be all over Bradley that Bill Raven had returned.

IN FRONT of the *Longhorn* he swung toward the hitch rack and piled out of the saddle. Wrapping the gelding's reins about the worn locust pole, he paused to scan the other horses racked up there, saw three animals at the end of the line. Each bore a Big G brand on the right flank. A look of grim anticipation covered Raven's wind-burned cheeks; he turned on his heel, moved across the walk and put his shoulders to the bat-wing doors.

A wave of sound rolled against him as he stepped into the dim, lamplit interior. Men's rough voices mingled with the clink of glasses along the bar and the rattle of poker chips at the card tables. He lingered by the door, searching the room with a spare and even attention, saw men turn away from the bar to regard him. And he saw how the talk dwindled away until an air of frozen stillness blanketed the room.

Raven's lips thinned out as he paced through the blue haze of smoke, angling for an opening at the bar. Men backed away to make room, but their eyes crowded against him with a sharp, pointed care.

The bartender, a bland, round-faced man, heavy-jowled and secretly smiling, came forward.

"Give me a beer," Raven murmured.

The man placed the palms of his hands flat on the bar. "You're Bill Raven, ain't you?" he asked.

"Yeah. What of it?"

The bartender's grin stretched out. Just this; you can buy your beer somewhere else."

Raven went rigid. And old, familiar feeling rolled through him—the feeling of trouble. He said quietly, "Friend, I'll give you a chance to reconsider."

For just a moment, seeing the dark flurry of passion in Raven's glance, the bartender hesitated. Then a new, resonant voice split the taut silence. "Turn around Raven!"

The sound of that voice was well-known to Raven; he swung around. "All right, Goodwin," he said and waited for the other man to emerge from the shadows at the far end of the bar.

Chairs scraped along the puncheons as card players pushed away from tables, feverish expectancy glistening on their faces. The threat of vio-

lence was an actual smell in the room—and they all savored that smell.

Raven waited with his shoulders pressed against the bar. The man who emerged from the shadows and ambled around the clustered groups of drinkers was in his middle forties, arrogant, dark-eyed with hair as black as ebony and heavy brows that narrowed down over his eyes in a perpetual scowl.

Behind him came two more men, strangers to Raven. The first man was short, slim and wiry; he walked with a swagger and with his hard, bright eyes he resembled a bantam rooster. A shock of reddish hair on his long, narrow head added to the illusion.

Raven's glance was about to drift to this one's companion when he saw the heavy, shell-studded gun-belts the man wore in criss-cross fashion around his waist, the ivory-handled Colts that reposed in twin holsters that were tied down to his thighs. This, then, was Harry Dale. The thought was like the touch of a hot iron, and Raven had to steel himself against the sweeping rush of his temper.

The second man was ponderous—built in massive proportions. He was at least six feet three inches tall, had wide, slab-like shoulders and a deep, powerful chest to match them. But what impressed Raven more than the man's size was the gross, brutal look of him. His eyes were like round black marbles in a dough-white face. He had a flat, scarred nose, small ears and a coarse, thick-lipped mouth. He was a man, Raven clearly saw, without sentiment or sensibilities.

GOODWIN gave Raven a sneering, twisted grin. "What's the matt'r? Did the U. P. get too hot for you?"

Raven ignored the gibe and said with a slow emphasis, "Tell your white-aproned friend behind the bar to draw a beer; I came in for a drink and I'm staying till I get it."

Goodwin's grin grew wider and more wicked. "Things have changed, Raven. The Rolling R is no longer top dog outfit in Bradley. There are

Big G cows on your Green Springs, and more Big G cows in Antelope Basin on the Long Bow range. I'm out and I need a lot of room. From now on your Rolling R is a two-bit ranch and you're nothing but a two-bit rancher."

Temper was like a white-hot flame burning inside Raven, yet outwardly he remained cool and detached. The only noticeable change was a slight narrowing of his eyelids. "Don't forget that drink, Josh," he murmured almost mildly.

Goodwin's control slipped a notch. He said tightly, "You get no drink in the Longhorn. And that goes for every puncher on your payroll."

Raven saw the brittle challenge in Goodwin's eyes and felt the hostility of the man and his companions like a high wall in front of him. He made a halfturn back to the bar, grabbed a whisky bottle near his elbow and ipped it over an empty shot glass. He filled it to the brim, set the bottle down and took his drink. And all the while he was conscious of the dread, suffocating silence quivering around him.

The bartender glared at Raven; Bill ignored him. When he pivoted back to Goodwin he saw how Goodwin's hands were balled and heard the ragged, aroused run of his breathing. "Thanks, Josh," Raven said. "That'll be on the house."

Somewhere a man coughed nervously. The sound was like an iron file, scraping along the nerve ends of every man in the saloon. Goodwin's huge body trembled, then grew still.

"All right," he said heavily, "We'll let that go. It's your last drink in the Longhorn and, if you're wise, it'll be your last drink in this town."

"Meaning just what?"

"Meaning that the road back to Julesburg is wide open. Ride it while you can; don't crowd your luck."

Still calm and dangerously controlled, Raven said, "You should know me better than that. I always crowd my luck; I'll crowd it now by asking what you know about Chuck's killing."

"It was even-stephen all the way,"

Goodwin said. "Harry Dale just shaded him on the draw."

"That all?"

"No, it isn't" all, snapped Goodwin. "You know damned well that Green Springs is government range. For the last two years, and even before you joined the railroad, Rolling R cows have been pastured on that grass. Well, lately the Rolling R hasn't had so many cows and I decided to take over Green Springs."

"When I your brother decided to get tough about it. He rushed into town, honing for a scrap; he had some words with Dale and went for his gun. Dale got him, that's all; it was self-defense."

"So you say," murmured Raven. "I still think it could have been murder."

He glanced at Dale. The little gunman stiffened and his hands began to slide toward his guns. "Maybe you'd like to back up those words," he stated in a high, whining tone.

Rave leaned against the bar, his features dark. "Sure thing," he replied softly. "Your move."

Goodwin thrust himself in front of Dale. "Hold it," he said to the gunman. Then he turned to Raven. "Remember what I said about crowding your luck."

"I'll push it all the way," said Raven through tight lips. "You knew and everyone else in Bradley knew that Chuck had been no good with a gun since he was thrown from a horse and smashed his right hand. Maybe the idea was to steer clear of the law and prod Chuck into a ruckus, knowing he couldn't outdraw anyone—least of all, a hired gun-slick like Dale."

"You damned—" raged Harry Dale and tried to shove past Goodwin. "I'll burn you down."

"Start burning," invited Raven. He had his elbows hooked over the edge of the bar and showed his contempt for Dale in every taciturn line of his face. His next words were directed at Goodwin. "Josh, I never did care too much about ramrodding a cattle spread; but with Chuck dead I aim to take over the Rolling R and run off the wolves. You've got twenty-

four hours to move your beef off my Green Springs graze."

Goodwin laughed harshly. "Neither you nor the Rolling R are big enough to back up that warning. Maybe you spotted two of Sue Bigelow's punchers drifting out of town. Those hombres were mighty good at reading sign; the Rolling R is on the way out."

There was a bright, bitter heat in Raven's glance. "Josh," he said with a brutal distinctness, "I remember giving you a thrashing a few years ago when you tried to pull a land grab. Looks like you suffer from a short memory; it's time for another lesson."

A flurry of pleasure whipped across Goodwin's face and he grinned at Bull Bronson, the huge giant of a man standing so stolidly beside him. "When did you figure on giving me that lesson?" Goodwin inquired.

"No time like now," snapped Raven and set himself for action.

Goodwin rushed forward and Raven started away from the bar. He heard a scuffle of movement behind him, whirled and saw the bartender had a bung-starter in his hand. He tried to duck away from the blow, but the crude weapon slammed down on his head.

Raven reeled dizzily. Through a sudden, filmy red haze he saw Goodwin leap in. A fist crashed against his jaw, knocking him to his knees. Then Goodwin's fierce, exultant shout rang out: "Take him, Bull! He's all yours!"

~ 2 ~



HE big man rolled forward ponderously, waiting for Bill Raven to rise, delight shining in his round eyes.

Raven stared at Goodwin, rage making him forget the dull ache at the base of his skull. "What is the matter, Josh?"

Afraid to try your luck?"

"No," said Goodwin. "Just don't

aim to soil my hands on you."

Bronson tramped over to Raven. "Get up before I put my boot in your face."

Raven dived at his knees, hooked his arms in back of the Bronson's legs and sent him crashing backward to the floor. A yell of surprise lifted from the crowd, then faded away to an awed, hushed expectancy as Bronson lumbered to his feet.

He leaped toward Bill, catching Raven as he too, was rising from the floor. Bronson's heavy-knuckled fist whip-sawed through Raven's tardy block, nearly unhinged his jaw. Raven felt the crippling jolt of his jaw at the same moment that the back of the bar slammed into his lower ribs. He hung there helplessly, still fighting the dizziness from the bartender's blow on his head, acutely aware that Bronson was capable of killing him with his bare hands.

Raven's breath tore at his throat. His arms were strangely leaden, yet he managed to lift them in time to fend off a roundhouse swing. But even that blocked blow, landing on his forearm, carried so much power behind it that it paralyzed all the nerves in his left arm.

It was the sight of the other man's ugly, leering face appearing out of the blue fog of cigarette smoke that sent Raven lashing out with a desperate counter-attack. He lifted his right hand from his hip drove it to the tip of Bronson's chin. It landed with a solid, meaty sound. Yet Bronson came roaring back.

Raven leaned against the bar, swung his right leg up and planted his foot in the middle of Bronson's belly and propelled him backward. Bronson reeled drunkenly across the floor and fell on top of a poker table; cards, chips and glasses cascaded to the floor. Raven followed Bronson over a floor that seemed oddly uneven and pitched at an oblique angle.

Bronson picked himself up, supporting himself on a chair. Suddenly he grabbed the chair, swept it over his head and brought it crashing down on top of Raven, one stout leg caught Bill behind the ear. He dropped as if someone had cut his

legs out from under him.

THE NEXT thing Raven knew someone was pouring a pail of water over him. He opened his eyes with an effort. There was a throbbing pain in back of his skull and one cheek was beginning to puff up.

A hard ripple of laughter drew his attention to Josh Goodwin. The big G ranch owner was leaning negligently against the bar. Behind him, and peering over his shoulder, was the round-faced bartender with a contented grin on his lips. "You're not as tough as I thought you were; that railroad job of yours must have been a soft touch." Goodwin laughed.

Raven pushed himself to a sitting position. Finally he rose. His shirt clung soggy to his body. He had been beaten. The knowledge created an acid taste in his mouth. Yet, the wildness that was so much a part of his nature rushed out of his gray-blue eyes and, seeing that wildness, Goodwin slid his hand down to the butt of his colt.

"Laugh while you can Josh" Raven said, "you won't get another opportunity."

"This is only the beginning," said Goodwin. He gestured to Bull Bronson who had a tight, thwarted look in his ugly countenance. "Bull was disappointed that you didn't give him more of a workout, he could have finished you."

"You may be sorry he didn't."

Goodwin sneered. "I've seen what you can do, you don't worry me. But I'll give you a break; fifteen thousand in cash for the Rolling R. Take it or leave it."

"I'll leave it."

Goodwin shrugged. "That's your funeral, then. I'll just take over your spread when I'm ready."

"It'll take a funeral—and mine at that—to get the Rolling R."

The urge to renew the fight was a hot compelling force in Raven even though he felt bruised and battered, but now he realized he must walk out of this saloon, leaving a chore unfinished. He still felt light-headed from the blow of the bung-starter and he was in no condition to pursue the

issue any further. He knew, too, how the taunting smiles and low-voiced gibes of Goodwin's friends would follow him out the door.

It was this knowledge that induced him to linger in the *Longhorn* until he had left one final warning thought with Goodwin and Bronson.

To Goodwin he said: "I'll see you around, Josh." On the surface the words were meaningless, but they carried the definite threat that there was more to come.

To Bronson he said: "Friend, we'll finish this little affair of ours another day."

RAVEN TURNED, then, and walked toward the bat-wing doors. He pushed through them, paused on the plank sidewalk to suck in a breath of fresh air and to watch the dull red ball of the sun sink behind a bank of clouds in the west. Already there was a coolness in the air, presaging the fast approach of night. Shadows lengthened along the slopes of the foothills.

There was a momentary racket from the stables of the Johnson Overland Stage Company as Old Lem Bruder drove the night stage for Rock Springs up in front of the hotel. These normal sights and sounds had a special flavor for Raven; he hadn't realized until now how much he missed the old life here. Suddenly he knew he had remained away too long.

For this town was not actually the same; things had changed. One man's greed had done that. And know the Rolling R, once the greatest ranch in Bradley, was fighting for its very life and only he was left to hold it together.

The pleasure of the moment left him and he swung morosely down the street until he reached the barber shop. He walked in, nodded to the proprietor who was busy cutting some cowboy's hair, and curtly ordered some hot water for a bath.

Bill had to wait fifteen minutes for hot water; when it was ready he ducked into the rear room, shed his clothes and climbed into the wooden tub. The bath refreshed him and

brought back some of his strength. He sent the barber out for a new shirt; when it came he dressed and climbed into the wide-armed chair in the front room, got a shave.

Afterward, standing in front of the cracked and fly-specked mirror to adjust his colored neckerchief, he noted how the ugly, bluish bruises stood out in bold relief on his face. He shrugged, gave the barber a dollar and strolled outside.

Bill was crossing the street toward a small restaurant when he was almost run down by a pair of horses. He stepped back and a man's voice came at him in a rough reprimand. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

Raven said nothing. He looked up, saw the man rein in his horse and come back. Behind him, on a pure white horse, rode his companion. "Ah," said the man. "Raven. I heard you were back."

"Hello, Raskall," said Raven. He did not smile. Then the other rider came into the shaft of light issuing from the restaurant window. "Annel Anne Maynard," he said.

The girl on the white horse took her time answering. "How are you, Bill?"

Raven saw her studying his face and knew she was examining the bruises.

"Are you sure you want to know?" he queried.

There was an immediate answering flash in her hot, dark eyes. Suddenly she was bracing herself against him, and it was like it had always been between them—no peace, no stability.

"Not really," she said and her smile was quite impersonal.

AGAIN RAVEN looked at her, studying her dark, luxurious hair which she wore in a high crown on top of her head, and the thin pressing line of her lips. He saw the pride in her, the vanity; yet, something electric whirled between them, a spark, compounded of memories of all that had been between them.

The few seconds that elapsed while they greeted each other in the middle

of the street gave Ty Raskall ample opportunity to watch Raven and Anne. He saw the hot glance that passed between them and he sensed that they were both remembering a lot of things he didn't want them remembering; Ty wanted Anne almost as much as he wanted a bigger place for himself in Bradley, and he resented any claim Raven might have upon her—even if that claim was old and worthless.

It was this resentment which made him rough and careless with his talk. "I hear Josh gave you your marching orders," he said.

Raskall was a handsome man in his mid-thirties. He had curly brown hair, thin eyebrows, a long straight nose and very white teeth.

"What else did you hear?" Raven asked.

"Bull Bronson put his mark on you" said Raskall.

"Anything more?"

"Isn't that enough?"

Raven answered with a cold steadiness. "If you mean to make me quit, the answer is no. Not nearly enough."

Anne slapped the calf of her leg with a quiet. "Still playing the role of a tough hombre?" she asked, her slow smile mocking him.

"I'm as tough as I have to be," Raven said. The hard temper that was rolling in him came out in each word.

"Were you tough enough today?"

He disregarded the question and said, "Too bad you weren't around to watch the fight; you might have had some fun."

Even while he said it, Raven realized how silly all of this was. They were baiting each other, deliberately trying to hurt.

"You had it coming," she said bluntly. "From now on the Rolling R won't be so proud."

Raven's face tightened. "You've never forgotten have you?"

"Forgotten what?" The question came sharply and color rose in her cheeks.

"You know," Raven said. "We both made a mistake; it's better this way."

"I agree. It was the best thing that could have happened," she said with vehemence. "Go to Sue Bigelow. I

wonder how she'll like her fighting man tonight." Then she laid a hand on Raskall's arm and added: "Come on, Ty. You promised to ride out to the ranch with me tonight."

"Sure, Anne," he said and lifted the reins, started to steer his roan gelding around Raven.

Raven remained where he was, big and solid and unsmiling. He laid his heavy glance upon Raskall and said: "By the way Raskall, I heard from Pinto Henley that you've got three hundred head of beef cattle up near Boulder Canyon. Better move them off."

Raskall shook his head. He showed his teeth in a smile. "No, Raven. You'll have to use force."

No change stirred the bleak outlines of Raven's face. "Just as you say," he murmured.

He lifted his hat to Anne, tramped around behind her horse and headed toward the restaurant.

3



AT SEVEN o'clock the next morning Bill Raven emerged from the hotel and walked down to the livery barn where he had left the black gelding, after deciding to remain in town. The hostler threw Raven's saddle on the big black, cinched it down tight; Bill paid the fee, swung up and drifted out of town, following the stage road west.

A pre-dawn coolness still lingered in the air. But the sun rising out of a ruddy bank of clouds in the east, promised another day of intense heat. Rolling country stretched ahead. Here and there the ground heaved upward toward a low ridge, then slid down to grassy swales. Far to the right, almost the base of a rugged line of buttes, Raven caught the crystal glitter of a creek.

After he left the road to take a narrow side trail through a thick growth of aspens the land turned more rugged. There were more hills now and

Every one carried the Long Bow brand, Sue Bigelow's brand. All of this country held good grazing land.

The trail followed the winding course of the creek until at last Raven saw the rambling log ranch-house that served as headquarters for the Long Bow spread. The stream ran along the eastern side of the house and vanished through a wide fissure in the cliff which, in turn, carried it from some distant upland level.

A horse cavy was stirring up a miniature dust storm in one of the corrals as Raven approached. He saw a chap-clad puncher emerge from the barn and join another man inside the corral who was trying to rope a saddle horse for himself. The roper turned from his task, spotted Raven trotting up to the ranch-house. He spoke to his companion, then pushed through the bars and met Raven as he dismounted near the veranda.

"Who are you looking for, friend?" he demanded.

"Sue Bigelow," Raven answered and walked on toward the steps.

"Hold on," snapped the puncher. His hand dropped to his gun.

THE FRONT door opened. Sue Bigelow came out on the veranda. She saw Raven and cried: "Bill! I heard you were back."

"Hello, Sue." Raven gestured to the other man. "Better tell this ranny who I am; he seems a bit spooked up."

"It's all right, Frank," she called. "This is Bill Raven."

Frank Kruger stopped. He had a deep, long-jawed face. "Raven, huh?" he repeated. He shrugged and walked off. But he didn't go back to the corral; instead, he cut toward the bunk-house.

Raven took the veranda steps at a bound and gathered Sue in his arms. She was a grave-eyed girl, straight and tall, with a smoothly rounded body and a briskness of manner that hinted at a firm, inner strength.

He bent down and kissed her roughly, hungrily. She lay against him, taking his caress and, for just an instant, returning it. Then she struggled in

his arms and pushed him away. "Please, Bill; not so rough."

"It's been two years."

"Whose fault is that?" she asked.

"Mine, Sue," he admitted. "It's a damned long time; too long."

He couldn't take his eyes away from her. He saw her skin was still the same creamy tan he remembered. She had a soft, sensitive face that mirrored each change of expression. She had a tremendous capacity for feeling, yet she hid it behind a rigid control; that was her dominating trait—control. She never let her feelings get away from her.

Loving her as he did and wanting her as he had never wanted another woman, Raven felt an odd sense of disappointment. It was always that way. His strong, wild feelings running away with him, making him rough and demanding. And always she withdrew from him, giving him only a meager portion of the richness of passion that rested within her.

She was standing away from him now. He saw her eyes darken as they roved over his face. "I heard about your fight with Bronson," she said flatly.

"Who told you?"

"Lance David, my foreman. He saw it. From what he said you could have avoided it."

"That's one man's opinion."

Sue looked at Raven's grim face, and a feeling of contrition washed over her. She moved close to him, placed a hand on his arm. "You've a right to feel bitter," she said. In a lower voice she added: "I'm sorry about Chuck."

Raven didn't appear to be conscious of her nearness now. A cold grayness had settled upon his rugged features. "I blame myself for that," he murmured. "If I hadn't always been a damned fiddle-foot I would have stayed here to help Chuck run the Rolling R. With the two of us in Bradley, Goodwin would never have made his play."

"But it was Harry Dale who shot Chuck," Sue protested.

Raven nodded curtly. "And Josh Goodwin who gave Dale his orders.

Chuck was no hand with a six-gun. I know they're saying it was a fair shake, but I figured Dale had orders to crowd Chuck into a fight as the first move toward taking over the Rolling R."

Sue's face darkened imperceptibly. "And now you're back to get revenge."

"I'm here to protect what was mine and Chuck's," he said. "I gave Chuck a raw deal. I aim to make it up to win from grabbing the Rolling R; the second is to find definite proof that Goodwin ordered Dale to murder Chuck. When I get that proof.."

RAVEN DIDN'T finish, but his meaning was perfectly clear. Sue, listening to every word, completed his sentence with a gesture of angry despair.

"You'll be gunning for Goodwin and Dale!" She stamped her small, booted foot and lashed him with her tongue. "That will be the signal for more killing. Oh, Bill, can't this killing stop? Dad was shot by rustlers during a raid just about six months ago. Now there's Chuck. And if you do as you plan there'll be more of it."

"What would you have me do?" he demanded. "Take Chuck's death lying down?"

"Killing Goodwin and Dale won't help."

"I'm not so sure."

Sue threw herself against Raven. "Bill, you mustn't try; you wouldn't have a chance. Dale is a gunman. Isn't it enough that I've lost Dad? Must I risk losing you, too?"

"I'll take my chances with Dale," he said.

She gave him a long, searching look. His heavy-boned face was rigid, the angle of his jaw more pronounced than ever. It was the face of a stranger. He was a man in the grip of wildness, dangerous and destructive.

"Bill," she said plaintively. "I've never seen you this way. You've grown hard and reckless. I believe you like the fighting and the brawling." There was a pause. "I suppose you killed men on your railroad job."

"Yes. Two men; it was kill or be killed."

Sue shuddered and recoiled from him. "There are marks of other fights on your face. But it's your eyes. They're the eyes of a gun-tough." She shook her head and a fleeting expression of sadness touched her lips. "I can see now that you'll never be satisfied with a piece of range and some cattle. You'll always be a drifter, a man on the prod. What chance is there for a woman in your life?"

"Plenty, Sue," he said, his stern features breaking into a faint smile. "And you're that woman."

He reached for her, but she backed away. "That's what you say now. But the minute you leave here you'll forget me. You'll be thinking of Goodwin and how you can smash him."

Raven thrust his hands into his pockets and regarded her with a sober concentration "Sue, this is a hard land; a man has to fight for what he wants. Your Dad and mine had their fight against Indians and renegades to build their ranches. Living itself is a constant battle.

"If I let Goodwin take every bit of graze he wants you can guess how long I'd last in Bradley. Every cowman in the valley would be rushing in for a piece of the spoils. I've got to make my stand now or not at all.

"Then there's your Dad. He was shot down in a rustling raid. The rustlers got away and Sheriff Sam Zents never did find your Dad's killer; I'd like to find the man.

"Please, Bill," she pleaded. "Forget that. Dad is dead—God rest his soul. I'll miss him, always; but he's gone and I don't want anyone else to die by stirring things up again."

Raven shrugged, but the thin line of his lips told her that he would not let the matter drop.

"By the way," he said, "while I was in Julesburg I got a letter from Pinto Henley. Among other things he mentioned that Goodwin had taken over two thousand acres of your northern range. Do you intend to let him stay there?"

"Yes, my friend, she does," a new voice answered behind Raven.

TURNING quickly, Raven saw a chap-clad cowpuncher striding across the yard toward them. The

man was a little over medium height and walked with a conscious swagger.

"What business is it of yours?" Raven snapped.

The other man stared insolently at Raven and strode to the foot of the verandah steps. Close-up, Raven noted the puncher's oblong face, his deeply burnished skin, the brooding and unfriendly expression in his deep-set brown eyes.

"Go easy, Bill," Sue cautioned. "Lance David is my foreman." She looked at the ramrod and added: "Lance, I want you to meet Bill Raven."

David nodded curtly. "I know; I saw him make his entrance in Bradley."

There was a veiled contempt in David's tone. Raven, already pushed too far by the events of the last twenty-four hours, rose to the craftily framed challenge. "Maybe you'd like to tell me what's behind that remark," he said.

David's brown face creased in a sneer. "My meaning is obvious—like the result of your fight with Bronson. The Ravens have been in the habit of riding high in Bradley; you figured on doing the same. I reckon Bronson and Goodwin showed you where you head in. 'Two-bit rancher' he called you; the name fits, don't you think?"

David was mounting the steps as he talked. Between him and Raven there had sprung up an instant antagonism; each had recognized it at once and braced for trouble, but it was Raven who moved first. He slid away from Sue, pivoted toward the top step. David had his right foot planted there when Raven's knuckled fist caught him on the chin and propelled him backward. He skidded down the two middle steps and landed on his back and shoulders in the dust.

"Have you anything else to add?" Raven demanded.

"Just this," said David through lips that barely moved and his right hand made a blurring motion toward his gun.

Raven matched David's move; his hand was a white streak going to his holster and coming up again with black steel. But before he could bring the gun into line Sue had thrown herself in front of him. "Stop it, Bill!" she cried. "There's been enough killing."

"Stand away from him, ma'am," said David thickly. "I want to see how tough he is."

Sue whirled and faced her foreman. "Put your gun away, Lance!"

The foreman's mahogany-hued features were almost black. Dark blood suffused his bony cheeks, the hatred in him was an ugly thing to see. He sprawled in the dust, his mouth a vicious trap above his pointed jaw, his hand starkly white around his gun.

At last, he got slowly to his feet. He slammed his gun back into the scabbard. "I'll pay you for that, Raven," he said.

Raven put his own Colt away. "Don't push me too far, David the best way for you to keep your health is to button your lip."

Sue's palm slapped against Raven's chest. "Stop it!" she ordered. "There is no need for you and Lance to fight. Lance has been running the Long Bow since Dad died. He'll continue to run it for me."

"Does that mean you're satisfied with giving up that graze to Josh Goodwin?" Raven queried.

"It means just that," broke in David. "We can afford to lose that pasture; besides, we're in no position to fight."

Raven scowled. "Do you take orders from Goodwin or from Sue?"

David started up the steps again. "Damn it. You're looking for trouble and you'll get it."

BILL SURGED forward to meet the swaggering ramrod. Sue flashed in front of him, moved down the steps and flung herself at the foreman. "Lance," she said crisply, "you'd better go to the house."

David hunched his shoulders,

growled something unintelligible under his breath and finally trudged away.

Sue remained at the bottom of the steps. "I think you'd better go, too," she said.

She lifted her hand wearily and he stopped.

He came down the steps beside her. "I reckon I deserve that," he said; "I just couldn't control myself. But I won't take—"

"I know what you're going to say. You were both out of line. Lance will hear more from me."

He stood there, squinting a little in the morning sun that slanted across the dusty ranch-yard. "In a way it's none of my business," he murmured, "but you know I feel about you. I have to see you throw your land away. You know Goodwin won't be satisfied with two thousand acres."

A shadow passed across Sue's face, a shadow of trouble, of despair.

"I can't help that," she said listlessly. "Yesterday I lost two punchers; they said they didn't hanker to do a gunman's work at cowboy wages. The week before, another man quit; I haven't enough men to stop Goodwin."

"Hire more."

"I won't hire gunman and I won't ask my men to risk their lives in an attempt to drive Goodwin off."

There was an air of resignation about the girl that saddened Raven. "All right, Sue," he said; "let it go I've stirred up a lot of unpleasant things. For that, forgive me." He gripped her arms. "I just remembered. There's going to be a dance in town Saturday night. You're going with me."

"No, Bill." There was fear in her eyes. "Goodwin will be there; there'll be trouble."

"Not from me," he said with only the faintest hesitation.

"I'm afraid. What if Bronson shows up?"

"I give you my word I won't start anything."

"I'd like to believe that," she said wistfully.

"I'll pick you up after supper Saturday."

"No," she said. "We'd better not. I don't want any more fighting—or killing."

He smiled faintly and started toward his horse. "Saturday night, Sue. Don't worry. Leave things to me."

4



INTO Henley rushed out of the bunkhouse as Bill Raven pulled up in the Rolling R ranch yard. The stocky, short-armed ramrod glanced in Raven's direction, his eyes narrowed against the sun's hot glare. Then he let out a

war whoop when he recognized Bill. There was barely time for Raven to take in with a rapid flick of his eyes the one-story ranch-house, crude log bunkhouse and ramshackle hay barn before he was swinging out of the saddle to grasp Henley's outstretched hand.

"Bill," said Henley with a rough pleasure showing in his voice. "You sure didn't waste much time getting here."

"I threw up my job in Julesburg the minute I got your letter." Raven was genuinely glad to see the foreman and he said with a forced lightness: "Still the same Pinto. Gray-haired and hefty as a young bull."

Henley was forty-two, a veteran of the cattle ranges and, though he was stockier than the average cowhand, there wasn't any excess fat on him. He was solidly put together, his shoulders big and his eyes slate gray and very serious.

"Nothing's the same, Bill," he said. "Not after what happened to Chuck. The Rolling R won't never be the same without him."

Raven nodded somberly. "I reckon not."

"You look as if you've been in a fight," Henley observed. "Julesburg?"

"No, Bradley."

"Ah...Bronson again."

"So it's like that."

"Yeah. You talking about it?"

Raven said, "Sure," and proceeded to give Henley a brief account of his meeting with Bronson and Goodwin.

"Bronson is a tough customer," Henley admitted.

Raven's eyes flashed. "I'll take him next time."

"If anyone can, you're the man. Still, he's put his mark on a lot of men in this town. Ranny I hired three weeks ago got pushed into a ruckus with Bronson a few days later and was lucky he was able to ride out of town. Last Saturday two more quit, not aiming to stay and invite trouble; it's getting so I won't let any of the boys go to town."

"So Goodwin figures to cripple us by scaring away half the crew, then moving in without opposition."

"He's had a lot of success so far. For the past year we've been carrying fourteen hands. Know how many are on the payroll now?...Seven. And that includes me. Only two of the old hands are left—Allie Fenwick and Denver Barnes. Here they come now."

Two chap-clad punchers sauntered out of the barn and at Henley's wave, moved toward the ranch-house. Fenwick was a light-haired, bow-legged individual, not more than twenty-four. He had knocked around in a saddle most of his young life and he had the lean, trim-hipped look of the average rider of the range. Denver Barnes was a lazy looking man. He shuffled rather than walked and he had an impudent, almost boyish face. Yet, there was an ingrained toughness in him that made him a valuable hand.

Raven shook hands with both punchers, then found himself staring intently at Fenwick. His long nose was flat and pushed toward the left side of his face and three of his upper front teeth were missing.

"Is that more of Bronson's work?" Raven demanded.

"Yeah," Fenwick replied crisply. He looked suddenly much older. "I was a damned fool. I'd had a few drinks and I let myself get pushed into a fight; went for my hogleg, but Harry Dale was there, too. He shaded me plenty, took my gun away..."

"Then fed you to Bronson." At Fenwick's grim nod, Raven asked: "How did it start?"

"The usual way. Bronson and Dale were bragging about the way the Big G was preparing to take over the valley and how the Rolling R was a two-bit outfit. One word led to another and I'd just had enough redevye in me to speak my piece."

"And that was all Bronson was waiting for," said Henley.

Raven was silent for a moment. He looked at the three seasoned punchers who formed the nucleus of his small crew, and it occurred to him, then, how small his chances were of spiking Goodwin's plans. If things came to a showdown, eight men—including himself—would hardly be sufficient to buck Goodwin's outfit.

The only answer was to beat Goodwin to the punch; hit him hard in unexpected quarters and divide his strength. These thoughts were going through Raven's mind as he stood in the sun-dappled ranch-yard and looked at the weathered frame buildings.

For the first time he had really come home. He had been too long in realizing that the Rolling R was part of Chuck and himself. He had come too late to save Chuck, but not too late to preserve what Chuck had helped to build.

PINTO HENLEY'S husky tones broke into Raven's reflections. "Now that you've got an idea how things shape up what do you aim to do?"

"First, I'd like to visit a spell with Chuck," Raven said.

"And after that?" Henley queried.

There was a dogged set to Raven's jaw. He held himself straight and still. "We go after Goodwin."

Henley let out a gusty breath.

"That's just what I've been waiting to hear," he said. "I'm with you all the way to the ace."

"And that goes for Allie and me," said Denver Barnes.

"Thanks," Raven murmured. "Denver, will you take care of my horse while I walk up the hill?"

Barnes nodded and reached for the black's reins. Raven left them, then, and walked back and around the ranch-house. In the rear the hard-baked ground sloped sharply toward a little knoll shaded by trees.

He went past the well with its old-fashioned hand pump and took the slope without slackening stride.

There was a small cleared area rimmed by trees. In even rows, close to the line of cottonwoods, were the graves of Raven's mother and father and Chuck. The wooden headboards at the head of his parents' graves were rotting away.

But at Chuck's grave the headboard was bright and new. The mound of earth above it, however, was already dried out, lying in gray-brown clods that were no different from the lumps of earth above the other graves.

Raven paused beside Chuck's final resting place and removed his hat.

Bill didn't say any prayers at Chuck's grave; he wasn't a praying man. He just stood there, his head bared to the sun slanting through the leaves of the trees, his big hands crushing the hat he held so tightly.

Abruptly he turned on his heel, straightened out his sombrero, clapped it on his head and tramped back down the slope. Henley was waiting for him below. Raven looked at Henley and said with sudden directness: "From your letter and from my talk with Sue I've gathered that Goodwin is in the clear on Chuck's killing."

Henley inclined his head gravely. "He wasn't even in town when the shooting took place."

Raven's voice was clipped and short. "For my money it's still murder and Dale got Chuck on Goodwin's orders."

"Sure, but you'll never get evidence that will stand up in court."

Raven drew his Colt, twirled it by

the trigger guard. "This will be my court, Pinto."

"That's good enough for me, Bill," Henley murmured. "One thing. They've been scaring a lot of men out of Bradley. Once Goodwin finds out you mean to stick it out here, you'll be next on the list. Did you think of that?"

"I'm counting on it," Raven replied grimly. He peered up at the sun. "It's near noon; how have you got the crew spotted?"

"There's just Fenwick, Barnes and myself here. Two of the boys are riding our east range. Two more are at the Elbow Bend line shack. They're due to be spelled in a day or so."

"All right. This afternoon I want to take a look around. By the way, you said something in your letter about a note due at the bank."

"Yeah. It's for fifteen hundred dollars."

"Have we got the money to pay it?"

"No. Chuck was counting on making a drive to railhead and ship a bunch east to Kansas City. We've got ten days left; we'll have to start the gather today or tomorrow."

"It'll have to wait until we drive Goodwin's cows, and his men as well, off our Green Springs range. Dawn tomorrow ought to be a good time for that."



HE THREE riders on the ridge sat their horses quietly while they watched a thin sliver of gray color break through the night clouds banked in the east. Bill Raven leaned out of the saddle to peer down into the grassy glade below the ridge. Shadows still gathered thickly there and he could barely make out the blunt shapes of bedded-down cows. Farther away to the north

loomed the darker blot of a line shack. Gradually it took on a sharper outline as light fanned outward across the heavens.

"Just a few more minutes," Raven said.

Pinto Henley and Denver Barnes nodded; both men carried an eager, expectant look on their faces.

The cattle down in the bowl began to stir. On the far side of the herd a horseman appeared, riding circle. Amber shafts of light slid down the distant mountain slopes as the rising red ball of the sun pushed over the rim of the world. The cabin stood naked and white, like a bleached skeleton, in the encircling web of trees.

No smoke filtered from the chimney. To the rear, in a crude pole corral, were three saddle horses.

"Time to go, I reckon," Raven murmured.

Henley nodded, his eyes still on the corral. "Three horses," he said. "Three men inside. Plus one night hawk. A lot of men for two hundred cows."

"Maybe Goodwin is expecting trouble," said Barnes.

"He's going to get it," snapped Raven. He lifted the black's reins, glanced at Barnes. "Remember, allow us enough time to reach the cabin. Then give those dogies hell, and watch the night hawk so he doesn't bust up our play."

Barnes grinned lazily as Raven and Henley neck-reined their horses through the brush. They continued along the ridge until they struck a narrow side trail. The trail pitched downward, angling toward some bushes two hundred yards behind the shack.

As they rode they watched the remainder of the cows slowly rise and begin their day-long munching. Once Barnes had stampeded them, the lead steers would follow the natural contours of the valley, would run straight east for several miles and eventually reach Josh Goodwin's southernmost pastures.

Raven's big black trotted out of the last tangle of brush that cloaked

the slope and, obeying the pressure of Raven's knees, quartered directly toward the bowl that held the cattle.

THE CABIN was only a hundred yards away now. Raven came to a thick clump of trees, swung down, dropping the reins over the black's head. Henley duplicated the maneuver.

"All right," said Raven. Gun in hand, he darted from tree to tree. Henley followed. They reached the side of the cabin, crept near the open window and paused there, listening intently. The only sound was the deep snore of a sleeper.

Raven ducked low past the window, then straightened and ran around to the front door. Behind them and halfway down the ridge there was a sudden clamor; Barnes' six-gun drove shattering echoes across the morning stillness, then his wild yell cut through the air. Somewhere a nervous cow bawled. Restlessness sparked through the herd like a streak of chain lightning.

Raven lifted his foot, thrust it against the panel and gave it a shove. It was a weather-beaten affair, hanging on one hinge and it hadn't been bolted from the inside. Raven's kick spun the door violently inward and nearly ripped it from its hinges.

He followed the door inside and leaped to the right. Henley, crouched low, came after him and swung to the left of the door.

"Reach, everybody!" Raven sang out.

There were two double-tiered bunks set into the walls on the far side of the square room. Both lowers were occupied and one upper. The man in the upper was still in his blanket.

Now one man dropped backward, his arm lunging toward a soiled pillow. Raven's gun roared; a bullet dug into the far wall, two inches from the puncher's face. He rolled off the bunk to the floor and flung both hands over his head. "All right, all right!" he yelled.

"You're a little slow in obeying orders," Raven said. "Out of bed, the rest of you and don't try any tricks."

The man in the other lower bunk

stood up. He was short and wiry and his knees looked knobby in his long underwear. Pinto Henley chuckled. "Howdy, Harry," he said. "Never knew you looked so good in your underwear."

The cocky little gunman growled, "Shut up, Henley."

Outside there was a rumbling roar that grew in volume; the entire herd of cattle was on the run now and the sound of their passage sent a distinct tremor along the ground that reached the shack and shook the thin frame walls.

"Those beeves!" yelled the man beside Harry Dale. "They're running wild. We've got to go—"

"You're not going anywhere just yet," said Henley.

Dale's pinched features clouded with fury. "What do you think you're doing, Raven?" he demanded hotly.

"Just sending your boss' cattle back where they belong," Bill told him.

Dale showed his yellow teeth in a tight snarl. "You're pushing yourself way out on a limb," he said.

"Maybe you or Goodwin would like a hand in trying to saw off the limb," Raven said.

Dale nodded vigorously. "You called it, my friend. You'll never make this play stick; when the Big G is finished with you, you'll be ready to be picked up on a shovel."

RAVEN never went around a thing he could meet head-on. Now a tiny flame was kindled in the depths of his blue-gray eyes as the rumble of the stampede dwindled away, in the distance. "Do you feel like doing something about it personally—right now?"

Not a man in the room moved. A yellow band of sunlight shone through the window beside Dale; it illuminated Dale's dark, hollow cheeks and it put a strange metallic glitter in his eyes. "That hogleg in your fist makes you top dog," he whispered hoarsely.

Raven spoke in a still, cold voice. "That your gun in the holster hanging from the peg on the wall?"

"Yeah."

"Go and get it."

Dale grimaced. "And have you shoot me in the back?"

There was no change in Raven's expression. Just that tight coldness of danger, of imminent violence rasped harshly through the room. Pinto Henley frowned. "Don't be a fool, Bill," he protested. "Don't give Dale a chance; he's murder with gun."

Dale grinned faintly. It was not a pleasant grin, for he was in the grip of a hatred that was a corroding flux poisoning his brain.

Raven looked calmly at Henley. "Get Dale's belt and gun, Pinto."

Henley's frown deepened; he sensed the wildness that was impelling Raven, feared the consequences of a shoot-out between the two men. But Raven's implacable stare drove him around the crude pine table in the middle of the room. He moved past Dale, reached the wall, took Dale's shell belt and gun down from its peg.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Give it to Dale, then step away." Raven told him.

Henley approached the Big G ramrod on the left side, handed the belt and holster to Dale. Dale took it, letting it dangle in his hands. There was a feverish excitement in him.

"Strap it around your waist, Dale," Raven said; "but be very careful how you do it."

Henley moved back and around the table, watching Dale like a hawk. The tension in him was rising. He licked his lips.

Dale buckled the belt around his lean waist, adjusted it, then hesitated with his thumbs hooked over the top edge of the finely tooled leather.

"Whenever you're ready, make your play," Raven intoned. He thrust his own weapon back in the scabbard.

TIME STOPPED in that small, square room; the puncher beside Dale seemed to have trouble with his breathing. It was as if a suction pump were dragging all the air out of his lungs.

And all the while the two antagonists stood facing each other—Raven tall and taciturn, with a reckless hard care shunting from his square-jawed

features; Dale, small and wiry and deadly in his own way and torn by his wicked, hating wants.

There was a flicker far back in Dale's round, dark eyes. His right hand started to grope along the belt toward his holster. Raven remained immobile, his hands dangling at his sides.

There was something utterly frightening about the way Raven waited. He was like a block of granite; only his eyes held life and animation. But hell was rolling inside him; every man in the room sensed it. It did something to all of them, turned them uneasy, sent gray doubt crowding through Dale's mind.

His right hand had crawled to the top of the holster. There it stopped. It was as if his questing fingers had encountered and unexpected obstruction.

Suddenly Dale found himself remembering that Bill Raven had spent two years as a trouble-shooter with the Union Pacific railroad. He could imagine the brawls and fights in those tough end-of-track towns. To hold down a job like that a man had to be rough with his hands and swift with his guns; and Raven had held the job for two years.

Dale let his hands drop all the way down to his sides. He was beaten; he refused to take the gamble.

A gusty sigh of relief swept through the assembled men. Dale's cheeks reddened with shame as he saw his two punchers regard him in stunned surprise.

Raven spoke sharply. "Unbuckle your belt now and ease it to the floor, then step out of it."

Silently Dale complied with the order. After he had stepped away from the belt Henley took it and removed the gun and thrust it in the waistband of his levis.

There was a rataplan of hoofs outside. Through the half-open doorway Raven saw Denver Barnes canter into view. He rode up to the door, vaulted to the ground and entered the cabin.

"I see you've got them," he said with an indolent grin.

"Yeah," said Raven. "Nice job you did with those cows."

Again Barnes' grin showed. "Those critters will run from now until next Thursday."

"And the night hawk?"

"The last I saw of him he was rattling his hocks to keep from being run down by those steers."

"Good work. Now lope around to the corral and bring those saddle horses around front."

Barnes ducked back through the doorway and vanished around the side of the cabin. Raven turned to the three Big G hands.

"Climb into your clothes," he said.

GLUMPLY and dispiritedly they scrambled into shirts and levis and boots. Henley collected the rest of the guns, then Raven herded them on to Big G saddle mounts.

"Now we'll need some rope," Raven said.

"What for?" Dale demanded, breaking his silence.

"We're going to hogtie you gents to your saddles so you don't get lost on your way home."

Denver Barnes laughed softly. Dale gave him a baleful look.

Henley broke in, "Hell, you had your chance to show what you've got in your backbone. From what we saw I'd say it was nothing but jelly."

Dale cursed, his face was suffused with blood. "We'll ride," he said finally. "No need for rope."

"You'll go roped to your saddle or you'll walk," said Raven. "What'll it be?"

One of the other punchers said resignedly, "Come on, Harry. Let's get it over with. Bring on those ropes."

Raven nodded to the man. "We'll start with you."

The puncher climbed into the hull.

"Not that way," snapped Raven.

The puncher twisted around, looking puzzled.

"Flat on your belly and make it quick," snapped Raven.

Profanity spilled from the puncher's lips, but he did what he was told; Henley and Barnes stepped forward with some rope and lashed him

firmly to the saddle, did the same to the second man. When it was Dale's turn the ramrod wheeled toward Raven.

"Next time the cards will lay different," he said; "then you'll get yours."

Raven said without any change of expression: "Climb up."

Dale was lashed to his kak; then Raven took a hunk of wrapping paper from his pocket and a pencil, scrawled a note.

Dear Josh:

Those beef critters you had on my range got lonesome so I sent them back home. And here are three more sides of beef you can use for your supper tonight.

Bill Raven

When he finished writing he folded the paper and pinned it to the cantle of Harry Dale's saddle.

"Start them moving, Denver," he ordered.

Barnes took off his hat, slapped the rump of Dale's horse. The animal bucked once, then lit out, running. The other two Big G mounts followed.

Pinto Henley glanced at Raven and shook his head. "Man," he said, "you sure enough piled it on."

Raven didn't even smile. He said, "That was my intention."

"Goodwin won't take this lying down. He'll strike back fast."

"I hope so," Raven murmured. "I want to force his hand."

6



AFTER the three Big G saddle horses, bearing Harry Dale and his two companions, had trotted out of sight, Raven dispatched Denver Barnes to the Rolling R ranch with instructions to pick up Allie Fenwick

and proceed to the Elbow Bend

line camp to relieve the two stationed there.

Barnes was also told to leave word for Monk Lewis and Hondo Halleck, two other punchers who had been left behind with Fenwick, to saddle their ponies and ride to Indian Point. This was a ledge of rock in the midst of the rougher section of the Rolling R range. It was Raven's plan to have the two men from the Elbow Bend camp join him there, too, so they could start hazing strays down onto the flats in preparation for the coming beef drive.

"We're going to have to work fast," Henley grumbled as Barnes galloped off along the home trail. "Two weeks ain't a helluva lot of time to collect a herd and drive it to the railroad."

"I know all that," said Raven impatiently. "But if we crowd ourselves a bit we can do it."

"Provided we don't run into any interference from Josh Goodwin."

Raven swung into the saddle of the black gelding.

"I don't reckon we'll have any trouble in that direction until we're ready to start the drive," he said.

"We're kind of strapped for help," Henley reminded him. "If we make a drive you'll have to leave a few hands at the ranch and both line camps."

Raven considered the foreman's remark thoughtfully before he replied. "There are eight of us. Two men at the ranch. One man at each camp leaves four for the drive."

"You can't do it."

"We may have to," said Raven curtly. "Tell you what; you ride into Bradley right now and see if you can hire a couple more hands."

Henley laughed bitterly. "No cowpoke is willing to risk getting mauled by Bull Bronson for forty a month and found."

"Maybe you'll be lucky enough to spot a grubline rider drifting through the country. Try it. If you don't have any luck meet me at Indian Point."

Henley climbed up on his big roan horse and rode off toward Bradley. Raven cut straight across

the narrow valley until he came to an old game trail leading over the hump of the ridge. He rode steadily for twenty minutes until he came out upon a flat tableland bordered by thick brush.

Jutting out into the northern end of the table land was the gaunt seventy-foot granite butte which, at one time, had been an Indian look-out post. He saw a few wild-eyed steers at the edge of the brakes. At his approach they ducked into the brush. Raven dug his heels into the black's flanks and set out after the steers.

THE BLACK went crashing through the brush on the heels of a roan-headed critter. Buck-jumping and skittering into a shallow-walled arroyo, the black followed the fleeing steer. Raven loosened the lariat on his saddle horn, and as he pulled abreast of the steer he slapped at its rump with the rope end.

The steer bawled in rage and pain, tried to scuttle away. But the range-trained black headed the steer off, forced it up a slight grade and down the other side and onto the flats.

Again and again Raven dashed into the brakes after half-wild critters. At the end of two hours when he was joined by Monk Lewis and Hondo Halleck, he had seven steers out on the flats.

Lewis and Halleck had driven a cavvy of spare horses up from the ranch and they were thrown into a crude rope corral fastened between four live oaks that grew in such a way as to form a rough rectangle. After a short rest Raven switched his saddle to a rangy gray and threw himself back into the drive.

The cook came rolling into camp with the chuck wagon early in the afternoon and everyone piled off his horse to grab some beans and bacon and coffee.

Pinto Henley showed up with two new men just about the time Hank Lester and Norb Hall drifted in from the Elbow Bend line camp. The newcomers were lean, sun-browned men with bowed legs.

"Good work, Pinto," said Raven, hazing a spotted steer up to the holding ground and jumping out of the saddle to greet his foreman. "Have any trouble?"

"Not so far," said Henley. "Town was kind of empty. These gents were downing some redeye in one of the saloons and plainly on the drift; they're on the payroll, but for how long I don't know."

"All right. Put them to work. I'll have to pull out for the ranch in about an hour on account of the dance tonight." Raven paused a moment, considering Monk Lewis and Hondo Halleck as they went spurring off into a narrow side canyon after a couple of cantankerous cows. "Reckon I ought to call it off; too much work to do here."

"You go ahead," said Henley. "I can handle things here. Better take Monk or Hondo with you to keep an eye on the ranch."

Bill nodded his assent, then went back to his horse to rejoin the hunt for strays. The sun boiled down relentlessly, oiling the faces of the toiling punchers with layers of sweat.

AT THE end of an hour the gray Raven had been forking was thoroughly winded. He rode back to the horse cavvy and dismounted. The chase was getting harder now; they had to follow an ever-widening circle in the hunt for strays.

He had roped out a fresh horse and was swinging his saddle from the gray to the new mount when he spotted two horses quartering down a distant slope to the northwest. Pinto Henley, at the edge of the beef gather, noticed the oncoming horses, too, and trotted over. "Bill, that looks like Allie Fenwick in the lead. wonder what he's—"

"The second horse is being led," said Raven. "If it is Fenwick you can guess who the other man will be."

"You reckon Goodwin has—?"

Raven cut Henley short. "We'll see." But the way he chopped off the words told the Rolling R ram-

rod that Raven was fully prepared for trouble.

As the horses drew nearer Raven and Henley were able to recognize Fenwick. Henley noted something else. "The second man is tied to the saddle. If it's Denver Barnes he's hurt bad; he's got his face in that black's mane and I see ropes going across his shoulders."

Fenwick came on steadily, cut over a small hump of land and finally hit the flats. He pulled his horse to a halt before he reached Raven and piled out of the hull, hurried to the led animal, started fumbling with the ropes around the other man.

Over his shoulder he said to Raven: "Denver is hurt, Bill."

He had the ropes free by the time Raven and Henley came up. Barnes uttered a low groan, he pushed himself upright, with an effort.

Hardened as he was to the sight of violence, Raven experienced a shock of revulsion and pity when he regarded Barnes: both eyes had been blackened shut; one side of his nose had been crushed; dried blood was caked around the flaring nostrils. His upper lip was split and two front teeth were missing. The left side of his face was swollen to twice its normal size.

The sick feeling in Raven's stomach passed, was replaced by a pounding rage. His eyes shuttled to Fenwick, asking a silent question.

Fenwick's reply was clipped and grim. "Yeah. Bull Bronson."

Barnes was mumbling. "Bill... sorry I... Bronson was..." His broken lips fluttered and his body sagged; he toppled sidewise. Raven and Fenwick caught him, eased him to the ground.

Raven issued crisp orders. "Pinto, tell the cookie I want his wagon. Throw some blankets in the back. We've got to get Denver into town; he needs a sawbone."

Fenwick added in a low, tight voice. "Denver's insides got it, too, from what he told me before he passed out. Bronson pounded hell out of him; I'd like to get that son in front of my gunshot."

"Bronson is my meat," said Raven,

squatting beside Barnes, his face a pale mask of destructive fury. "This is my fight. Barnes got this beating because of me."

THERE WAS a clatter of wheels as the chuck wagon rumbled over the uneven ground toward them. The cook halted the team of bays close by and jumped down from the seat. Henley was fumbling with blankets in the bed of the wagon.

At a signal from Raven, Fenwick moved around to pick up Barnes' feet while Raven gripped him under the shoulders. They carried him over to the wagon, laid him gently on top of the blankets.

As Raven turned away he noticed that the two new punchers Henley had hired in Bradley had been drawn to the wagon by curiosity. Both men were gaping, wide-eyed at Barnes. "Blazes!" murmured one man in an awed whisper. "I've seen jaspers beaten up, but never like this. Who—who did that?" Henley peered sharply at the man. "We're havin a little trouble with another ranch."

"A little trouble!" echoed the man. "I reckon I'll just drift over the mountains."

Henley said, "Suit yourself." He looked at the second puncher. "What about you?"

"I'll stick," the other replied. "Any gent that gets beaten up like that needs a friend; I wouldn't mind having a hand in evening the score with the sidewinder that did this."

"Good enough," said Henley. "You may get your chance."

Raven watched the man ride off, watched the first man take one more shuddering look at Barnes, then swing away toward the mountains in the west. After a moment Raven turned to Fenwick. "How did it happen, Allie?" he queried.

The story Fenwick told was brief and to the point. He and Barnes had been scouring the brush, looking for Rolling R cows when Barnes had broken a cinch. Fenwick had continued his circle along the boundary between the Rolling R and the Long

Bow while Barnes had gone back to the line shack to mend the cinch.

When Barnes didn't return in an hour Fenwick had ridden to the cabin to investigate. He'd found Barnes sprawled out on the ground in front of the cabin, his face smashed in, bleeding from the nose and mouth.

The prints of two shod horses were in the yard and the ground "He was barely conscious when I found him," concluded Fenwick, was torn up in several places.

"He mumbled something about Bronson making an object lesson out of him."

Raven laid his bleak glance upon Henley. "Nothing on earth could keep me here at camp now," he murmured. "I hope Bronson shows up."

Henley nodded. "I know how you feel, Bill. But watch him; he's a killer. There's no mercy in him. Want me to take the wagon into town?"

"Yeah, but I'm tagging along. We'll drive straight to Doc Stack's place. If he isn't in Bradley we'll dig him up—wherever he may be. On the way I'll stop off at the Rolling R to get cleaned up for the dance. But I'll overtake you before you reach Bradley."

Raven lingered to call Monk Lewis over and tell him he was in charge of the camp until morning. Then, with Henley at the reins, his horse tied to the tail gate and Raven riding alongside, the wagon rumbled out of camp



hauled Henley

AT THE Rolling R ranch-house, Bill Raven stopped just long enough to shave and change into clean clothes, then hurried out to the corral, saddled a fresh horse and raced on again. A mile outside of Bradley he overhauled Henley in the buckboard.

Barnes had not regained consciousness. He lay limp and lifeless in the wagon bed, tossing from side to side with each jolt of the wheels. Staring down at him, Raven felt all his nerves knot tightly inside him. Barnes' condition was serious; he probably had a concussion and if Bronson had kicked him he was, no doubt, also suffering from internal injuries. The thought filled Raven with remorse; by continuing his private war with Goodwin he was endangering the life of every puncher on the Rolling R payroll.

The responsibility was a heavy one. Bill had no right to expect any man to run the risk of being crippled just to save a few thousand acres of land and some cattle. Because this struggle was an intensely personal one, Raven told himself, he must give the members of his crew a chance to pull out. It was the only fair thing to do.

Bill was sure he could count on Henley and Fenwick and Monk Lewis to stay on. The others were in doubt. But, at this moment with the sight of Barnes before him and the sure knowledge of how ruthless that beating must have been, he was wild enough not to care how many men backed his play.

The sound of a rough voice nearby brought Raven out of his stony reverie. "Now what have you got, Henley?"

Raven jerked up his head, saw that the wagon had stopped in front of a small frame cottage on a knoll a half mile above the center of town. A small, wiry, black-haired man with dark eyes and a dark mustache to match them, strode down a curving path to the weather-beaten picket fence.

"Denver Barnes," said Henley, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

Bennett Stack, the town's only doctor, frowned, then said without much friendliness to Raven, "Heard you were back. I've been waiting for something like this."

"Yeah," said Raven, his lips hardly moving, "this is just the beginning."

The doctor walked around to the back of the wagon. He stared at

Barnes. His small, precise lips tightened. "Looks like he was arguing with a steer," he murmured.

"It was a bull," said Raven. "Bull Bronson."

Stack let that information simmer in his mind for a second. "Bronson did a thorough job," he said, at last. "What happens next?"

Raven's answer was short and quick. "Be ready for another patient."

"Just like that?" Stack's eyebrows lifted quizzically.

"Just like that," repeated Raven.

The doctor's manner changed. Suddenly he was all business. "All right," he said "Carry him inside."

BAVEN AND Henley removed Barnes from the wagon bed and, with the doctor leading the way, took him inside the cottage. The doctor's graying, middle-aged wife opened the door into a small room fitted out as a crude office.

There was a rough, hand-planed desk in a corner, the pigeonholes crammed with papers and bills. A wooden cabinet had been built into one wall. The doors of the cabinet were open, revealing Stack's instruments, bandages and an assortment of medicines.

At a gesture from Mrs. Stack, Raven and Henley deposited Barnes on a small couch. A coal-oil lamp hung from chains suspended in the ceiling; Mrs. Stack turned up the wick, then swept out of the room.

"Anything I can do?" Raven queried.

The doctor was already struggling out of his black coat and rolling back his sleeves. He moved to the cabinet, took down a black kit bag and swung around. "Clear out. The both of you!" he replied testily. "Nothing you can do. The missus can give me all the help I need."

Raven lingered long enough to add: "Do everything you can for him, Doc; I want Denver back on his feet and I don't care what it costs."

"Damn the costs!" growled Stack. "The man is hurt—that's all that concerns me."

Raven and Henley turned and

tramped awkwardly out of the room. Back on the street with the gate closed behind them, Raven said: "Take the wagon to town and leave it at the livery. You hang around and keep posted about Denver. I'm going out to the Long Bow."

IT WAS full dark by the time Raven reached the Bigelow ranch. As he trotted up to the main house and swung to the ground the door to the bunkhouse was flung open and a man ducked out, flinging a harsh call through the gloom. "Who's that?"

"Bill Raven."

The answer appeared to satisfy the Long Bow puncher, for he went back inside.

Raven turned toward the long front room of the ranch-house. He saw a light in the room and waited for the door to open. The loud exchange of words across the yard between the Long Bow puncher and himself should have been heard by Sue.

He straightened his black string tie, tucked his white shirt into the waistband of his trousers and climbed the steps to the porch.

Through the window he saw Sue sitting in a chair. She was knitting with her head bent, her eyes intent on her nimbly moving fingers. The boards of the porch sent off echoes of his heavy stride. Still Sue did not lift her head. Raven felt himself tightening up. He rapped on the screen door with his knuckles. Sue's precise voice bade him enter.

He shouldered into the room. Sue rose at his entrance. She dropped her knitting into a cloth bag beside the chair. "Hello, Bill," she said.

He reached for her with his arms. But she held him away, not giving him a smile. "Not tonight, Bill,"

Raven's hands dropped to his sides. He gave her a searching look. Only then did he notice that, though her hair was neatly waved, she was wearing an ordinary calico house dress.

He said, "I thought you'd be all dressed for the dance, Sue."

"I've changed my mind about going," she replied.

"Why, Sue?" he asked.

She brought her long, slender hands in front of her and clasped them tightly. They looked white and rigid, just as her mouth did. "I'm surprised you find it necessary to ask that," she said.

"I'm asking."

She slanted a bitter, despairing glance at him. "I'm afraid I've always expected too much of you," she murmured; "You'll always go out of your way to hunt trouble."

"Suppose you be more specific."

"I will." Her cheeks were set primly. "You weren't satisfied with hazing Goodwin's cows off your range. You had to strike at Dale and those other two men right where they would be hurt most—their pride. Trussing them up like sides of beef! How do you expect—?"

"How do you know about that?" he interrupted.

"Lance David told me about it this afternoon."

Raven's eyes glowed with a steely light. "And where did he hear about it?"

"Is it important? News gets around. Especially news of that sort."

"No. I'm not so sure about that; neither Dale nor any of the other Big G hands would be inclined to talk about how they were humiliated."

He strode across the room, flung open the door.

"Where are you going?" Sue asked.

"To find Lance David."

"He's not here. I sent him to town to avoid trouble."

RAVEN LET the door ease shut. He came back to Sue. She was very lovely and yet, at this moment, so utterly remote from him. A stiff wretchedness assailed him. "About the dance," he said. "I wish you'd change your mind again and go."

"It's no use, Bill." There was sadness in her tone. "Goodwin and Bronson will be there; if you show up, too, you'll be inviting them to retaliate. There may be a fight—perhaps shooting." There was a break in her voice and pure misery shone in her eyes. "Oh, Bill, I don't want you hurt..."

The look in her eyes brought him forward. He reached out and pulled her into his arms. This time she didn't resist. She had her face against his chest. A nervous trembling shook her slender body. His embrace tightened. The sweet warmth of her, the subtle fragrance of her hair was like wine to his senses.

Suddenly she drew away from him. Her gray-green eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "Bill," she whispered. "Do something for me."

"What is it, Sue?" There was gentleness in him now.

"Don't go, Bill," she pleaded.

Raven's face registered instant change. A murky darkness filmed his eyes; he drew back into his solitary man's world where all issues were clear-cut and knife-edged. "Don't ask me that," he said.

Her eyes burned hotly. "Forget your silly pride for once."

"It's more than pride, Sue; to fail to go to that dance would be a confession of weakness."

"The code again!" she said with stinging malice.

"Yes," he agreed. "It's a hard code, and maybe it isn't always good sense; but it's a code every man must live by in this country—or he fails to be a man."

The straightness went out of her shoulders, and she spoke with a dispiritedness that was worse than anger. "Then it's no use. You'd better go."

Bill was thinking of Denver Barnes and of his horribly mutilated features; he felt temper sweep through like a torrid flame, and he knew it was chiseling his face in hard planes.

She watched him in shocked silence. Raven's wildness, his tough inner core never failed to startle her, to leave her breathless. She saw how he fought to control his feelings and wondered what grim thoughts had prompted that alteration in his features.

He said finally with a great effort, "If I give you my word that there'll be no trouble at the dance, will you go?"

She glanced at him, her eyes suddenly bright and eager with hope.

He stood straight and still before her. And now she saw a different kind of passion had hold of him. It was a hunger for her; the spark of it reached her and kindled a responsive fire within her. It was a fire she had experienced before and never ceased to fight.

"Oh, Bill," she said impulsively, "if I were only sure you meant that."

"I do mean it," he insisted. "It's been a long time since we danced."

She said softly, "It really has." Then she searched his face carefully. "You'll really give me your word?"

He nodded. "I'm telling you I won't start anything. This is our night; I'd like to make it something to remember."

"I want that, too, Bill."

"Good!" He spoke heartily, pulled her close, and kissed her with rough ardor.

When he released her there was a high color in her cheeks. She looked flustered and a little annoyed. "Must you do that?" she asked. "I—I mean, just that way."

"Sue," he said, "you're wearing my ring; it's no secret how I feel about you."

She looked down at the small gold band that circled the third finger of her left hand with its single small diamond. When she spoke she seemed a little confused, a little anxious to be free of him. "Wait here for me," she murmured, "while I change into another dress."

Then she was gone, rushing past him into the hall.



B RADLEY was ablaze with lights when Raven drove the Long Bow buckboard into town and racked up the team alongside an empty feed barn. On both sides of the street the hitching rails were lined with saddle horses, wagons and buggies. The yellow shine of

lamplight, issuing from saloons, illuminated the board sidewalks and the dust beyond them. Cowpunchers in from the ranches rubbed shoulders with townspeople as they made the rounds of the bars before proceeding to the dance.

Raven leaped to the ground, walked around the buckboard and gave his hand to Sue; she stepped down. For just a moment she leaned against him and he caught the warmth of her smile. She took his arm and they started along the sidewalk.

The dance was being held in a big hall on the second floor of The Mercantile building. It was a room used for town meetings and dances and was reached by an outside stairway. Already the sound of music drifted to them; the piano and fiddlers had started. As they came up to the Mercantile they could hear the thump of heavy boots as clumsy punchers whirled their feminine partners around the floor.

At the foot of the stairway Pinto Henley stropped Raven. "How is Barnes?" Bill demanded quickly.

"Doc says he's going to be all right, but he won't ride for several weeks." Henley removed his hat, nodded a greeting to Sue. "Couple of his ribs were busted."

Raven's face hardened instantly. Sue's eyes widened. "What happened to Barnes?" she asked.

"Bronson caught him at the Elbow Bend line camp and beat him up." He spoke with a toneless anger that was frightening.

"You did that to Denver Barnes," she said.

"How do you figure that?" he asked.

"By trussing up Dale and those two punchers like sides of beef. Barnes' beating was Goodwin's answer to you. Oh, Bill there'll never be any end to it." Her eyes turned cold. She added lifelessly: "Will you take me home, Bill?"

Raven gripped her arm at the elbow. "We're here, Sue. We're going on with it.

"No. I'm afraid."

"There'll be no trouble—tonight,"

he said. "You have my word."

Henley backed away, not wanting any part of this personal argument.

Raven didn't give Sue any time to offer further protests. With his hand under her elbow he guided her to the stairway and they mounted to the meeting hall.

INSIDE THE frame building shook to the stamp and beat of dancing feet. On a raised platform at the back of the big room the musicians were holding sway. There was a long stringbean of a man draped over a stool, playing a piano. There were two fiddlers and another man who doubled at playing a guitar and a mouth organ.

Benches were lined up along the other three walls. Some of the older men and women sat there. A long table at the front of the meeting hall held a huge punch bowl and some picnic baskets brought by a few of the ranch families.

The musicians swung into a slow waltz. Raven paused near the door. "Shall we start?" he asked.

She nodded and slid into his arms. They drifted around the floor easily, the vibrant warmth of Sue's body filling Raven with an odd pleasure and contentment. She danced with easy grace, one hand resting lightly on his shoulder. "Having fun?" Raven asked, as they swung past the band stand.

"Of course, Bill." She started to smile, then stopped, and he felt the sudden stiffening of her back muscles. Raven swung her around so that he faced in the direction she had been looking. Josh Goodwin, Bull Bronson and Harry Dale had just entered the meeting hall. Bill saw Bronson and Dale survey the crowd. Simultaneously their eyes came around to him and halted.

Bronson shook his broad, slab-like shoulders. A wide, pleased grin pulled at his lips. Dale's hand dropped involuntarily toward his gunbelt. The malevolence in his round, dark eyes hit Raven with the impact of an actual physical blow.

"Bill," Sue was saying in a low, choked voice, "remember..."

"Don't worry," he said. He tried to keep the words gentle, but a note of harshness crept into them.

They danced on. Sue kept staring toward the doorway; Bronson and Dale remained posted there. Goodwin had drifted away to talk to another man.

"We won't stay long, Bill," Sue said. Strain was eating at her control.

"Nobody's making us leave till we're ready," he said. Now let yourself go and have some fun."

The musicians struck up a faster tune. The dancing couples increased their pace. Someone banged into them. Raven turned to mutter an apology, then stopped short when he saw that the other couple was Anne Maynard and Ty Raskall.

"Hello, Bill," said Anne. To Sue she gave an over-sweet smile. "I'm glad to see you, Sue; you're looking well."

"And so are you, Anne," Sue responded.

The two girls had never been very friendly, and the knowledge that Anne and Bill had once loved each other was an added embarrassment to Sue. Anne looked arrestingly beautiful in a bright yellow dress with full, ruffled skirt. She had let her long, blue-black hair down. It was combed in silky waves and there was a bright ribbon holding it together.

Raven took his long and deliberate look at her. When he met her glance he saw the mockery in her eyes. "Well, do I pass, Bill?" she asked softly.

"You're stunning," he said in frank honesty and was unaware of the stab of pain that went through Sue standing close beside him.

Raven never failed to experience a solid pull of attraction for Anne. Yet, he understood it for what it was; the natural reaction of a man to a lovely woman with a well-formed body. Once that attraction had been like a searing flame between them—but the flame had gone out.

He knew now that there could never be any other woman for him but Sue, he knew that his feeling for Sue was something deeper and more permanent.

All of this was just a split-second impression flitting through his mind before he swung his attention back to Sue and tightened his arm around her waist. Anne saw the gesture and her dark, arching brows drew minutely together.

Ty Raskall showed his even white teeth in a wide grin. "Aren't you running a risk coming to the dance, Raven?"

Raven's answer was quick and blunt. "No more than you, Ty."

"What are you driving at?" Raskall demanded.

Sue dragged Raven away. "Come on, Bill, while the music is still playing."

Raven shrugged and left Anne and Ty Raskall standing in the middle of the floor. They made a complete circuit of the hall before the waltz ended and the couples slowly drifted toward the sidelines. Raven guided Sue over to the refreshment table. He had to elbow his way through several couples, but he finally emerged with two glasses of punch. They drank standing up. Raven took the empty glasses over to the table. When he returned he found Lance David with Sue.

"Lance has asked me for this dance," she said. "Do you mind?"

"Go ahead," he said.

THE MUSCIANS had started another waltz. David and Sue swung onto the floor. Then Raven saw Anne with two other girls at the end of the refreshment table. She noticed him at the same instant. He gestured toward the dance floor. She nodded. He approached and took her in his arms. They moved out among the couples just as Bull Bronson came up to the table. Bronson had obviously been intending to ask Anne for the dance; now he scowled darkly after Raven and turned to one of the girls.

The girl accepted his invitation. Bronson guided her clumsily among the other dancers. The girl was looking up at him and talking animatedly. But he didn't hear a word; his attention was centered on Raven. Once he glanced over toward the door where Goodwin had again taken up his sta-

tion. Bronson nodded and Goodwin returned the gesture with a wink.

Anne was letting Raven have the full impact of her hot, dark eyes. "I wondered if you were going to ask me to dance."

He smiled faintly. "I wouldn't have missed it."

"Wouldn't you?"

There were times when she could be coldly hostile to him, and other times when she was provocatively warm and friendly. Tonight she was warm; tonight she wanted him to notice her. She still had the power to stir him—as she could stir any man. She was soft in his arms, and very yielding. A strange, reluctant excitement soared through him.

Then a gruff voice spoke behind him. "I hear Denver Barnes got trampled by a steer."

Raven knew that voice. He stopped in mid-stride, twisted around to face Bull Bronson. The Big G puncher was dancing with a small blonde. Raven's face turned into a frigid gray mask. "That'll be too bad for the steer."

An ugly gleam crept into Bronson's small eyes. "That so?" he said. "They say Barnes is in bad shape."

Raven's temper was slipping. Anne saw the danger signals and cried out in sudden dismay. "No, Bull. Stop it!"

Neither man paid any attention to her. One or two couples near them had stopped dancing, sensing trouble.

"That's right, Bull," Raven said gently. "Denver is in bad shape." Never had a man looked more deadly than Raven looked at this moment. "But not half as bad as that steer will be when I tack its hide against a fence."

Bronson's arms dropped away from the blonde. She was frightened, her eyes wide and staring. She backed away.

"Maybe you'd like to do something about that steer right now," suggested Bronson.

"I sure would," said Raven; he stepped in and slapped Bronson with an open palm.

The musicians on their raised platform saw that blow, they stopped

playing. And in the quick stillness that followed the stinging impact of that slap carried through the meeting hall like the report of a pistol shot.

BRONSON LET out a roar of rage and sprang forward. Then, out of nowhere, came the short, bow-legged figure of Sheriff Sam Zents. He pushed between the two men and dug a gun into Bronson's belly.

"Hold it!" he growled. "There'll be no fighting in this hall."

A hubub of voices filled the room. Men were shouting. Over near the refreshment table a woman screamed. It was followed by the whimper of an infant child.

"Get out of my way, Sam," yelled Bronson, "or I'll bust you in half."

"You won't do any busting with a couple of ounces of lead in your brisket," the middle-aged lawman muttered.

"Let's go downstairs, Bull," said Raven, a savage, eager light in his eyes. "I reckon a hitching rail will be good enough to tack your ornery hide to."

"Raven," said Bronson thickly, "this time I'll kill you."

He turned with the sheriff right at his side.

"Let's go, Zents," he snapped.

The crowd split to let them through. Some of the men raced to the doorway and went pounding down the outside stairway so they could take up favored positions in the street to watch the fight.

Right at the doorway to the outside landing Sue pushed herself to the front of the crowd. She grabbed Raven's swinging arm. "Bill! Bill!" she implored. "You promised—"

He looked right at her and didn't see her. He was in the grip of an all-consuming rage that blotted every other consideration from his mind. Her fingers fell away and she stepped back, stricken and deeply hurt.

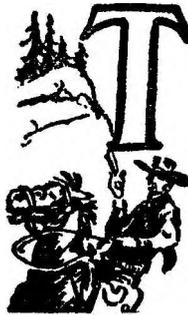
Raven moved on, blood pounding in every nerve.

Down in the street men were gathered in a wide circle between the board sidewalks. Bronson and Raven reached the bottom of the steps to-

gether. Zents lifted Bronson's gun out of the holster. He turned and held out his hand for Raven's weapon. Raven dug out his Colt, passed it over, then calmly unbuckled his cartridge belt and let it drop to the ground. He took off his coat, dropped his hat on top of it at the edge of the walk.

He turned toward Bronson as the huge, long-armed puncher leaped at him. Bronson's knee was driving up. Raven tried to twist aside. But Bronson's knee cap caught him low in the belly. Splinters of pain shot through Raven, like tiny nails being hammered into his flesh.

He doubled up and went down on his face. An inarticulate cry churned from Bronson's throat as he swooped in and slammed the toe of his boot into Raven's ribs.



HE ENTIRE left side of Raven's body seemed to be paralyzed by Bronson's kick! He saw Bronson moving in again, saw Bronson's booted foot swing back, then forward. From some deep and hidden well of strength

Raven found the energy to roll away; and as he twisted out of reach he flung up one hand, caught Bronson around the ankle and hauled him to the ground.

The Big G puncher landed on his back and shoulders with a jarring thud. Raven scrambled to his feet. Pain was still digging at him. It sent a nauseous feeling churning through his stomach.

"Finish him, Bull!" a man in the crowd yelled.

Bronson came up and charged. The knuckles of his left hand grazed Raven's temple as he slid past. Then Raven locked both his own hands together, raised them over his head and brought them down in a crushing blow upon the back of Bronson's

neck as the latter stumbled in one of the street's ruts.

Bronson sprawled face-down in the dust. Raven jumped on top of him, got a grip on his ears and banged his face into the hard ground. Bronson wrenched around savagely, unseated Raven, then flung himself full upon Raven, but Bill was waiting for him. Instead of vaulting on Raven's chest, Bronson struck the soles of Raven's upraised boots. With a violent spring of his legs, Raven sent the big man arching away from him.

Both men rose together. Bronson rushed at Raven, hit him with a glancing blow to the side of the face, but took a sharp counter to the jaw in return.

Raven was cooler than he had been; the first wild rush of wrath had left him. He knew this would be a brutal fight with no quarter given. Bronson was out to maim him for life; he read the man's intention in his hooded eyes.

Bronson shuffled forward in the dust, led with a looping right; Raven slid under it and drove his own left deep into Bronson's belly. Bronson gasped in pain and immediately reached for Bill with his long arms. Raven backed away, not wishing to be trapped in that fashion.

Back and forth across the street the fight waged, with Bronson always stalking his smaller opponent. When he hit Raven, the sound of his meaty hands striking flesh and bone, could be heard plainly by every man in the crowd. Raven ducked and side-stepped and danced around Bronson, blocking most of Bronson's punches and slipping in now and then with short, telling blows.

A roundhouse swing that Raven failed to avoid caught him high on the head and knocked him off his feet. There was an immediate roar from the throng of onlookers. Raven felt as if his head had been torn from his shoulders; never in all of his rough-and-tumble fights had he encountered a man who could punch like Bronson.

Raven got up because to stay down meant being trampled under Bronson's boots. But his vision was blurred and his strength seemed to be

slipping away. He saw Bronson rushing at him. He threw up his arms; a hard-knuckled fist drilled through his guard, nailed him on the mouth. The blow mashed his lower lip against his teeth and blood ran warmly in his mouth; but the pain rushed away the veil of blackness that had been drawing across his hand.

He backed away. Bronson followed, his evil face alight. "This is it, Raven," he said and moved in for the kill.

RAVEN WAS tottering on the edge of defeat; he understood that; read his finish in Bronson's slitted eyes. But again he marshaled his strength; the steel that was so much a part of his nature, took hold of him.

Without warning he stopped retreating. Bronson kept coming; he charged Raven with a long right that missed, followed it with another right. Bill swung around, put his back to Bronson, caught Bronson's arm at the wrist. Then he bent double and flipped Bronson's tremendous weight over his back.

Bronson sailed through space, struck a hitching rail in front of the Silver Dollar Saloon and smashed through it. A jagged sliver of broken wood skewered his side. He belched in mingled pain and rage. He tore it out of his flesh and started to get up, the sharp-edged hunk of wood held in his hand like a dagger.

He was rising from his knees when Raven roared in, smashed him on the jaw with a pile-driving right. Bronson flipped over backwards lost his crude weapon. There was no rules to this fight; it was kill or be killed. Raven didn't wait for Bronson to rise. He came in fast while Bronson was trying to get clear of the debris of the ruined hitching rail, got a grip on Bronson, heaved him, struggling and clawing and mumbling curses, up over his head, turned once around with him in the middle of the street, then hurled him to the ground.

A gasp went up from the crowd. From somewhere close by Raven heard Pinto Henley's familiar voice cry out. "He's all yours now, Bill!"

Bronson was stunned by the crush-

ing impact of the fall. For a moment he rolled in the dust, trying to get up. Raven waited for him, stood on wide-spread legs, the depth of his breathing lifting his chest up and down. Blood seeped from his cracked lip, ran down his chin,

Bronson finally rose. His recuperative powers were amazing; there was still fight in him, and he shuffled forward, lashed out with a left hook that rocked Raven back on his heels. He lowered his head, tried to butt Raven, but Raven stepped away, drove the hell of his hand against Bronson's Adam's apple.

The big man reeled, gagged for breath. Raven hit him, then, with a wicked right and left. Bronson stayed on his feet; but he was definitely hurt; Raven smashed another right to Bronson's jaw. A sweeping left caught Bronson's Adam's apple once more. Bronson's eyes rolled in agony. Another left hook slammed into the big man's mid-section. And when Bronson doubled over in pain, Bill ducked low and butted him in the jaw. Bronson was already going down when Raven finished him off with a bruising uppercut. He didn't move after he struck the dust.

The crowd was tensely silent. They were awed by the amazing spectacle of seeing Raven whip a man forty pounds heavier and four inches taller. Then, like a bursting dam, the flood of talk broke. Somewhere a cheer broke out; but Raven clamped a lid on the noise by uttering a brittle challenge to the assembled multitude. "Has Bronson got any friends who'd like to take up where he left off?" he demanded.

There was a thick weariness in Bill's voice; he stood rooted in the dust, his feet wide apart, his chest heaving up and down from his recent exertions. His black trousers were coated with dust and torn at both knees. Blood streaked the corners of his mouth. He was weary enough to fall down beside the man he had whipped. Yet, he remained in the center of the circle, hard and defiant and reckless enough to fight again.

THERE WAS a stir in the ranks of the crowd. At the edge of the

sidewalk near the meeting hall several cowpunchers stepped aside to let Josh Goodwin and Harry Dale through. They looked at Bronson, then at Raven; Bill met their glance with a steely intensity

From somewhere behind Raven, Pinto Henley sang out: "I sure hope Bronson's friends make a play because I'm tired of holding this hogleg."

Raven twisted his head around to look at Henley. The foreman's gun jutted from his fist and the barrel was directed toward Goodwin and Dale. Then Sheriff Sam Zents lumbered up to Henley "Put that cutter away, Pinto," Zents ordered "There'll be no shooting. The fight's over."

"Yeah, it's over," said Goodwin, thrusting out his blunt jaw. "It's over—for now."

Harry Dale was in a crouch. He was pale and tense; his hand rested on the heel of his gun.

Zents spotted him and said, "You draw that gun and you're a dead huckleberry."

Dale sneered. "You figure you can shade me, Sheriff?"

The wizened lawman said, unmoved, "While you're drowning me my two deputies will be pumping you full of lead." He gestured to a man posted on either side of the ring of spectators; each deputy held a scattergun in the crook of his arm. "Josh," the sheriff went on, "better get Bronson out of there."

Goodwin's flat, bloodless lips pressed together. "Dale," he said, "get a pail of water in the saloon."

Dale turned and drifted away. Goodwin stood near Bronson's prone figure, idly scuffing the dust with the toe of his boot. Some of the crowd started to drift away. A few men wandered into a saloon; others returned to the meeting hall.

Dale came back with a pail of water, poured it on top of the Big G puncher. The shock of the cold water shook Bronson back to consciousness. "Get up, Bull!" said Goodwin.

Bronson looked around vacantly. Slowly he got up; his rough, hard-planned features stained with blood and dirt; his eyes seeming smaller than ever. He noticed Raven and start-

ed forward, but Goodwin hauled him back.

Raven said in a brittle voice! "Bronson, the next time you have a go at me be ready with your gun. I ought to have killed you for what you did to Denver Barnes. I may yet."

"Cut that talk," growled the sheriff. "If you want to prefer charges against Bronson, I'll see you in my office."

"No thanks, I can kill my own skunks."

"Don't bank on that, my friend," said Goodwin. He added on a menacing note: "I'll be seeing you."

"Make it soon," snapped Raven.

Zents grabbed his arm. "Maybe you better clear out of town. I want no killing here. The same goes for you, Goodwin."

The Big G ranch owner didn't bother answering. He and Dale whirled and led Bronson away. More of the crowd drifted off.

Abruptly, Raven twisted loose from Zents' grasp and moved toward the Mercantile. Henley started to join him, but swung aside when he saw Sue Bigelow hurrying down the steps from the dance hall.

She reached the bottom step, glanced in Raven's direction, then looked away and walked on.

"Sue!" he called. "Where are you going?"

She stopped. "Home," she said in a clipped voice.

"Wait, Sue!"

She turned full around to face him. There was wildness in her tone. "Never mind," she said. "Go back to your brawling and fighting. That's what you like; you don't really care about me or how I feel."

Raven strode up to her. His throat felt tight. "Sue, please try to understand."

The long, lovely line of her lips quivered. She was very white and very angry. "You gave me your word," she said in the voice of a stranger. "Now look at you—bruised and beaten, your clothes torn."

"I had to do that, Sue; there was no other way."

She laughed. It was a harsh sound, barren and empty. "I believe that; for you there never will be any other

way—until somebody kills you." "I've been a long time seeing you as you really are. What kind of life would I have had with you—waiting terrified every night, wondering if you'd come home flat on your back in the bed of a wagon?"

She was trembling when she had finished. Never since he had known her, had he ever seen her so aroused. Looking into her smoldering eyes, he was appalled to see how irrevocably she had drawn away from him. And then she did the one final thing to close the door between them. She stared down at her left hand, fumbled with the ring on the third finger. She pulled it off. "This ends it," she said, low-voiced. "Here's your ring. I won't be needing it anymore."

She threw the ring at him. It grazed the tip of his outstretched fingers and fell to the ground. Bill let it go and started toward her.

"Let me go," she flared. "Lance David will see me home."

She walked away rapidly, leaving him alone. At that moment the street was deserted. The music upstairs in the meeting hall was in full swing.

Dazedly Bill scuffed the loose dust of the street, searching for the ring. Hunkering down near the board walk, he lit a match and played the sputtering yellow light around the spot where he thought it had dropped. There was no sign of it.

Finally, he gave it up. With a bleak look in the direction Sue had gone, he whirled around and stamped across the street to one of the saloons.

After he had vanished between the bat-wing doors, another man who had been hidden in an alley beyond the meeting hall, darted forward to the place where Raven and the girl had been standing.

He dropped on his knees in the dust. He, too, lit a match and slid the wavering tongue of flame along the edge of the plank sidewalk. The match burned down and he flung it away. Quickly he lit another, stirring the dust with the fingers of one hand.

At last, he found what he was looking for. He flicked the match out, thrust his fingers into his coat pocket. Then,

glancing sharply up and down the deserted main stem, he turned and moved to the wooden stairway that led upstairs to the meeting hall.

10



FOR TWO days following the dance in Bradley the Rolling R crew was kept busy rounding up cattle for the trail drive. By Tuesday night they had more than a hundred and fifty head in the gather. Raven hoped to ship between three and four hundred steers to the Eastern market. At thirty dollars a head, the prevailing market price, he could secure enough cash to pay off the note at the bank and also to make a few improvements on the ranch.

There was no further trouble with the Big G ranch. Raven had seen no sign of any Goodwin riders. He had sent Monk Lewis and the new hand to the Elbow Bend camp to watch the cattle stationed there, had ridden over there late Tuesday afternoon and they had reported that everything was quiet.

It wasn't natural; Goodwin, already committed to a bold plan of range grabbing, was not the man to quit because Bronson had been beaten. He would move again and soon.

"He's waiting," said Raven early Wednesday morning as he squatted beside Henley at the cook fire and washed down the last of his biscuits and bacon with a cup of muddy coffee. "The trouble will come after we've got the gather completed, or after we've started the drive."

"We're going to be mighty short-handed on the drive," Henley pointed out dubiously.

"You're right. The only way out is to combine our herd with the Long Bow herd."

"How do you know Sue Bigelow is going to ship any cattle? There's talk in town that she's aiming to sell out to Goodwin."

"Maybe I can argue her into joining us."

"After what happened the other night?"

Raven's eyes came quickly back to Henley and there was heat in them. Henley flushed and murmured: "Sorry, Bill. Didn't mean to be personal."

Raven smiled meagerly. "It's all right, Pinto."

The Rolling R ramrod had lingered long enough in the street after Raven's fight with Bronson to see Raven's encounter with Sue and to hear the opening words of their argument. He had known, then, what was coming and had wandered away so as not to embarrass them. Later, when Raven had tramped moodily into a saloon, ordered several drinks, then walked out to his horse, Henley had been right beside him.

They'd gone straight to the cow camp that night. And during all that long ride Raven hadn't talked. Henley, guessing that the break between them had finally come, wisely kept his own counsel.

Now Raven stood up, took his plate and tin cup to the nearby creek, washed it out and returned it to the chuck wagon. Going over to the improvised rope corral that held the remuda, he threw a saddle on the big black gelding and set out for the Long Bow Ranch.

Half an hour later he sent the black cantering over the crest of a low hill and pulled the horse into a walk when he noticed another rider approaching. It was Sue Bigelow.

THEY MET at the foot of the slope. Raven halted the black and removed his sombrero. "Good morning, Sue," he said.

She nodded without speaking and without smiling.

"I'm glad we met," he went on. "I was on my way to have a talk with you."

"There's nothing to talk about."

Sue's manner was unmistakably reserved and distant. Now, looking at the soft curve of her mouth, the smoothly rounded arch of her throat and the deeper color tone of her gray-green eyes, he was suddenly as-

sailed by an unutterable sense of loss.

Yet, it was characteristic of Raven that he made no further attempt at apology. He had tried once after his fight with Bronson. She had given him her decision, then, in a very thorough and positive way. And Bill understood himself well enough to know that if the situation which had arisen at the dance came up again he would act in precisely the same fashion. There was no other way for a man who had been reared in this violent, untamed land. You fought for what you wanted and you fought to hold onto it after you'd gotten it. Those who didn't fight were hopelessly doomed.

"I won't keep you long," he said and hoped the stark hunger in his eyes did not show. She was so near to him, yet everything about her was a dismal reminder that she had retreated beyond his reach.

"What is it?" she asked impatiently.

"I'm gathering a herd to send to railhead. It's the only way left for me to raise the money to pay off my note at the bank. I thought you might want to pool your cattle with mine for the drive."

"No, thank you."

"There's nothing personal about this," he said. "I offer it as a pure business proposition. If we pool our herds and men there'll be less chance of trouble on the way."

"I'm not making a drive," she said.

Raven was startled. "How do you propose to meet your note?"

"It's really none of your business, but I'm thinking of selling."

"To Goodwin, I reckon."

"Yes. He rode over yesterday to renew his offer."

"Don't sell."

"I'll make my own decisions," she told him.

Raven gazed at her cheerlessly. "All right. But what will you do and where will you go if you sell out?"

"Time enough for that later," she said.

"Now is the time to think of it," he insisted. "You're used to ranch

life. You'd never be happy away from here."

Uncertainty laid a gray film over her eyes. She turned her head away, gazed off across the hills.

Raven resumed; "Sell a beef herd now and you can hold onto the Long Bow."

Sue wavered. "Well, if I decide to ship with you, I don't want you to get any wrong ideas."

"I understand," said Raven stiffly; "there's nothing personal about this. It's strictly a business arrangement."

She blushed, stung by the malice in his talk. "All right," she agreed. "When do you plan to start?"

"Saturday."

"That gives me three days."

"It's all you need. You've got plenty of cows on your Silver Creek range. The boys are working west toward Boulder Canyon. You can have your crew push your herd east to the holding grounds there."

She nodded and picked up the pinto's reins.

"Is there anything else?" she asked with an odd finality.

Raven looked at her, seeing how desirable she was and how utterly removed from him. The cold wall was still between them.

He said quietly, "I reckon that's all."

"Good-by," she said without a smile and turned the pinto around.

She went off at a fast trot, taking the trail back to the Long Bow.

AN HOUR after sunrise on Saturday the combined drive of Rolling R and Long Bow cattle was ready to get under way. Lance David and three other punchers had hazed a herd of three hundred Long Bow steers onto the bed grounds near Boulder Canyon late the previous afternoon. The three Long Bow men had the appearance of being hardcases, though they seemed to know their way around cows.

Raven had made it clear at the outset that he would be in charge of the drive. David, in turn, had made it equally clear that he didn't like the idea and was a party to the plan only because he had to take orders from Sue Bigelow.

There was no friendliness between the rival crews, no attempt to mix. To save men and equipment it had been arranged that the Rolling R should supply the chuck wagon while the Long Bow supplied the hoodlum wagon into which was loaded extra bedding, blankets, saddles and other cowboy gear. Each outfit, however, brought its own remuda.

Now, with the steers up and grazing along the flats and all the cooking paraphernalia stowed away in the chuck wagon, Raven mounted his big black gelding and rode to the head of the Rolling R herd.

He picked out a huge roan steer, choused him into motion. Then, in quick succession, he teased other select steers into line. Gradually, singly and in pairs and then in larger groups, the entire Long Bow herd trotted off, angling straight north across the broad plain.

The swing riders cantered into position, trimming the flanks and keeping cows from straying out of line. There was a great din of noise compounded of clacking horns pounding hoofs and leather-lunged cowboys yelling: "*Hi-Ya-a-h! Git along!*"

With Raven were Pinto Henley, Allie Fenwick, Hondo Halleck, Hank Lester and the new man, Frank Underwood. Monk Lewis had been left behind with another new hand at the Elbow Bend camp, while Norb Hall had been put in charge of the home ranch.

Raven fully realized that he had spread himself too thin; he was leaving the home ranch wide open. If Goodwin decided to make a move to grab some more range, Allie Fenwick would be helpless to stop him. Yet, Bill needed every available man for the drive. No matter what happened at the ranch, the drive had to go through or there would be no money to carry on.

It wasn't a pleasant prospect and his face was grim and saturnine as he took up his position at point and headed the steers over the hump of a low hill.

Behind him the Long Bow and Rolling R steers were strung out in a broad, heaving wave of mottled gray and brown bodies. Pinto Henley

and Allie Fenwick held down the right flank with Lance David and one other man. Hondo Halleck and Hank Lester were at the left flank with two more Long Bow punchers. Frank Underwood and the third Long Bow puncher were muffled in the dust of the drag. And behind them rumbled the chuck wagon and hoodlum wagons, while the third Long Bow puncher brought up the rear with the combined remudas of both outfits.

They traveled steadily all morning. At noon they halted briefly for lunch on a high, sparsely wooded knoll, then they rolled on again, not stopping until near sundown. Raven selected a wide flat area filled with grama grass and bordered by a crystal-clear stream that provided ample water for men and cattle.

They were at the edge of rougher country now. Off ahead, to the north, lay the dark, purplish shapes of a few low bluffs. Beyond the bluffs the land rose, tier on tier, in a series of great shelves, bisected by gullies and canyons and steep-walled ravines.

THE HERD watered at the stream, crossed to the far side and were pushed onto the bed ground by the weary, dust-stained punchers. By the time the steers were settled and Hondo Halleck and another man had been detailed to ride herd on them, the chuck wagon drew up and the cook began rattling pots and pans in preparation for supper.

Horses had been stripped of their saddles and staked out to graze within the confines of a crude rope corral. The cook fire was blazing several hundred yards away from the nearest cows and when the cook began banging on a dish pan with a wooden spoon the men drifted over quickly for their bait of fried beef, beans, biscuits, tinned peaches and coffee.

It was typical of the mutual distrust and dislike shared by both crews that the Long Bow riders took their tin plates of food and drew off to one side of the campfire, well away from the Rolling R hands.

When supper was done and the dishes had been stacked away and the men were rolling up smokes be-

fore hitting their blankets, Raven got up and walked around the fire to the other side.

Now that darkness had fallen the wind coming out of the north was definitely brisk and cool. It rippled through Raven's flannel shirt, bringing an annoying chill to his bones. He was restless and uneasy. It was an old, familiar sign to him—the harbinger of trouble to come.

Lance David and the three punchers with him glanced up sharply as Raven approached. "David," said Raven levelly, "I'm going to put three men on night-herd duty. We'll take three hour shifts."

"What's the matter?" jeered David. "Spooking up?"

The three men with the Long Bow Ramrod grinned. Raven fastened his attention on the biggest of the three. "What's the joke, friend?" he demanded. "Let me in on it."

Raven's eyes were like gun bores. He made an entirely heavy and tough shape before them. The big Long Bow puncher stopped grinning.

"It's nothing," he mumbled.

Raven swung back to David. The antagonism between them was like the electrically charged atmosphere during a thunder storm—volatile and ready to flare up at the slightest spark. "I'm going to join the two night hawks for the first shift," Raven said. "I'll leave it to you to have a man ready for each of the next two shifts."

He didn't wait for David's reply, but turned and walked back to Pinto Henley.

"What's up?" the Rolling R foreman asked, rising from his position near the fire.

Raven told him his plan to use three-man shifts.

"Did David have any objections?" Henley asked.

"No, but he's still honing for a fight. Better get some shuteye, Pinto. I'll take the first shift with Halleck."

Henley's features were somber and worried. "I'll hit the blankets," he said, "but I'm not figuring on doing much sleeping. There's trouble in the air."

Raven's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "So you feel it, too. Well, we'll see.

Hope we're ready for it if and when it breaks."

He moved off through the darkness to the horse cavity. He picked out a rangy bay, saddled up and rode away past the fire and began a wide circle around the herd.

AFTER A while the camp settled down. One by one the weary men rolled up in their blankets and fell asleep. Raven, from his position far along the northern rim of the herd watched the fire glow for an instant, then drifted on. He saw a few restless cows some distance away and sent the bay in their direction, crooning the words of a simple trail song.

The moon came up, a bright silvery crescent riding high above the fleecy clouds. Out along the flats the grass held a gray-white shine, but at the edges of the basin the shadows were thicker and more pronounced.

Nothing happened in the first three hours and Raven and his two companions rode back to camp, turned loose their horses. Allie Fenwick, Frank Underwood and one of the Long Bow hands took their place. After they'd gone trotting off toward the bedded-down steers, some impulse sent Raven to the far side of camp where the remuda was being held.

He took his saddle from the bay, switched it to the black. He took a second saddle and put it on a powerful roan. Then he led both animals closer to the fire and staked them out to graze.

When he returned to his blanket and eased down upon it, Henley turned his head and spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Good idea, Bill. We may need those horses in a hurry before this night is over."

"That's the way I figure," Raven said.

He shifted around on the blanket until he got into a comfortable position. Wadding up his hat, he placed it beneath his head and lay staring up at the star-encrusted sky.

For an hour he fought off sleep. Then, suddenly, his eyes flipped shut and he drifted off.

The flat, sharp report of gunfire,

interspersed with distant yells brought him instantly awake. He was sitting up in his blankets and starting to roll to his feet when he heard the frightened bawling of a few steers. The rattle of guns came from the south and east.

The strident clamor of sound drove the cattle herd to its feet. Again came the terrified bawling. It was followed by the ominous clack of horns and the first rumbling din of steers beginning to move.

"Here it comes!" said Raven savagely, glancing briefly across the flats where six hundred steers, turned wild by the yammering of those guns, surged forward in a dark, churning wave.

"Hit your saddles!" he shouted as he saw Lance David and the other Long Bow men scramble to their feet.

Then he and Henley dashed for the saddled horses fifty yards behind them.



AN EARTH-shaking roar of sound filled the night as Raven and Henley drove their mounts at a dead run toward the fleeing cattle. It was like a thousand drums sending their vibrations pulsing through space.

Bill Raven and Pinto Henley struck the deep left flank of the herd and raced parallel with it. Raven dug in his spurs recklessly and the black gradually drew away from Henley's horse. Bent low in the saddle with the wind lashing him in the face, he knew that he was riding side by side with death. One false step of the black gelding now and it would be all over. He had ridden in stampedes before, had seen the shapeless bundles of crushed bones and flesh that were all that remained of cowboys who had gone down under the trampling hoofs of fear-crazed cows.

Ahead of him the leaders of the herd were running in blind panic, heads down, eyes staring wildly. Beyond them, still several miles away, loomed the shadowy outlines of the bluffs that marked the beginning of broken country.

There were only three possible outlets from the basin. Far to the left—toward the northwest—the basin narrowed down to a hundred-yard wide trace that led toward Idaho. Straight to the north the ragged barrier of cliffs was broken by a single, high-walled defile that wandered for five miles through the tangled malpais and eventually debouched upon another grassy basin. This was the planned route of the drive. To the northeast the bluffs fell away abruptly to the rim of a sheer precipice which overlooked a deep, rocky gorge.

Watching the leaders now, Raven noticed with a sudden, sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach that the steers were veering to the northeast. There was no possible chance of getting them to enter the defile that led northward at the pace they were traveling. The only recourse was to stop them, to set them going around in a circle before they reached the precipice. If that failed the entire herd would be lost!

Bill dug his spurs into the black, treating the animal harder than he had ever treated a horse before. He was scarcely a hundred yards from the leaders when a section of the herd, split off at a tangent and swung northwest. There were about twenty-five critters in the bunch. Then quickly three more bunches followed, charging straight across Raven's path. There were two hundred cattle, in all.

A fierce yell sounded behind him. He turned and saw Pinto Henley, lying low across his saddle, come pounding up. "Head them off, Bill!" Henley shouted.

"No. Let them go," Raven yelled, in return. He pointed to the main herd. "Got to keep after the main bunch to keep them from landing in the gorge ahead."

As the two men swung sharply to the right, pressing against the flanks of the cattle, a group of horsemen materialized out of the dust cloud ahead of them.

"Frank! Frank Underwood!" Raven called uncertainly.

His answer was a fusillade of lead. Bill saw muzzle-flame wink redly from the guns of those horsemen; he ducked low, his own Colt sliding up from his holster. He centered his sights on the bobbing shape of one of those riders and let go with two squalling shots.

The lead horse reared high and crashed into the animal directly on its right. Both men were thrown to the ground. Then, suddenly, the riders swerved and galloped off toward the northwest, following behind the cattle that had abandoned the main herd. Pinto Henley, close at Raven's side was cursing and triggering his Colt. He let out a yell of triumph when he saw one of the riders sway in the saddle and fall against the horn.

"Let them go!" Raven yelled. "We've got to turn these critters!"

Both Raven and Henley had lost ground in the brief exchange of shots with the rustlers. Now they sank home their spurs and renewed the chase. Raven loaded fresh bullets into the three empty chambers of his Colt as he rode.

He wondered if Allie Fenwick and Frank Underwood and the Long Bow night hawk had gotten clear when the stampede broke. He had seen no sign of any other riders, though the pall of dust that hung over the basin obscured his vision, limiting visibility to less than sixty yards. Now and then he imagined he heard a faint, crackling sound which resembled gunshots, but he could not tell if it were more of the rustlers still trying to excite the steers or Fenwick and Underwood, trying to turn them.

ABRUPTLY three more horsemen spurred around the point of the herd from the east. The fact that they had been well enough in advance of the lead steers to execute the

maneuver identified them immediately in Raven's mind as rustlers.

The long-barreled Colt in his fist swiveled around and he sent three fast shots crashing into their midst. They returned the fire without slackening speed. Raven felt a hot arrow of pain skewer his side and knew he had been hit.

Then, as quickly as they had appeared, the horsemen were swallowed up in the billowing dust cloud.

A sticky wetness began to spread along Raven's ribs, creeping slowly down to his hips. He fought against a little wave of dizziness, fully realizing he would be out to ribbons if he ever fell off the gelding now. Then he leaned over in the saddle, gun in hand, and fired pointblank at the steer nearest to him; the steer stumbled and went down. Bill kept on, overhauling the lead steers now.

Recklessly he charged into the edges of the herd. Again he leaned down and fired at a steer. The animal veered into its neighbor and both went down. Henley dropped two more.

Raven reloaded hastily, still riding at a headlong pace. Again and again his gun roared. Then Halleck and David spurred up. All four men crowded in against the herd. Gradually the steers were turning, swinging in a wide, slow arc to the east. Raven, out in front of the herd now, rode against a big roan steer that broke away from the main herd. He charged the animal, fired close to its head and hazed it back in the milling circle.

From the east appeared Allie Fenwick and two more riders, both of them Long Bow hands. They swung their mounts around the far edge of the circle. The cattle kept running, but they had been turned. The first wild panic of the stampede had been crushed.

For another fifteen minutes Raven and his companions close-herded the leg-weary steers. Slower and slower they ran in an every-narrowing circle until, at last, they came to a dead stop.

As the dust lifted the riders flung themselves to the ground. The cattle

would do no more running tonight. "I'm glad that's over!" breathed Allie Fenwick. He removed his neckerchief from around his throat and wiped the sweat and dust off his face.

Raven took a step away from the black and winced in pain. Pinto Henley saw him and came over at once. "You're hit, Bill," he said.

"Just creased along the ribs," Raven replied.

"Let's have a look."

Before Raven could protest Henley pulled up Bill's shirt. With a lighted match he peered at the bloody furrow in the flesh above his right hip. A bright red line trailed from the cut down along his thigh.

Lance David and the two Long Bow hands crowded near. There was an odd, bright look in David's thin-lidded eyes. When Raven peered over at him he grimaced and turned away.

"Anybody else hurt?" Raven demanded. "Better count faces."

Fenwick exclaimed: "Underwood hasn't shown up."

David turned back and said, "One of my men is missing, too."

"We'll have to look for them," said Raven, going toward his horse.

"Wait!" Henley protested. "Let me fix that cut above your hip."

Taking a clean white handkerchief from an inside pocket of his trousers, he swabbed at the bloody cut. "Say, here's a funny thing," he murmured.

David and Fenwick jerked around. Raven said idly, "What, Pinto?"

"The bullet that tagged you came from behind you," Henley said and there was a razor-edged sharpness in his voice. "The mark of the bullet passing through the flesh is plain." From his crouched position, he peered up at Lance David. "Where were you when we ran into those two bunches of rustlers?"

DAVID PLANTED both hands on his hips. "Speak plain, mister. You figuring I potshot your boss?"

"Could be," Henley answered bluntly.

David started toward Henley, red

rage in his eyes. Raven pushed Henley to one side and placed the palm of his hand against David's chest.

"That's far enough," Raven murmured.

Deep in the wells of his eyes a dangerous light flickered. David saw it and rashly ignored it.

"You got anything to add to what Henley said?" Bill inquired.

Henley broke in gruffly. "I still want to know where you were when Raven and I flushed those rustlers."

David rocked back and forth on his boot heels. Temper was a hot iron, firing his emotions. "That depends," he replied. "I heard shooting up ahead a few minutes before I reached you gents. By the time I pulled up to the leaders I saw no one but you two. Then Fenwick rode up. That satisfy you?"

There was a grating challenge in his voice. Raven and Henley both watched him. His eyes, at this moment, were muddy pools of wrath. "It'll have to do, I reckon," said Henley, his manner still unrelenting.

Raven said impatiently, "Let it go. This is no time for fights; we've other work to do."

"Sure," said David, crowding close. "That still don't make me a backshooter. The day I feel like going after you with a gun I'll let you know."

"You name the time," Raven countered. "I'll be ready."

"What about those cows that got away?" Henley demanded. "You aim to chase after them?"

"Not tonight. They were running northwest. That's the direction those rustlers took. It's a cinch they'll be waiting and expecting pursuit. That country northwest of here is ideal for ambushing. Besides, we need every man here."

Fenwick spoke up, his voice a little uncertain. "Bill, do you reckon those long-riders were trying to steal cattle or just stampede them into the gorge?"

"No telling. Looked to me like they were just trying to break up the drive." Raven paused, staring out across the flats in the direction of

camp. "Underwood show up yet?"

"No sign of him," said Halleck, who had just ridden in after a brief scouting trip.

"Let's spread out and look for him." Raven gazed at Lance David. "One of your hands is missing, too."

"Yeah. Al Derek."

Raven moved stiffly toward his horse.

"Wait a second," said Henley. He moved up to Raven again, made a pad of his handkerchief and bound it against Raven's side. Then Raven tucked his shirt inside his trousers.

He felt a stab of pain along his lower ribs when he hefted his body into the saddle. He was dog-tired and so were all the others. But there was still an unpleasant job to do.

"Scatter and beat your way back along the flats," he said. "If you find anything fire two shots."

THEY SPREAD out, several hundred yards apart, and began the hunt for the missing riders. The black gelding trotted slowly along while Raven cast his eyes sharply to the right and left. Here and there he saw the mangled carcass of a steer that had gone down in the rush.

Two shots sounded off to his right. He heard a shout from Pinto Henley. He swung the black in that direction. He found Henley dismounted beside two still forms. Beyond them, a riderless horse with dragging reins was nibbling at some grass shoots.

Fenwick and Lance David clattered up as Raven flung himself out of the saddle. "Who is it?" Bill asked.

"Two of the rustlers," Henley said over his shoulder.

He struck a match on his boot sole, held the light near the fallen men. Both men had gone down along the edge of the line of stampede, both had escaped being trampled; but they were dead, nevertheless. The bullet loads from the guns of Raven and Henley had done for them.

"Ever see them before?" Raven asked.

"No," Henley replied and looked at David.

"They're strangers to me, too."

Raven clucked in disappointment.

Henley rose. An oath ripped from his lips. "Does it make any difference?" he grated. "We still know."

Interest put a greedy shine in David's eyes. "You mean Goodwin?" he asked.

"Who else?" snapped Henley. "And he's not fool enough to send men out on a job who might be recognized if something went wrong."

"Hell, I've got no more use for Goodwin than the next man," said David. "But I'd hardly call this proof."

"I'll get that later," said Raven, resolution stiffening the angle of his wide jaw. "Meanwhile, there's still Underwood and your man, Derek, missing."

He went back to his horse, remounted. Again they spread out. It was Raven himself who found Underwood some fifteen minutes later; the black horse nearly stumbled over a shapeless heap of flesh and clothing that had once been the tall, angular puncher.

And just a short distance away Lance David came upon Derek, in similar condition. The sight of those two men sobered and saddened the rest of the crew as nothing else could have done. Henley took off his hat and his voice was oddly shaken when he said: "Frank was a damned fine gent. Hope he's riding easy wherever he is now."

As they lingered there the creaking of wagon wheels announced the arrival of the chuck wagon and the hoodlum wagon. While the cook started a fire and threw a pot of coffee on the flames, Raven sent for some shovels. Fenwick and Halleck set about digging a grave for Underwood while the two Long Bow punchers attended to the same details for their own saddle pard.

After the two punchers had been buried everyone had some hot coffee. Then the entire crew moved back to the jaded cattle herd. A rough camp was made, two guards were dispatched to watch the brutes and the rest settled into their blankets for the few hours that remained of the night.

12



THE NEXT morning Raven announced that he was going to try and get a line on where the two hundred stray steers had been taken. He told Pinto Henley to hold the remainder of the herd on the bed grounds until noon to give the weary critters a chance to rest and graze. And while they were talking Lance David trotted up.

"I'll tag along with you, Raven," David stated bluntly.

"You're needed with the drive."

"Sure. But don't forget I've got a stake in those missing beeves."

Raven shrugged. "Have it your way."

Henley rolled a cigarette, fired it with a match and blew a cloud of smoke into space. He spoke thoughtfully. "Suppose you pick up the trail of those cattle. You aim to make a fight of it?"

"I was wondering the same thing," David added. He gazed intently at Raven.

Raven returned the stare levelly. "No. I just want to see where they go."

"And you think you know where?" David prodded.

"Yeah. If Goodwin ordered this raid—and I'm sure he did—the chances are he'll want those cattle headed back home.

"That doesn't make sense," David objected.

"Don't reckon I see it, either," chimed in Henley. "Seems to me he'd want to shunt the brutes right into Idaho and get them out of the state."

Raven shook his head emphatically. "The way I see it," he said, "Goodwin wouldn't risk throwing the cattle on his own range. "If he's working with any buyers who aren't particular about blotted brands, they're probably located in northern Utah or Colorado borders."

Lance David sneered in disbelief. "That means you think he's been doing all the rustling on Bradley

"Well, hasn't he?" snapped Raven.

David's upper lips skinned back against uneven teeth. "Don't ask me. You seem to know all the answers."

Henley squinted at Raven. "And if your hunch is correct," he said. "What then?"

"Then I'll dump the whole business in Sheriff Zents' lap."

"Provided you can find the cattle and link them up with Goodwin," David pointed out.

"You got any reason to think I won't?" demanded Raven. The knuckles of his left hand, gripping the reins, grew round and white.

"No, damn you!" half-shouted David. "And don't go putting words into my mouth."

Again the two men looked glances. And it was David who first looked away, angry but confused.

RAVEN TURNED to Henley. "Start them moving if I'm not back by noon," he said. "If I find the trail heads back the way we came I'll follow it all the way. If not, I'll pick you up later."

"All right," said Henley and nodded imperceptibly in the direction of Lance David. "Watch yourself, Bill."

Raven lifted his hand and rammed his black gelding away from the chuck wagon. David followed right on his heels.

They cut sharply away from the prairie, quartering toward the cut in the bluffs that led northwestward toward Idaho. The moment they entered the wide defile the character of the country changed. Grass and sage were replaced by rocks and shale and dry, gritty earth.

They traveled the entire three-mile course of the defile. Beyond the land shelved upward. Still the hard malpais continued. At the end of an hour they reached a definite fork in the trail. To their left, at right angles to the course they were following, was a dry rocky streambed. It twisted through thick, thorny brush.

Raven halted, studying the ground

carefully. It was bare of sign, but his mind was made up. "We'll drift left," he said, breaking the silence that had enfolded them.

"No," said David with sharp insistence. "Better hunt along the main trail for a spell yet."

"Go ahead," Raven replied and nudged the black into the left-hand fork.

Behind him he heard David's muttered curse. Then came the sluff-sluff of hoofs as David turned and followed.

They reached the bench, forged sharp right, then left again through more trees. The arroyo narrowed, moving imperceptibly upward. Then in the shade of a stand of junipers they came to a damp spot of sand.

In the sand was the clear imprint of a cow's hoof. Close beside it was the equally clear outline of a horseshoe. Both prints were fresh, for the crust of earth along the top was just beginning to crumble.

"This is it, I reckon," said Raven.

"I want to see more sign than that before I'm convinced," Lance David retorted.

Raven didn't bother answering him. Instead, he giggered his mount forward. After another half mile the arroyo splayed out, the walls becoming very shallow. At this point there was another patch of soft earth, here the ground was literally pock-marked with cow and horse prints.

"Do you need any more convincing?" Raven said as David reined up beside him. "The way I read that sign a hundred or more head of cattle passed by here during the night."

David grunted his agreement. He pulled his horse around.

"I guess I'll drift back to camp," he said.

Raven spoke quickly and with sharp insistence. "A while ago you were speaking about repping for the Long Bow's interests. Have you changed your mind?"

The corners of Lance David's mouth twisted faintly. "Not at all," he said. "You seem to be right about the trail heading back into Sam Zents' territory. If you're going to lay this

thing in his lap you won't need my help."

Raven wondered what had prompted the alteration in David's plans. A few hours ago he had been determined to accompany him. Now he appeared even more eager to return to camp. There was something wrong. Raven looked up, saw David watching him. Lance's upper lip curled.

"Go ahead," Raven said at last. "I'll follow through at this end."

David tugged his hat brim down over his face and rode off. After he had gone Raven continued along the trail of the stolen beef.

RAVEN SOON found himself a few miles west of Josh Goodwin's range. He had lost the trail, but was riding due south in the direction the herd had been traveling. This was rough country, scarred by gullies and ravines. A major portion of Goodwin's western range was made up of land equally unsuitable to the grazing cattle.

Yet, the fact that the stolen herd had been driven so close to Goodwin's line lent strength to Raven's conviction that the Big G owner had engineered last night's raid.

Bill continued south, always drawing nearer to that bleak, no-man's land that overlapped the borders of Utah and Wyoming.

Fifteen minutes transpired, then a half hour with no further sign of the cattle.

He was well beyond the Goodwin and Raskall outfits, though still in Bradley County, when he spotted the seared, brown line of the Avalon Mountains. He knew, then, that he was near the Utah border. The slopes jutted steeply before him, a barrier to further travel. The nearest pass was situated miles to the eastward.

As he approached the divide Bill saw the great black gap squarely in the center—a huge hole gouged out out of the mountainside by toiling miners. He had been a kid in his teens when an old prospector had found gold along the slopes. The prospector had sold out to a stock company. But even before machinery could be moved in to operate the mine on a

commercial scale, it was discovered to be a freak deposit and not worth the investment.

Scores of men had poked about in the surrounding hills, but the take of gold had been negligible. Within a month the area had been vacated. The clutter of board shacks that had been constructed on the site had subsequently been razed and converted into line cabins by some of the small hill ranchers.

Now there was nothing to mark the spot save that ugly black hole in the mountainside, ringed by a thick fringe of chaparral. The ground in the vicinity was soft and brown. If any cattle had gone by in the last twelve hours the evidence would be clearly discernible. However, Raven scouted the area, riding in an ever-widening circle, and found nothing.

Finally, Raven dismounted at the mouth of the mine and ventured inside on foot. There was only a single wide passageway, shored up by heavy timbers and extending for about a half mile into the mountain. With the aid of matches which he lit at intervals, Raven walked several hundred yards along the twisting tunnel. Again the search proved futile.

Discouraged and not a little puzzled at the disappearance of the cattle, Raven retraced his steps. Outside, he thought of the pass to the eastward that led through the mountain, but finally decided to delay further search until he had seen Sue Bigelow and contacted Sheriff Zents.

13



Sue.

The girl's hand fluttered up to her

SHERIFF Zents was talking to Sue at the foot of the veranda steps when Raven rode into the Long Bow yard. "What brings you back so soon?" the lawman demanded. "The herd was stampeded," said Raven, looking at

throat. "How bad was it?" she whispered.

"We lost two hundred head," Raven replied, then went on to give an account of the raid. He concluded: "They were trying to shove the entire bunch off that cliff northeast of Bragg Mountain."

Sue stepped closer. There was a gray anxiety on her face. "What about the men, Bill?" she asked.

"Two of the crew went down in the first rush. Frank Underwood and one of your punchers, Al Derek."

"That finishes it," Sue stated. "You can forget about the drive."

Raven shook his head. "By this time Pinto Henley is pushing the rest of the herd on toward Canterville and the railroad."

"It doesn't matter now. I'm selling out."

Raven gripped her arms. "You can't do that, Sue."

"I can and I will." There was a keyed-up quality to Sue's talk. "This rustling and killing will never stop." "There's always been violence in the West, Sue. This is the frontier—not a city back East. As for the rustlers, leave them to me; I'm going after them."

"You won't have to look far," snapped Raven.

Zents peered sharply at him. "You're thinking of Goodwin. But you said the two raiders that were killed were strangers."

"Goodwin is smart enough to hire outsiders for that kind of work."

"That isn't proof," Zents pointed out.

"I'll get that, too," said Raven.

"If you're holding back any evidence I want it."

Raven told about trailing the stolen cattle, then losing the trail completely near the abandoned mine.

"That's happened before," said Zents. "Before you came back from Julesburg I took a posse through that pass east of the mine clear into Utah without finding any stolen cattle. That was a big raid; five hundred head from your ranch, the Long Bow and the Big G."

"It's no trick to steal your own

beef for a blind," said Raven. "The natural thing for those rustlers to do was to haze the two hundred stolen head over the line into Idaho. Instead, they pushed them back here. And the man who stands to profit by breaking up the drive is Josh Goodwin—the hombre who has been grabbing range right and left."

Zents stroked his weather-roughened skin. "True enough. But up to now every move Goodwin has made has been within the law; all the graze he has taken has been free range, belonging to neither of you."

Raven changed the subject abruptly. "Zents, were any Big G punchers in town last night?"

"No. Why?"

"A matter of elimination." Raven's face was bleak. "They weren't in town. Now if I find they were away from the Big G—"

He didn't finish, but his reasoning was obvious.

"Hold on!" protested Zents. "That still won't prove anything."

"To me it will," said Raven. "I've been crowded as far as I intend to be; from now on I'll do the crowding."

"Watch your step," warned the sheriff. He drew up his slender, wizened figure. "If you step beyond the law I'll come after you."

Raven gave him a cold, humorless smile, then turned to Sue who was watching them both with a bitter, half-angry despair. "Sue," he said, "I want you to hang on a while—at least, until this rustling mess is cleared up and the herd reaches the railroad."

"If they reach the railroad, you mean," she murmured brokenly.

Zents' ragged gray eyebrows pinched together. "Don't talk like that, girl. Don't sell now; you may regret it."

Sue protested, but Raven and the sheriff combined to argue her out of her decision to sell. For Bill however, it was an empty victory because her features remained white and bereft of hope. And when he tried to take her in his arms she pushed him away and asked him to go. Then she ran inside the house.

TWENTY MINUTES later Raven drew in his horse atop a brush-covered knoll above the main buildings of the Big G. outfit. The place appeared deserted. No sounds issued from the bunkhouse. The only noise was the clatter of pans from the cook shack adjoining the mess house.

Accordingly, Raven pushed the black gelding down the slope behind the outbuildings. He left the horse tied to a cottonwood, then slipped, on foot, past the corral and barn. At the cook shack he found the door ajar. The bald-headed puncher who served as ranch cook was fussing with an apple pie he was preparing for the oven. He whirled as Raven stepped inside.

"What do you want, Raven?" he demanded truculently.

"Information," said Raven. "Where were Dale and Bronson and the rest of the outfit last night?"

The cook sneered. "None of your damned business."

He jumped nearly a foot off the floor when Raven's gun appeared in his fist and the crash of a gunshot rocked the shack. The bullet fanned past the cook's sweat-greased cheek.

"You've got nice long ear lobes, Baldy," murmured Raven. "How do you think you'd look without them?" The metallic click of Raven's gun hammer being eared back was ominously loud. "Now once more Baldy, I'd like some information."

"If it's information you want," said a voice behind him, "you might try asking me."

Raven turned half-around to find Anne Maynard in the gray dust of the yard. She was wearing a full-skirted yellow dress that clung to the rich, rounded contours of her body. Raven felt an earthy shock of pleasure at seeing her.

"All right, Anne. Where was your crew last night?"

Anne gestured to Baldy. "Leave us alone," she ordered. The cook grumbled an oath, but obeyed, shuffling past Raven to go out in the yard. Anne came to the doorway. She said to Raven: "They were here. Why do you want to know?"

Raven watched her closely. When he didn't answer she said: "Ah, I know. Somebody broke up the cattle drive; you're looking for evidence."

"Smart girl," he said, rougher than he meant to be because her nearness bothered him.

She moved closer, thoroughly aware of her charms and their effect on a man. With every movement and with every glance she was inviting his admiration. "Let me have the details," she begged.

"There was a raid. We lost two hundred head. I trailed the critters near enough to Big G land to convince me Josh knows where they are."

"Wrong guess, Bill. The boys were here last night. Josh, too."

"Maybe he hired the job done," Raven said. He pushed away from the door, started past her.

She stopped him, the fingers of her left hand dropping to his arm. The hot feel of her skin was like a shock darting through him. "Don't go, Bill."

"I've found out what I wanted," he said grimly.

"But you're still not satisfied." Her eyes and the enticing curve of her mouth were pulling at him. "Oh, Bill, why don't you give it up? You'll never beat Josh."

Raven's features hardened. "I'll never quit, Anne."

"What will it get you here?" she asked. "I admire a man who fights. But there's no chance here. Some other place, yes—and with the right woman, there'd be no stopping you." Her face lifted to him.

"You see yourself as that woman?" he inquired.

"Yes, Bill," she whispered. "Could you do better?"

"We had our chance and missed it," he said slowly.

Anne straightened. She spoke with an impatient vehemence.

"Forget Sue. She's not for you; she has no blood, no fire. You want a woman who is ready to fight for you and with you. Is Sue doing that?"

Raven winced as the barb shot home. It had been a continual source of disappointment to him that Sue had exhibited no disposition to buck

Goodwin's range-grabbing moves. Her coldness, her reserve had hurt him, too. Yet, he was in no mood to have her shortcomings pointed out by Anne.

"So long, Anne," he said, tearing his eyes away from her. He tipped his hat and moved off toward the wooded slope.

Anne said angrily: "You're a proud man, Bill—and some day your pride will kill you."

"I reckon you're right," he said. "But that's the way I'm built."

He turned full away from her, then, and trudged off through the trees.

14



FROM the crest of a high, timbered bench an hour later Raven paused to follow the progress of a lone horseman far below and several miles north of his position. Bill had first spotted the man as he quartered up the slope from a series of low foothills. He had come out of the north and was riding in an arrow-straight line toward the south. However, the man would soon come to a fork in the trail he was following and Raven was idly curious to see which path he would choose. The southeast fork led toward the Big G ranch and the town of Bradley; the southwest fork crossed Ty Raskall's range and meandered on for many miles through flat, arid country.

The rider came on steadily, reached the fork, and without hesitation swung southwest. There was something vaguely familiar about his dim figure below; Raven elected to intercept him.

He eased the black off the bench. There was no trail here, just hard-packed earth and thickly growing trees. The big gelding slid on its haunches several yards, then picked a narrow trace through the leaning aspens.

A half mile from the bench Bill emerged from the trees onto a flat, rocky eminence. He crossed the cliff-top, saw that other brush and trees obscured his view of the lower trail, and again put the black horse down a steeply pitched slant of ground. This time the descent brought him directly to the trail.

One sharp glance showed him the other horseman not more than a quarter mile away. And it showed him something else: the rider was Lance David.

A humming pressure sang along Raven's nerves when he considered what the Long Bow foreman might be doing in this neighborhood. That David was playing some obscure and secret game of his own was obvious; his presence here, when he was supposed to be back with the trail drive, explained his eagerness to get away after they'd picked up the first sign of the cattle. Raven decided not to intercept the rider; he would follow Lance, instead.

Only one circumstance puzzled Bill. He had suspected David's loyalty to Sue Bigelow and the Long Bow spread; it had occurred to him that Lance might be linked with the rustlers. And David's presence on the TR Connected trail augured that something of vital importance had come up. But—whatever it was—Raskall and not Josh Goodwin was involved.

Now and then, as he rode, David glanced back in the direction he had traveled as if he suspected a follower. But once Raven was certain of Lance's eventual destination he kept well to the rear and out of sight. When, at last, David drew up in the big grove of cottonwoods that surrounded the TR Connected ranch buildings, Bill was hidden back in the brush.

The sun slid suddenly out of sight behind the rugged mountain crags piled high along the Western horizon. A deep red glow filled the sky and purple shadows filled all the pockets in the hills. David dismounted near the veranda. Someone appeared in the bunkhouse doorway and

sent a ringing challenge through the twilight air. Then the speaker recognized the visitor, muttered, "Oh, it's you, Lance," and wandered back inside.

RAVEN WAITED in the brush while the shadows lengthened and dusk crept across the land. Finally, he pushed through the brush, leading the gelding. Lights had sprung up in the bunkhouse. There was a light in the front room of the ranch-house, too, and Bill saw the figures of two men move between the lamp on the table and the window.

Out behind the barn Raven ground-hobbled the black, then moved stealthily across the yard to a half-open window. The murmur of voices became clearly audible as he paused beside the window; he peered inside, saw Raskall, bluff and hearty, offer a cigar to David. The Long Bow ramrod took it, bit off the end and stuck it in his mouth.

Raskall took a knife, cut the end off his cigar, then produced a match and touched flame to David's cigar tip and his own. "Well, how did it go?" Raskall asked, talking around the cigar.

"The raid went off—but not quite as planned," David said a little uneasily.

Raskall removed the cigar from his mouth. "Damn it!" he growled. "Don't tell me the boys bungled it."

"The hombres I hired for the job," said David, "scattered the beef but Raven and Henley managed to head the critters off before they went over the cliff."

"Did any of the critters break away?"

David smiled meagerly. "Yeah. Two hundred head. And the boys were on the spot to haze them away."

Some of the unpleasantness left Raskall's face. "That's better. Did those men you hired take them to the hideout?"

"Hell, I guess so. I couldn't leave the drive."

Raskall's eyes glittered in the yellow shine of lamplight. "And our friend, Raven?"

A brooding, saturnine mask set-

tled over David's weathered cheeks. "I missed him," Lance said reluctantly.

Raskall cursed and fired his cigar into the empty wood box beside the stone fireplace.

"How could you miss in that stampede with nobody to question a stray gunshot?"

Outside, beyond the window, anger sent its pulsing vibrations through Bill Raven. Without realizing it, his hand gripped the well-worn stock of his Colt; He leaned closer to the open window, intent on the two men.

"It's not easy as you think, shooting in the dark," David mumbled in defense. "As it was, that damned Pinto Henley, put the finger on me. Some day I'm going to bore that jigger."

"Better take care of Raven, first," Raskall reminded him.

"All right. Meanwhile, what do you aim to do about that beef?"

"The cattle can stay in the hideout for a few days. A friend of mine will be coming across the border to buy them."

"You mean Duke Leeming?" David queried.

"Yeah. The same gent that's been taking care of all the other critters you and the boys have been able to drift away from their home ranges. I'll try to sneak up to the hideout tomorrow to have a look at the beef."

"Suppose Goodwin finds out?"

"He won't if no one talks." Resentment crept into Raskall's voice as he added: "He thinks I'm just going to play his game. Josh has all the cattle he needs; he's only interested in more range. But I need cattle. It was his idea to bust up that trail drive, using my crew; but if anything went wrong and one of my regular hands was downed I'd be on the spot."

"Maybe he'd like that."

"Maybe he would," retorted Raskall. "I'm playing his game for two reasons: for Anne, and for the cattle I can steal. When Josh takes over the Long Bow and the Rolling R I'll get the leavings. He wants no rustling because if any suspicion of it pointed to him it would pull Zents

over onto Raven's side. Right now Zents is riding the fence."

"But Goodwin went along on some of those early raids before Sue Bigelow's father got bushwhacked," David pointed out.

Raskall's lips twisted. "Sure he did—until we ran into a trap and almost lost a couple of men. That scared him; since then he's played it safe—grabbing range and leaving the cattle alone." Raskall paused a moment. He looked disturbed. "You made a mistake not sticking with the drive; it puts you very definitely under suspicion."

David objected at once. "I don't see why," he said. "I had a responsibility to Sue Bigelow; my reason for leaving was to report back to her. Henley took it without a murmur. Besides, it may give me a chance to line my sights on Raven."

BEHIND DAVID and Raskall the half-open window rose all the way with a protesting squeal of sound. They pivoted around as Raven thrust a leg over the sill and jumped into the room. "David," said Raven in a flat, threatening tone, his big Colt jutting from his fist, "you never had a better chance than right now."

Both men faced him in amazed stupefaction. Their bodies were half-bent in a crouch, eyes wide, hands arrested above their gunbelts.

"Go ahead," Raven invited. "You missed me last night. Maybe you'll have better luck tonight."

Sheer malevolence surged in David's thin-lidded eyes. But he saw ruin in Raven's menacing gun bore, in the uncompromising set of his jaw and mouth.

"I'll put my gun away if that will help you decide," Raven offered. There was enough wildness and animal passion in him to make him heedless of risks.

Neither man made any move to take up Raven's challenge. They stood there, mute and rigid, hating him with their eyes, yet willing to carry the issue to its logical conclusion. "I thought so," said Raven, his voice cold with contempt.

He left the window, circled around

the table in the middle of the room, retreating toward the center hall. From this hall a stairway led to the upper floor.

He said, after a brief silence, "I heard enough during the last few minutes to know just how and where you two skunks stand; before I deliver you both over to Sam Zents I want some information."

Some of Raskall's confidence returned. "You'll never get us away from here," he said. "You forget my crew in the bunkhouse. You'll be a dead man before you go a hundred yards."

"That's if you think you want to risk calling them," Raven said. Again Raskall saw the reckless light of battle flaring redly in Raven's eyes. It told him very clearly that Raven was spoiling for a fight.

"You can't prove a thing against us. We can deny everything you claim to have heard."

"True enough," Raven admitted. "But there's the little matter of my stolen cattle and where they're being kept. Also, there's Adam Bigelow, Sue's father. He was drygulched, remember? I want to know who was responsible for that."

"I don't know a damned thing about that," Raskall asserted. A film of perspiration oiled his face.

"We'll see. First, where's the cattle?"

David answered in quick defiance. "You won't get me to talk."

Raven said, "I think you will—with this little persuader to help me."

HIS GUN leveled out, Raven addressed them in harsh, brittle tones that carried the solid weight of irrevocable intention. "I'm carrying a full load in this iron and I'll use it all to make you talk. . . . Ty, I'll start with you. I'm going to put a slug in your left knee-cap; if that don't convince you, I'll put another in your right knee-cap. The same goes for David."

"You wouldn't dare!" fumed Raskall, but his features were white with fear.

"Try me and see," said Raven grimly.

There was a sudden shout outside.

Boots pounded across the veranda. Raven backed toward the hall. A TR Connected puncher pushed through the screen door. "Raven!" he yelled and flung up his gun.

"Get him, Ritter!" bellowed Raskall.

Raven spun around, saw Ritter's Colt swinging into line. He leaped to one side as Ritter's gun spewed a livid streak of flame. Then his own weapon roared; Ritter dug a hand at his shoulder and fell forward.

Back in the living room Raskall and David were shucking their Colts. Another puncher behind Ritter charged through the doorway, stumbled over the fallen man and pitched head-long.

Raven thumbed a shot at Lance David, moving toward the hall and drove the Long Bow ramrod back to cover. There was additional noise in the ranch-yard, warning Raven that the rest of the TR Connected crew had been aroused. His only escape lay upstairs. He turned, dove for the stairway and raced up the steps two at a time.

A pair of bullets hummed by, splintering bannister supports. On the upper landing Raven paused to line two shots down the stairway as Raskall and David plunged into view. But they kept on coming; and when a hot lead slug fanned his face, dangerously close, Bill sped down the hallway and took refuge in the first room he came to.

He slammed the door shut, threw the bolt, and backed away, sliding along the wall, trying to accustom his eyes to the darkness. The moon had risen and a meager white banner of light entered the room. Then the pound of boots outside told him the TR men were outside.

A volley of lead drove him to the floor. The room had obviously been used for storage purposes, for he could see now several old wooden chairs piled in a corner.

THERE WAS a shout from Ty Raskall. "Raven! We'll give you a chance. Come out with your hands up!"

Bill laughed harshly as he shoved fresh bullets into his Colt. "Better

shoot down the door!" he yelled and sent two shots slamming through the splintered panel.

He heard a howl of pain from one of her charms and their effect on a yell sounded. "Bennett! You and Slocum get downstairs and cut him off in case he tries to get out a window."

Raven rose from the floor as Raskall's order was given. He knew that in a matter of minutes they would blast down the door and mow him down; the only way was to take his chances going out the window.

He crawled to the open window on the side of the house. Boots clattered down the stairs, telling him that Bennett and Slocum were on their way to cut him off. Another fusillade of shots sprayed the room. One stray bullet smashed the upper pane and shards of glass tinkled down around him. He risked a shot in the back and stuck his head out of the window. The drop to the ground was too much to venture a jump.

Near the side of the house was a gigantic cottonwood. Raven saw at a glance that there was a stout branch about six feet away from him and a little below him. That decided him; he climbed out, fumbled precariously on the sill for a footing as he struggled to stand upright. He was cautiously turning his back to the room with one hand gripping the upper half of the window which had been lowered a few inches from the top when he heard a splintering sound behind him.

Raskall and David and the others were trying to break down the door. At the same time a yell from the front of the house warned him that Bennett and Slocum were outside.

With a grunt Raven pushed himself away from the window, shot forward and down. A thin branch raked his face. Then his hands struck a heavier branch and he swung in mid-air. The pull on his armpits was tremendous, but he held on grimly until he succeeded in levering his legs around the branch. Then, with most of the strain off his arms, he slid down the branch to the main trunk.

WHEN BILL was scarcely eight feet from the ground, he

stopped: Bennett and Slocum had charged around the side of the house and one of them halted under the tree, directly beneath him. The other ranged closer to the house wall.

The thump of heavy bodies slamming into the hall door told Raven that in a matter of seconds Raskall and the others would gain entrance to the room whence he had just escaped.

There was no time to waste. Raven crouched on the lowest branch and dropped full upon the unsuspecting puncher waiting beneath the tree. Raven's one hundred and eighty-five pounds hit him and crushed him to the ground.

Raven slammed the muzzle of his gun along the side of the man's head as he rolled to his knees and scrambled clear. The puncher near the house whirled, his gun cantering upward. He fired at the same target in the shadows of the tree and the bullet plowed into the trunk behind him. Raven snapped to his feet when he saw the other man go down, clutching at his shoulder.

An exultant shout from the room above told him that the door had been broken down. He sped around the side of the house as Raskall came to the open window, spotted him and thumbed a brace of bullets in his direction. Raven raced into the clear in the deep darkness that cloaked the rear yard.

He gained the barn before Raskall, David and the rest of the TR Connected hands charged outside. He caught up the black gelding, swung into the saddle and spurred away into the night. By the time the TR Connected men had saddled up their horses he was a half mile away and traveling fast.

Once in the brush he slowed down a trifle until he found a narrow trace. He followed this up a steep slant to the crest of a ridge. Behind him he heard the faint hue and cry of pursuit.

The ridge was bare of vegetation for a quarter mile, then the timber began. He sped into the trees before the riders on his trail topped the crest. Then, well into the trees, he angled off the trail, forcing the black deep into the brush until he was

twenty yards away and completely hidden.

Dismounting, he stood beside the black. When the rataplan of hoofs warned of the approach of the TR Connected men he put his hand over the black's muzzle to keep him from neighing. The riders sped by at a rapid clip. And after the sound of their going had dwindled away, Raven remounted spurred the black back to the trail and swung toward the high mountain stringers that lay well to the north.

15



HE TR Connected crew had been gone three-quarters of an hour and the two wounded punchers had been removed to the bunkhouse when three riders clattered into the TR ranch yard.

Thinking that the horse men were some of his crew returning, Raskall went right on talking to Lance David who had remained behind with him. Suddenly the door burst open. Josh Goodwin and Bull Bronson walked in with their six-shooters palmed. "Stand up and keep your dewclaws away from your cutter!" blurted Goodwin in a sharp, angry voice.

Raskall rose from his chair. "What's the idea?" he blurted.

"You know damned well what the idea is," snapped Goodwin. He jerked his head toward the shadows in the hall. "Come in, Begley."

A thin-skinned, slat-limbed man with gaunt cheeks and gray-black hair clipped short against his round skull sidled into the room.

Raskall's eyebrows twitched in puzzlement. "Begley," he said, "You're supposed to be out chasing Raven." Goodwin kept the muzzle of his Colt lined squarely on Raskall. "Begley's been on my payroll for some time. Ty," he said. "I've warned you about stealing beef—that I wanted it stopped. But you've always been hungry—so I wasn't surprised when Beg-

ley told me you grabbed two hundred steers from Raven's trail drive. Begley was hidden in the next room while you were palavering with Raven."

"A damned spy!" growled Raskall, his eyes filled with venom as they settled on the slat-limbed puncher.

"Sure," agreed Goodwin, "and he's earned his pay." The Big G owner's cheeks darkened with temper. "I want you to turn those cows loose in the badlands. If Zents even gets a smell of that rustling he'll move against the Big G—and I don't want to have to kill a sheriff at this stage of the game."

Raskall shook his head. "I'm keeping them; they're as good as money in the bank to me."

Lance David cut in sharply: "Ty is right. We've been doing your dirty work and you nor anybody else is going to stop us from making some dinero on the side."

The Long Bow ramrod was watching Goodwin and the gun in his fist and he missed the sly look the Big G owner gave Bronson.

Bull Bronson moved with incredible speed for a man so huge. One leap took him to David's side. Even as David made a frantic stab for his gun Bronson sledged him with a sweeping left hook. The blow caught David on the chin and bounced him against the wall.

With a savage yelp of joy Bronson waded in. A right and a left to the face smashed David's nose, sent two teeth cutting through his lower lip. He fell forward, blood seeping across his pointed features. Bronson kicked him callously in the ribs, then turned away.

He had taken three steps when David's prone figure stirred. A Colt appeared in his slender hand. Goodwin yelled; his iron swiveled toward David, but the crash of his gun was preceded by the red glare of David's smoking Colt.

Bronson never had a chance. David's bullet caught him in the middle of the back and tore right through his chest; he was dead before he tumbled to the floor.

Then David, his right wrist shattered by Goodwin's snap shot, began to scream. He writhed on the punch-

eons while a scarlet stream escaped through the open web of fingers covering his bullet-torn flesh.

"You crawling back-shooter!" cried Goodwin, charging toward David. "I'm going to pump you so full of lead you'll look like sieve."

"Wait!" yelled Raskall, grabbing Goodwin's arm. "Killing won't bring Bronson back. In the first place, you'd have the problem on your hands of explaining his death. And, secondly, there's a way we can profit by this."

GOODWIN turned slowly, his eyes dark and hot and suspicious. "How do you figure that?" he demanded.

"You want Bill Raven out of your way," said Raskall. "Okay. You can do it without your hand showing in the deal at all." He dropped his arms cautiously and thrust one hand into the pocket of his trousers. When he drew it out he held a small diamond ring in a plain gold setting. "Did you ever see this?"

"No," replied Goodwin.

"It belongs to Bill Raven," Raskall informed him with a pleased grin. "Up until the night of the dance in Bradley Sue Bigelow wore it. You'll remember they quarreled in the street after Raven's scrap with Bronson; well, she broke their engagement and threw the ring in the dust. Raven hunted around for it, but couldn't find it."

Raskall's grin flared widely. He flipped the ring up in the air and caught it again. "I found the ring," he resumed, "and nobody saw me pick it up. As far as anyone knows, Raven still has it. Several people saw Sue throw the ring at him before the crowd broke up. All we have to do is tote Bronson's body into town. Then we produce this ring and tell a story of having found Bronson bushwhacked on the trail to Bradley. We can say the ring was lying close to his body.

"Zents will do the rest. Everybody heard Raven threaten to pull a gun on Bronson the next time they had trouble. Zents will take him in; there isn't a jury in the West that wouldn't

hang him on the evidence. So what happens? Raven is through and you can take over the Rolling R."

At first, Goodwin's features remained blank. But as Raskall finished talking a certain rough leasure stirred in his eyes. "You've got something," he agreed. "We'll do it."

Goodwin was not one to regret the loss of another man, even such a man as Bronson who had done his bidding for many years. Bronson had had his definite place in the scheme of things. But so long as his death could serve an immediate and profitable end, Goodwin was content.

"What about Lance David?" he asked Raskall.

"We can use him. Bronson has been asking for a slug in the back for years; you know that."

Goodwin hesitated a moment, then gruffly ordered Begley to take David over to the bunkhouse and bandage him up. After the two punchers had gone Goodwin turned to Raskall again. "I've changed my mind about those two hundred sters," he said with a mocking grin. "You can keep them but I'll take a fifty per cent cut of the profits."

"No, you don't, Josh," fumed Raskall. "They're mine."

"I'll take my cut," Goodwin insisted, "or a certain sheriff in Idaho is going to get a note about a certain stagecoach robber and killer who used to be known as 'Idaho' Jaynes and now answers to the name of Ty Raskall."

A thundering rage poured through Raskall. He looked mad enough to go for his gun. But, finally, his clawing hands dropped to his side. "You damned skunk," he breathed. "You think of every angle."

Goodwin nodded. "Where are the cattle and when is the payoff?"

"They're hidden up near that abandoned mine," Raskall said. "Duke Leeming, an outlaw friend of mine, handled that raid as I told you he would; he can unload the critters at a good price. He'll be at the mine in five days. We can ride up there together."

Goodwin saw a furtive flicker in Raskall's eyes, but he said nothing.

He grinned harshly. "Good enough," he murmured. "I'll meet you here." He stared at Bronson. "Now come outside and help me load Bull on his horse. I'll leave his body out in the brush and in the morning I'll pack him to town in a buckboard."

16



AT DAWN Raven left his dry camp high in the mountains, where he had gone after slipping away from Raskall's crew, and started down toward the foothills. The thought was in his mind to have another try at the

abandoned mine which he now knew hid the secret of the missing cattle.

After an hour of slow, but steady riding he dismounted on top of a rocky bench that overlooked the road from the Big G ranch to Bradley. He studied the familiar, rolling terrain with a careful attention, searching for some sign of movement.

Suddenly he saw a buckboard, drawn by a pair of black horses, swing into view as it clattered out of a high-walled canyon. Two men occupied the front seat and the driver was lashing the team into a gallop. In the wagon bed a long object covered by a tarp kept jouncing around as the wheels struck ruts in the winding road.

Something about that bundle in the wagon and the speed at which the vehicle was being driven aroused Raven's curiosity; he forgot about the mine and ran back to the gelding. In a moment he was pushing through a narrow aisle in the trees and angling toward lower ground. Ten minutes of rough riding through tangled brush brought him to another promontory much closer to the road.

He recognized the husky, thick-shouldered shape of Josh Goodwin at the reins. And, of course, the small man beside was Harry Dale.

There was no sign of Bull Bronson who invariably accompanied Goodwin

on all his trips. Then, as Raven squinted his eyes to study the wagon bed again he noted the extraordinary length of the tarp-covered bundle there. There was a man under that tarp. A big man, and obviously dead. Was it Bronson?

Bronson or not, Raven was puzzled because Goodwin found it necessary to go into town himself. He wasn't a man to show feeling for any member of his crew. Something was in the wind and Raven decided to find out what it was.

Sticking to the brush and trees, he followed the buckboard all the way to town. From a low ridge overlooking the main street he saw the wagon skid to a stop in front of the sheriff's office. Goodwin climbed down and shouldered into the frame building.

A few seconds later he emerged with Zents. Other men began to pour out of saloons. Angry shouts reached Raven faintly. The body in the buckboard was lifted out and carried into another building. Then the dozen or so men in town that early made a rush for their horses.

Raven watched only long enough to see Zents swing out to lead the group. He knew this was a posse forming and so he started to retreat through the trees.

Ten minutes later the posse sped past him along the road. He followed at a distance and, somehow, was not too surprised when they took a fork in the road and swung toward the Rolling R. That meant that whatever had occurred he had become involved.

He was deep in the trees behind the house when the posse stormed into the yard. He saw Norb Hall, the puncher who had been left in charge of the ranch, emerge from the barn. There was a brief exchange of words. Then the riders dismounted and split up to search all the buildings.

After a while they assembled in the yard again and rode off. But Zents left two possemen behind as a guard before his men strung out toward the southeast—in the direction of the Long Bow spread.

Raven stayed in the trees, debating the best course of action for himself.

Bronson or somebody else on the Big G was dead and Bill, obviously, was the man the law wanted. He couldn't risk going to town and even the Rolling R was temporarily cut off from him.

He hadn't eaten in sixteen hours and the pangs of hunger were beginning to gnaw at his belly. There was no place he could go for food. Zents would be shrewd enough to detail guards to his Elbow Bend camp and might do likewise at the Long Bow. And without a rifle he couldn't bring down any wild game.

Finally he decided to stay in the brush behind his own ranch and then late in the day to try contacting Sue at the Long Bow. If Zents had not left a guard there he might get the latest news from Sue as well as some food supplies.

IT WAS dark when Bill arrived at the Long Bow. There were no lights in the bunkhouse; that meant Sue's two remaining hands were out on the range. A light in the ranchhouse told him Sue was at home.

But the thing that bothered Raven was the possibility of a sentry left by Zents. He didn't want to run into anyone. He had work to do—cattle to find and a score to settle with Goodwin; he didn't want to be forced to shoot anyone in order to keep his freedom.

Raven took a tour past the corral and saw a half dozen horses capering around behind the bars. There were no saddled horses to be seen so he took a chance, cantered over to the house, got down and walked up the veranda steps to the front door.

Sue heard his approach and flung open the door before he could knock. She stepped back, astonished. Lamp-light struck her cheeks and watching her, Raven thought he had never seen her so cold, so bitterly angry.

"You've got gall coming here this way with a posse hunting you," she said with razor-edged sharpness.

Raven pushed her ahead of him into the room. "Tell me, Sue," he said, "what's happened?"

She tried to pull away and said, "You're hurting me."

"Sorry," he muttered and dropped

his arms. "What is it, Sue? I was up in the hills this morning and saw—"

Sue interrupted him. "As if you don't know that Bull Bronson is dead—shot through the back."

"So it was Bronson." Then, half to himself he added: "Then I was right." He raised his voice to ask: "How do they connect that killing with me?"

The scorn in Sue's face deepened. "You killed Bronson. You've gone too far this time. The law can't protect you."

Raven came toward her. She backed away as if she were afraid of him. "How do they tie me up with that killing?" he asked.

"The ring I gave back to you," she answered dully. "It was found beside the body. Bronson left for town after dark last night, but it seems he never got there. This morning when Goodwin learned he hadn't returned, he set out for town. He took Dale with him and they went in the buckboard because they needed supplies. They found Bronson five miles from the ranch, lying in some bushes beside the road."

She stopped and gave him a long, despairing look.

"Go on," he said tightly. "Give me the rest of it."

"He had been dead for several hours," she said. "A .45 calibre bullet struck him in the back. His horse had wandered some distance away. They found the ring nearby. It must have fallen out of your pocket."

Her eyes never ceased watching him. There was a sick loathing in them.

"They rigged it pretty sharp," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't kill Bronson. I didn't see him last night." His anger was a cold lump in his chest. "I've been framed—and very neatly. Something happened last night. Bronson got his and Goodwin saw a way to tie me to the crime and get me out of his way. It's my own fault about the ring."

"Then you admit that you killed Bronson?" she said.

"I admit nothing," he almost yelled at her. "I never had the ring. After you threw it in the dust I looked for

it and couldn't find it. I was so mad that I walked off without it."

She gave him a withering glance. "Do you expect me to believe you'd leave a three-hundred dollar ring?"

"No, Sue," he said. "Just as I wouldn't expect you to believe that your own ramrod has been working with Ty Raskall and helping to steal your cows and mine. In fact, they were behind the breaking up of that trail drive—under orders from Josh Goodwin."

Redness stained her cheeks.

"Prove that!" she challenged.

"I can't now, but I will. Just as I'll prove someone—probably Goodwin or one of his men—picked up that ring and saved it—"

RAVEN BROKE off as the clatter of galloping hoofs was borne to him on the night breeze. He stiffened, his hand automatically loosening the gun in his holster. "Probably the posse again," he said to her. "What will you do?"

Her answer came back at him with quick vehemence. "I won't hide you," she told him; you're on your own."

He looked at her with sharpened attention. She had her hands folded in front of her in a grip so firm that the tips of her fingers were darkly suffused with blood and the rest of her hand was starkly white.

Bill paused another instant, listening to the rapid beat of those hoofs and dismally aware that he was cut off at the front. It had been careless of him to leave the black gelding outside. The horse would be recognized at once. Raven paused just long enough to say: "Thanks, Sue. For everything."

His words cut her like the sting of a lash and she recoiled. Then he was gone, sprinting down the hall to the kitchen. Sue heard the rear door close with just the slightest jar of sound. Then all other noises were absorbed in the tumult of clattering hoofs and shouting men that swept up to the ranch-house.

She heard a high, ringing shout from Josh Goodwin. "Zent's! Raven is here. That's his black gelding, I tell you!"

Zents roared out immediate orders.

"Surround the house. Dale, take a few men and scatter around the out buildings."

The boom of those voices and the tramp of heavy boots across the porch, echoed like a trip-hammer in Sue's heart. There was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer, Zents and three other men shouldered into the room.

"We want Bill Raven!" said Zents, his seamed face very morose. "He's here."

"Yes," she said dully. "He just went out the back door."

Zents lifted his eyebrows in astonishment. Goodwin, who had just entered, also showed his surprise. "So you don't like a killer, do you?" he asked.

Sue's face grew whiter and more strained. "Get out, all of you!" she said. "Leave me alone. He's here—what more do you want?" Her voice broke and she turned away, fleeing toward her bedroom.

"Let's go," said Goodwin and pivoted toward the hallway.

Zents and the others careened after him....

THICK DARKNESS filled the rear yard of the Long Bow ranch when Raven stepped out of the back door. It lacked an hour of moonrise and the thin scattering of stars in the sky did little to dispel the heavy darkness.

Raven was thankful for the gloom as he darted toward the barn. He heard the posse sweep up to the front of the house. He heard Zents' shouted orders and realized he had to make up his mind fast as to what he would do.

The barn was a possibility with its hay loft. But any thorough search would include the haymow and there would be little chance of escaping discovery. Already he saw possemen streaking around the side of the house, then dismounting to go stalking forward on foot.

Yellow light washed a bright path into the yard as the back door flung open and several men piled outside.

"Round up some lanterns in the barn," ordered Zents. "And somebody

keep an eye on the corral so he can't get a horse."

Men were spreading out over the entire yard, coming toward him. Two of them broke away from the main group and raced to the barn, intent on securing lanterns. Raven threw himself flat on the ground a short distance away.

The possemen sped right by him without noticing him. But in a few seconds now he would be hemmed in. Right now the darkness was Bill's shield, but the lanterns would remove that protection from him.

Then he saw the dark bulk of the watering trough between the barn and the corral. He got to his hands and knees and began crawling toward the corral.

There were men in front of him, scarcely fifty yards away, and he could see two more posted beside the corral bars. He reached the watering trough just as somebody tumbled out of the barn with a lantern. Its rays spread a vast cone of illumination through the yard's dust and Raven hastily flipped himself over the side of the trough into the water.

He could not avoid splashing a little and he held his breath, waiting for an alarm. Not fifty feet away and still partially concealed by darkness Sheriff Zents called out: "What was that?"

"You're hearing things, Sam," someone answered from the corral.

"Maybe," snapped the lawman. "But he's around here somewhere. I don't want him to slip away." He raised his voice. "Johnson, I'm coming in the barn to help you."

His dark moving shape went past Raven. Another man joined him. Both entered the barn. Afterward, there was the tumult of saddle gear and other ranch impedimenta being tossed around in the frenzy of the search.

Raven remained half-submerged in the water. The night air was cool and some of its chill crept into his bones.

WITHIN TEN minutes Zents emerged from the barn. Josh Goodwin, who had been searching in the high grass behind the barn and

the corral, came over and questioned the sheriff.

"Any luck?"

"Not a sign of him," replied Zents, disgruntled.

The men left the barn, wandered over toward the corral. Others of the posse were ranging farther afield, going into the horse pasture. Raven submerged when he saw that Zents' line of march would take him close just below the surface, feeling the chill going deeper into the well springs of his body. Someone with a lantern paused right beside him, and he felt a different kind of coldness take hold of him as he waited for the man to turn and spot him hiding there.

Zents paused to light up a cigar and the others with him halted. Raven wished they would move on. His breath was tearing at his lungs with a sharp, wrenching pain. And the slightest movement of the water would betray his presence. The pounding of his heart sounded like the dull boom of a drum in his ears. The agony in his lungs increased.

Then, finally, Zents moved away and the others followed. Raven pushed his head clear, opened his mouth. Then he had to fight the urge to suck in fresh air with a great gasp. Even that noise would be heard. Instead, he drew the oxygen in slowly, almost sobbing with the pain of it.

He stayed in the watering trough another fifteen minutes while Zents and his men again went through the ranch-house and scoured around the brush pockets that walled in the Long Bow. At last, they gave up and returned to their saddles.

"We'll split up!" shouted Zents. "We'll keep the lanterns and spread out in all directions, beating the brush as we go."

"Good idea," answered Goodwin from a corner of the yard. "We've got him trapped on foot; he can't go far."

After that the posse broke into small fragments, each unit riding off to scour its own appointed search area.

Only after they were well away from the ranch did Raven venture

to leave his hiding place. Climbing out, he shook himself, squeezing his clothes through his hands to drain the moisture out of them.

They had taken the black gelding with them. But they had forgotten the horses still in the corral. Now, he found a rope hanging from a peg in the barn and moved through the bars and quickly threw a loop around the head of a white-stockinged bay. He took a blanket and saddle from the barn, threw them on the bay, drew the saddle cinches tight and stepped aboard. Then he pushed off, determined to ride the gauntlet right through the posse.



THE HEAT of another day filled the pale blue, sunlit sky and danced in shimmering waves over the seared land when Raven finally sighted the abandoned mine through a gap in a row of buttes he had been following for the

past thirty minutes.

He had been lucky the night before in escaping through the lines of the posse. And his luck had held this morning when he flushed a rabbit out of some brush and knocked him down with a snap shot from his Colt. Thoroughly famished by hunger, he had risked a fire to broil the skinned animal and eat it for breakfast.

For a long time after he had eaten he had debated whether he should risk riding back to the foothills to find Raskall and Goodwin and force a showdown on the issue of Bronson's murder and the theft of the cattle. At last, he had decided to stay in the high country. It was the safest course for the moment because Zents and his posse no doubt was still scouring the hills. And, at the same time, he might be lucky enough to find where the cattle had been cached.

Pushing through a gap in the bluff, he followed the course of a dry wash

for a half mile until he struck a rising slant of ground that lifted over a brush-covered ridge. From the crest of the rise he noticed another rider skylined on a knoll a mile away.

He watched the yonder horseman dip out of sight and it occurred to him that the man was also angling toward the mine. The thought spurred Raven into action. A few miles farther on the trail he was traversing was intersected by another trail deriving from the northeast. And that was the trail the other rider was following.

Deciding that he wanted to reach the intersection first, Raven sped headlong down the slope. He rode recklessly for ten minutes, careless of broken ravines and gullies that pock-marked the area. Then, as a little seared brown vegetation appeared along the edges of the trail, he swung the bay onto the grass to muffle the noise of his progress.

He came to the intersection and slowed to a halt. A wall of granite loomed on his right. This wall formed one section of a narrow canyon that held the side-trail. Whoever was riding that side trail would have no view of the main trail until he was full upon it.

So Raven waited, at ease in the saddle. Three minutes dragged by before he caught the clatter of metal shod hoofs on stone. Raven flattened the bay and himself against the granite wall. He saw first the head of a horse, then the shape of the rider.

He recognized Lance David, saw his right arm in a sling. Then David swiveled around, spotted him and made an awkward, delayed stab toward the gun on his left hip.

Raven's gun flipped into view. "You're much too slow with your left hand, Lance," Raven said. He looked at the bandaged arm. "What snake bit you?"

"None of your business," snapped David. His rough, unshaven face was tight and ugly.

"Keep going toward that hogleg, Lance," Raven directed. "When you get your fingers on the handle, haul it out and toss it away."

David glowered at him but he obeyed.

"That's that," Raven said. "Now you and I can take a pasear up to that abandoned mine."

"What for?" David demanded.

"I've a hunch my stolen cows are up there somewhere. If I run into any difficulties, maybe you can help me out."

"You'll get no help from me."

Raven shrugged. "That's all right. You can keep me company anyway, while I hunt around for sign. Now, move out ahead of me."

David turned his back on Raven and kicked his horse into motion. Raven followed, eyes alert and missing nothing.

The ground grew rougher. The hills took on a steeper slant. Gray alkali lifted from their horses' hoofs and hung in sifting clouds around them.

WHEN THEY finally came within sight of the low mountain range which housed the abandoned mine Raven studied his surroundings with a great deal of attention.

As far as the eye could see the land was deserted. Raven and David were alone under the blazing sun. At a command from Raven, David cut toward the mountains at an oblique angle. It was Raven's plan to again study the ground from the direction in which he estimated the stolen Rolling R and Long Bow cattle had been driven.

However, the dry bare earth was empty of sign. It was packed hard and scoured clean by roving winds. Thick brush grew along the base of the slope. Raven edged nearer. His eyes scanned each stunted tree and bush. Suddenly he noticed a few broken branches on a thick clump of manzanita. "Hold it, David!" he said and rode up to the bush.

The break was fairly recent, he saw. He came up against the bush, peered past the screen of branches. Then he uttered an exclamation.

Throwing himself out of the saddle, he glanced once toward David to make sure the Long Bow foreman had halted. Then he dived into the manzanita and out again. There was

a long scratch on his right cheek from a branch and blood began to fill it. But he was heedless of the stinging pain. He was occupied with a huge clump of dead branches that had been crudely fastened together with rope. He showed it to Lance David. "Does this give you any ideas, Lance?" he asked.

David shook his head. "It's just a bunch of branches. What am I supposed to make of it?"

"Why, maybe nothing," said Raven. "Then again this could have been used by your rustling friends."

"For what?"

"To blot out the tracks of cattle. There are several more bunches of these branches back behind those bushes. They're all tied with rope and they all have a long free end of rope. With several riders dragging those branches back and forth across the trail, it would be an easy matter to brush away all sign of recent movements of cattle."

Raven gave David a sharp, searching look, then ducked back into the bushes again. He was gone about fifteen seconds. Then branches crackled as he shouldered his way into the open again. This time he held a spade in his hands. "Some more evidence," he observed. "There are a few more shovels back there. That completes the picture."

"Yeah?" said David. "Tell me how?"

"That cave-in inside the mine," said Raven, "is probably a shallow one. I can think of no other reason for having shovels hidden here. If they belonged to some of the old miners who worked the gold claims here they'd be all rusted. These are comparatively new. That means just one thing to me. My stolen beef was driven into the mine. A passage was hacked through the tunnel so that cattle could be hazed into some valley on the other side of the mountain range. Then the dirt was shoveled back again."

David laughed at him. Yet Raven detected a hollow note in the laugh. "You don't think I'm right?" Raven queried.

"I think you're loco," said David.

"All right," said Raven. "We'll see how loco I am. We'll take another look inside the mine. You lead the way."

David pushed his horse into motion. There was a hint of reluctance in his manner. Raven's vigilance increased when he saw the furtive way David's head moved from side to side. He dropped farther behind David so as to be ready for any unexpected move David might decide to make.

They were riding along the foot of the slope beneath an overhanging shelf of rock and just a few yards away from the mine entrance when Raven spotted a saddled horse. The horse was ground-hobbled a scant six feet from the opening and almost completely hidden by the darkness that shrouded the interior of the cavern.

Raven tensed in the saddle. He called out to David to stop.

There was an abrupt, swishing sound above him. He twisted in the hull, peering upward. A noose dropped over his head and shoulders, drew tight. He tried to wrench loose.

A heavy body hurled its weight upon him. He was thrown from the saddle. Strong arms encircled him. A pistol barrel clubbed the side of his skull. Darkness swept over him.

18



WHEN RAVEN regained consciousness he found himself in a square, earthen room, shored with heavy four by six timbers. He knew instantly that he was within the abandoned mine. The flickering yellow light of a single

lantern threw gaunt, elongated shadows up and down the damp walls. It revealed, also, a crude plank table and three old packing cases which served as chairs.

The smoke-grimed lantern stood on the table. A few feet away from the table Raven saw Ty Raskall and Lance

David talking to a third man—a dark, heavy individual with a crooked mouth, shaggy eyebrows and long, unkempt hair. This man, Raven guessed, must be Duke Leeming, the outlaw who was handling the transfer of the stolen beef.

As Raven moved and propped himself up on an elbow while massaging the side of his head with his free hand, Lance David jerked to attention. "He's come out of it, Ty!" David announced and started forward.

Raskall and his companion followed. The latter grinned in sardonic fashion at Raven and said: "You've got a hard skull, mister. I thought I'd laid you out for keeps with my gun barrel."

Raven fought back a surge of dizziness. "Better luck next time, Leeming."

The outlaw started in surprise. "So you know my name." Raven ignored Leeming and looked straight at Raskall who had drawn his Colt. "Well, Ty," he said coolly, with no trace of the tension that gripped him showing in his face or his voice, "where do we go from here?"

"You're going straight to hell on the end of a bullet," Raskall said. "I'm going to do what Zents and his posse have been hankering to do for several days."

Raven still remained calm though there was a dull throbbing in his temples. He pushed himself to his feet, then placed one hand against the rough, unplanned side of a four by six to steady himself. "Is that because you think I killed Bronson or because I know too much?" he inquired.

"Suppose you make a guess," Raskall said.

The strength was slowly flowing back into Raven's body. His head, too, had cleared and only a tiny ache remained where Leeming's pistol barrel had struck him. Leeming didn't have his gun out, but he wore his holster tied down and he had the look of a man who lived by the speed of his draw. He took one shaky step forward, then stopped as he saw Leeming's right arm lift, the fingers of his hand spreading.

Raven decided to stall for time. He was on the brink of disaster. The knowledge filled him with a growing rashness. A cold current of air licked against his face. He lifted his head, stared past the table and noticed for the first time a thin crack of daylight in the far wall.

THE ROOM he was in was obviously a small side chamber that did not connect with the main tunnel. He had never seen it before. But from the litter of opened cans, a blanket or two and some assorted riding gear Raven concluded that the room had been used by Leeming and his men on numerous occasions.

"Listen, Ty," Leeming announced suddenly. "I don't want to waste any more time here. The boys are waiting to drift that beef in the hidden canyon beyond this mine; I'd like to get a good start before sundown."

"All right," said Raskall. "Get rid of the critters and be back here inside of ten days with the dinero. After that, I'll have a special job for you."

"What kind of a job?" demanded Leeming sharply.

There was an ugly shine in Raskall's eyes when he answered. "I'm going to smash Josh Goodwin. I'm tired of doing his dirty work. He forced me to cut him in on this beef deal—"

"Hell," interrupted Leeming, "if he cuts in, it's on your end. Not on mine."

"That's understood," snapped Raskall. "I had to consent because he had me in a spot. But I'm through taking his orders. I figure when he's finished using me I'll wind up with a slug in my back. I aim to beat him to it. When you get back after selling that beef I'll tell you about my scheme for burning out Goodwin and his ranch and his crew with him."

The crunching sound of boots on hard-packed earth hauled Raskall around. Then Josh Goodwin's flat, dangerously smooth voice vibrated in the confined area of that underground room. "Tell it now, Ty," he said. "We'd all like to hear it."

He had approached from the far corner of the chamber, where Raven

had noticed the tiny crack of light. Slightly to one side of him was little Harry Dale.

Duke Leeming spun around at the same time that Raskall swung to face the intruders. But one look at Goodwin and Dale and the guns in their fists sent him into a leaping dive to one side. And as he leaped his weapon barked a savage tongue of flame.

Goodwin and Dale fired simultaneously. Goodwin's shot drilled through empty space. But Dale, swinging his gun bore as Leeming moved, caught the outlaw squarely in the chest. Leeming squeezed off one more shot before he died, but the bullet lanced into the dirt.

All of this action took only a split second of time. Then Dale and Goodwin wheeled, their guns lining upon Raskall and Raven, Raskall, with his Colt in his fist, didn't have the sand to follow through. He let his arm drop.

"So you're too yellow to burn powder," Josh Goodwin muttered. There was a wild light in his eyes, and the twist of his long mouth brought a red banner of shame to Raskall's cheeks. Then he turned to Raven. "Looks like I'm really playing in luck today—bagging you, too."

Raven spoke with calculated cutting scorn. "The smell in here was bad before, but it's gotten much worse since you two polecats wandered in."

Harry Dale swore savagely and stalked across the earthen floor. "I've been wanting to cut you down to size for a long time, friend Raven. This looks like the right occasion." His gun was held tight in his hand and he had the hammer eared back. "Where would you like the first slug to go?"

IN THE BRIEF silence that followed the shadows beyond the lantern light seemed to grow thicker. There was a pulsing vibration of peril in the damp cool air. Angry white arcs of pressure rimmed Dale's mouth corners.

Raven stared down the long, steel-gray barrel of Dale's gun and saw in it his own ruin. Death was in Dale's red-rimmed eyes, in the black hole of his gun bore, in the draught of air

that whipped past his face. Yet, he showed no concern. He stood tall and straight and still, his whole bearing a brittle challenge to the little gunman. "Better wait till I turn back, Harry," he murmured. "That's the way you usually do it, isn't it? Like Old Man Bigelow?"

The question was a goad to Dale and he surged forward. "I'll pour the whole load into your guts," he threatened.

Josh Goodwin cut in abruptly, "Stay away from him, you fool! If you take another step he'll grab you before you even get a chance to fire a shot. Stand back."

"Hell, let's drill him," said Dale, "then hand him over to Zents."

"No," said Goodwin. "I've got other idea. Meanwhile, get Raskall's gun and see if David is packing any hardware."

Without waiting for an order, Raskall dropped his Colt. Dale moved behind him, retrieved it, then went over to David and frisked him. "Nothing on David," Dale called.

"Got a little news for you, Josh," Raven said, deciding suddenly on a bold bluff to gain information. "Something Zents would like to have."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"I hear you're the gent that back-shot Bull Bronson."

Goodwin's cheeks darkened. "That so?" he said. "Who told you?"

"Our mutual friend, there." Raven pointed to Lance David.

Goodwin whirled on the ramrod. "You dirty skunk..."

"That's a lie! yelled David in a frenzy. "I never said a word."

"No?" said Raven, prepared to add further decorations to his impromptu tale. "You sure sang your tune up in the hills when I nabbed you and threatened to stake you out for the ants unless you talked."

David retreated before Goodwin's explosive rage. "Josh—I tell you—it's a lie. It wasn't me. I—I didn't talk. David's voice rose shrilly. "No—no. Josh. Don't shoot!"

His yell ended in a scream as Goodwin stalked forward and shot him pointblank in the chest. David's mouth flipped open. His body sagged loose-

ly and fell to the ground.

Raven felt a heavy shock roll through him; by his crude bluff he had caused Lance David's death. David was a renegade, unscrupulous and a killer at heart, but somehow the calm indifference that cloaked Goodwin as he watched David drop and coolly blew smoke out of his gun barrel held an element of sadistic pleasure. "Dead men don't talk, eh, Josh?" he said.

"Hell, he was a skunk," growled Goodwin. "Not worth the lead in the bullet that killed him. As for Bronson, David was the gent that shot him."

"David?" said Raven, a note of disbelief in his voice.

"Yeah. We had a little trouble in Raskall's place. Remember, Ty?" Goodwin turned back to Raven. "It was the night you tried to get some information about your stolen beef from Raskall and David. Me and Bronson pulled up after you'd gone. Bull gave David a going-over with his hands, then turned his back on David. That was a mistake; David plugged him dead-center."

Raven's features were taut when he asked: "Whose idea was it to frame me for the killing?"

Goodwin grinned and pointed to Raskall. "There's your man—Ty Raskall."

Raven said low-voiced: "And the ring? I suppose you found it in the dust after I left."

He looked at Raskall, but it was Josh Goodwin who replied. "Right. Ty picked it up after he's seen you and Sue quarrel. He produced it after Bronson got killed and suggested it as a bit of evidence to pin Bronson's murder on you. Everybody knew that you and Bronson were bound to fight it out. It was a natural."

"Wasn't it?" said Raven, his eyelids dropping another notch over his angry eyes. And Adam Bigelow. "Who did you pay to do that? It couldn't have been Ty—he hasn't the stomach for that sort of thing. As for Bull Bronson, he liked to work with his fists. So it must have been Harry Dale."

THE BIG G ramrod growled an oath. "You don't go pinning that on me," he snapped.

"What are you afraid of, Harry?" Goodwin drawled lazily. "Sure you did it and you got two hundred dollars for the job. Remember?" There was a measured and calculated cruelty in Goodwin's amiable talk. He had no secrets from Raven now. It was perfectly clear from his manner that he knew he was talking to a dead man, and wanted Raven to know it. When Bill regarded him with the same savagely cold contempt, he added as an after-thought: "There was another two hundred dollars for another job, too. Harry. I almost forgot."

Dale crimsoned as Raven's glance leaped to him. Raven's temper burst loose and he grated: "Chuck!"

Raskall cut in nervously: "What are you telling him all this for?"

Raven said, "Can't you guess, Ty? Josh can't do himself any harm talking to a dead man. That's what I'll be in a little while. You and me both, I reckon."

Raskall's eyebrows tilted sharply. His cheeks turned white. "No, Josh. You wouldn't—"

"Like hell I wouldn't!" snapped Goodwin. "You double-crossing snake! So you were going to burn me out and fix yourself up as king-pin in Bradley. You even tried to run a sandy on this cattle deal, telling me you were only supposed to meet Leeming here on Saturday."

"Dale has been watching this mine ever since the night Bronson was killed. I never did trust you too far and I figured you'd try to pull some stunt. It was Dale who spotted Leeming going into this underground room the other day. Then today you showed up."

Goodwin laughed in harsh, devilish enjoyment, then resumed. "The opening is well concealed. Just a crack in the rock fissure of the bluff which you and Leeming found led into an old side cut of the mine. And there's plenty of brush to hide it from any-one riding by outside."

"Dale also figured the cattle were being held in some pocket beyond the mine. What we overheard confirms

that. Now you're going to tell me how to reach that beef."

"Find them yourself," said Raskall with a sudden display of defiance. "I've got nothing to gain by talking now."

"You'll find them at the other end of the main mine tunnel," Raven told Goodwin.

"But that's caved in," Dale objected. "Been that way for years."

"Sure, but it's not much of a cave-in as everyone thought. All the stolen cattle are driven that way. The tracks are wiped out by dragging sections of tree branches tied together over the ground. The loose dirt from the cave-in is shoveled away to let the cows through, then put back again."

"Why are you telling me this?" Goodwin asked.

"Because those critters belong to the Rolling R and the Long Bow and I don't expect they'll ever do you any good."

Goodwin's heavy brows drew together above his dark eyes. "For a gent that's only a few minutes from hell, you talk mighty big," he said.

"You haven't killed me yet," Raven pointed out bluntly.

But the string had just about run out; Raven knew that. Without a gun or any other kind of weapon, he was helpless. Still, he had it in his mind to go for Josh Goodwin whenever the latter betrayed his intention to finish him. And he'd keep going for Goodwin as long as his legs would hold him. It was all a man could do—to go down fighting.

RAVEN accepted the situation with a composure that startled Goodwin. Finally, the Big G owner turned to Dale. "Go out and take care of your little chore."

Something in Goodwin's glance and in Dale's unholy grin before he tramped away, drew a feverish protest from Ty Raskall.

"What are you planning to do?"

Goodwin answered slowly and easily. "Dale is going to plant some dynamite around the entrance to this room. When it goes off you and Raven will be penned in here."

Raskall gasped in dismay. "Gawd!

That's murder! Give me a chance, Josh. We can work together. Hand Raven over to Zents..."

"After what I've spilled to him?"

"Josh! You can't kill me; we've been friends. And there's Anne. She and I..."

"Anne will have to do without you," said Goodwin callously. He raised his voice to call to Dale. "Hurry with that dynamite, Harry!"

A surge of recklessness spun Raven away from the wall. "I'll take a bullet," he said and lunged straight toward Goodwin.

"Stay back!" warned Godwin, retreating past the table.

Raven ignored the command, lurched forward. Goodwin fired one shot and the bullet missed Raven by a hair's breadth; then there was a shout from Harry Dale up near the entrance.

Suddenly Raskall was screaming in mortal terror and dragging out a short-barreled gun held hidden inside his shirt. He ran toward Goodwin. Goodwin squeezed the trigger of his Colt. Raskall went down, clutching at his shoulder. Then as Dale appeared near the entrance, Goodwin whirled and sent a shot crashing into the lamp on the table.

Glass splintered. The light winked out. Burned oil reeked in the room. Dale's shout pulled Goodwin away. "Fast, Josh. They're short fuses I set!"

As darkness dropped upon the room, Raven continued his forward lunge. He heard Goodwin far ahead of him, saw the crack of daylight blotted out as the Big G owner crowded through the opening. Raven angled toward that narrow cut of light, his heart pounding in his chest.

Once past the table his boots struck an unseen obstruction and he pitched headlong on his face. He scrambled to his feet and went on, hearing the desperate cry of Raskall somewhere behind him. Then, when he was still ten feet away from the opening he was lifted off his feet and hurled violently to the hard-packed earth floor. A tremendous concussion boomed in his ears. The ground shook and trembled. Rocks and dirt and jagged sec-

tions of timber toppled all around him.

A falling rock struck his shoulder, went skidding off into the gloom. Dust was an unseen fog, choking him. Overhead the four by six shorings creaked and groaned. A resounding crash announced the collapse of several beams that supported the roof. They careened to the earth. One great timber came to rest on Raven's back, pinning him down.

FOR MANY minutes the dirt and rubble collected around the entrance to the mine chamber. Total darkness filled the room. It was an absolute blackness that was somehow evil and alive. A pall of dust swirled invisibly in the gloom. It gagged Raven, forcing him to cough. And each cough brought its own agony as the convulsions of his body racked his flesh against the heavy beam that pressed down upon his spine.

Slowly the dust settled. But the darkness remained—a wall that was thick and impenetrable.

From far across the room Raskall's voice came to him. "Raven, are you all right?"

"I'm trapped under a big timber. How about you?"

"Winged in the shoulder. That's all. Can you move?"

Raven wriggled, trying to free himself. "Not much. There's a heavy beam lying across my back."

"Ah!" said Raskall and a red lance of flame pierced the darkness. A bullet thudded into the pile of rubble near Raven's right hand.

"Damn it, man, what are you trying to do?" gasped Raven.

Again Raskall's gun roared, a jagged flame-streak split the gloom and a slug hammered into the dirt close to Raven's face. "I'm going to kill you. That's what!" said Raskall, a strange, half-crazed frenzy in his voice. "I know a way out of this chamber and it's not by that dynamited entrance. I'm getting out and then I'm going to wait my chances and clean up on Goodwin and Dale. But first, I'll start with you."

There was a macabre satisfaction, a certain gloating pleasure in Ras-

kall's announcement. Raven heard the sucking scraping sound of Raskall's boots along the hard earth as the TR Connected owner stalked him in the darkness. "Where are you, Raven?" he asked with a laugh.

Raven held himself rigidly still, hardly daring to breathe. The blackness was like a miasmic fog, deadening all of his senses. He strained his eyes, trying to detect where Raskall was. He braced himself on an elbow. The timber on his back shifted slightly. The weight of it drove him down again. An involuntary groan dragged past his lips.

Raskall laughed. His gun roared, very close now. The bullet dug into the dirt a few inches from Raven's chin. Lose clods of earth whipped against his cheeks

He ground his teeth together in impotent rage. Blind luck had saved him so far. But in a moment Raskall would stumble over him. And that would be all.

19



ALL THE while the posse searched the Long Bow spread for Bill Raven, Sue did not stir from her room. There was a strange, frigid numbness around her heart. She waited tensely, with a hollow emptiness inside her, for the jubilant shout that would announce Raven's capture. The minutes dragged by in slow agony. Finally, Zents and Goodwin came clumping through the house again.

They searched the place from top to bottom. Only Zents ventured into the privacy of her own room, murmuring his apologies for disturbing her. She had thrown herself on the bed and did not deign to answer him.

Then Zents and Goodwin tramped outside and rode away with the posse. Still, she remained where she was. A long time passed before she rose,

walked downstairs and out under the stars.

She walked stiffly and disjointedly as if her arms and legs were no longer a part of her body. The odd numbness remained with her. Shock had left its cruel mark upon her. She was on the thin edge of collapse. Her tired eyes scanned the distant hills. Far off, a coyote lifted its mournful plaint to the night sky. The sound sent a shudder up and down her slender frame.

Later, in bed, sleep would not come to her though her body cried out in weariness. She rolled and tossed feverishly. Toward morning she drifted off into troubled slumber. Nightmares assailed her. There were hideous visions of Bull Bronson staggering around with a hole in his back, of Raven standing nearby with a smoking gun. But the one vision which kept returning to her, again and again, was that of Raven riding wildly through the night with a band of horsemen close upon his heels. In each pursuing rider's hand there was a length of rope shaped like a noose.

She awoke shortly after dawn in a cold, drenching sweat. A sickening exhaustion gripped her and she had to force herself to get up. After bathing and dressing she felt better. But she could not throw off the fear that had induced those horrible nightmares. The cumulative shock of her father's death months before, the killing of Raven's brother, the approaching loss of her ranch and now Bronson's murder had been too much for her jangled nervous system.

She had felt a strange revulsion for Raven last night, had been afraid of him—afraid of what he had done, what he might still do. That had been all wrong; she saw it all now. Bill had come to her for help; she had been his last refuge, and she'd refused to lift a hand.

Somehow, too, she knew that he hadn't killed Bronson. It was all a mistake—a frame-up as he had stated—yet his life hung in the balance.

Now that he was gone, now that he was being hunted like a mad dog she realized that she wanted him and loved him as she had never thought

herself capable of loving. She saw with a clarity that was utterly frightening how she had failed him.

He alone in this troubled range had the heart and the will to fight back against Goodwin. He'd continually looked to her for love and for strength. The strength had never been there. Instead, he'd found weakness and fear. And the love she bore for him had always been muted by another kind of fear—a shy reserve that had kept him at arm's length.

No, she hadn't been much help to him. And today—this very hour, in fact—he was being chased from pillar to post with every man's gun ready to turn against him.

To quell the desperate curiosity that burned in her Sue decided to ride into Bradley for news. At the corral she noted that the bay was missing. Immediately hope stirred in her breast. Raven must have eluded the hunt last night. Then, after the posse had gone, he had helped himself to the horse and escaped to the hills.

WHEN SHE reached Bradley Sue found the cowtown seething with excitement. Wherever she walked talk centered about Raven and the manhunt. Men spoke freely of a hanging.

She gained some reassurance from the fact that one segment of the posse rode in during the afternoon and reported its failure to come up with the fugitive. Yet deep inside the ugly dread maintained its steady, nagging flicker.

How long could he hold out, she asked herself? Most of his crew was still away on the trail drive. He had to go it alone in the struggle to save the Rolling R. But with a murder charge hanging over his head, he had to abandon that fight for the greater fight of saving his own neck.

After another sleepless night Sue was beside herself with fear. She no longer could tolerate her own inaction. Suddenly she decided to fling herself into the breach and make the investigation Raven was now prevented from making.

Again and again he had repeated his conviction that Josh Goodwin was the man behind the rustling and that he had deliberately set Harry Dale against Bill's brother. If that were so, perhaps she might find some item of proof at the Big G outfit.

That the undertaking was fraught with peril, she understood. Yet, surprisingly, she brushed her fears aside. A new force was impelling her now. It was a driving passion, warming her blood, filling her with a reckless excitement and daring she had never known.

Once her decision was made she moved swiftly to the corral and roped a horse and saddled it. Hopeless as the task seemed, she had to make a try, for if she could find any evidence linking Goodwin to the rustling or to the deaths of Bill's brother or her own father she might yet win a reprieve for Raven.

Forty minutes later she drew her lathered pony to a halt at the edge of some brush on a knoll overlooking the Big G ranch. She was just in time to see the Big G crew emerge from the bunkhouse, throw saddles on their horses and gallop away.

There was no further sign of movement around the ranch. Smoke crawled lazily from the chimney of the cook shack on the far side of the house. But she wasn't worried about the cook. Finally, she quartered down the slope, now and then riding in the open, and dismounted under some trees, about fifty yards from the side of the house. She ran across the yard, gained the veranda steps and mounted them to the front door.

The door was not locked. She pushed inside and stood quietly in the shadowy hall. The house was silent. Anne, too, was out. She had either remained in town or was riding somewhere in the foothills.

Nervousness took hold of Sue now. She dreaded to think of the consequences if she were found here. Whatever she did must be done quickly. With pounding heart she moved into the small square room off the living room which served as Josh Goodwin's office.

IT WAS A roughly furnished chamber. An Indian blanket hung on a wall. There was a fireplace with a deer's head over it. There were two straight-backed chairs, a rough-hewn table with a lamp on it and a scarred roll-top desk in a corner.

Sue hurried to the desk, slid the top back. Somewhere she heard a crackling sound. She froze. The blood seemed to hang suspended in her veins. After a moment she realized it was one of the numerous noises one hears in a house when one is alone. It could have been the creaking of a beam or the rasping whisper of falling plaster.

She shuddered, forced herself to bend to the desk. With uneasy haste she rummaged through several pigeonholes. She hardly knew what she was looking for. She had often heard that Goodwin was a methodical man. If that were so and he was engaged in illegal business, perhaps he had kept some record of his operations.

It was a slim chance. But she was desperate now, for Raven could not hope to go on eluding his pursuers.

Then, as she came upon a tally book and riffled through the closely marked pages she found an entry that referred to several hundred head of Long Bow and Rolling R cattle. Opposite that figure a sum of money had been written in. The ink, however, had blurred and she was unable to decipher it. The figure itself was unimportant; it was the transaction itself—a transaction that spoke blatantly of rustling—that counted.

Sue leafed through several more pages without discovering any similar notations. Then, suddenly, her finger stopped at a page and she peered closely at the writing that seemed to leap up at her and thunder at her senses for attention.

She saw Harry Dale's name and opposite his name Goodwin had lettered in the sum of \$200 and the date of March 12th. Sue felt a horrible choking sensation in her throat. March 12th was a date she could never forget, for on the night her father had been shot and killed from ambush.

That notation of \$200 opposite Harry Dale's name was like a waving

red flag telling her what Chuck Raven had more than once suspected before his death—that Goodwin had been behind her father's death. And when Sue, moments later, came to a similar notation for the date of July 20th and remembered that this marked the day Chuck Rave had gotten into a gun brawl with Harry Dale and had been killed she was appalled.

Two hundred dollars was more than the average working cowpuncher earned in four months. Even granting that Dale was the Big G foreman and could be expected to be paid at a higher rate than the rest of the crew, there was no accounting for these cash payments. There were not entries of wages in the tally book. That, in itself, was an indication that the sums were paid for some special service. And, Sue was convinced, that service was dealing out death.

Whether those entries would be suitable as evidence against Goodwin, Sue didn't know. But her task was not finished; if Goodwin were somehow involved in the death of Bull Bronson and had arranged to pin the crime on Raven, perhaps, methodical as always, he had made some mention of it in this record.

But Sue had hardly scanned three more pages when she heard the clatter of hoofs coming toward the house from the road. Fear knifed through her and she became weak. She leaned against the desk, trying to decide upon a course of action.

Her temples throbbed painfully. Moisture coated the palms of her hands. The tempo of her breathing increased. She thought of hiding. Then, as the hoof beats drummed nearer she elected to brazen it out.

Thrusting the small tally book inside the V-neck of her shirt, she walked rapidly out of the office, passed through the living room and on into the hall.

SHE WAS just stepping out onto the veranda when Josh Goodwin and Harry Dale rode up and swung down to the ground. Goodwin let out a low, surprised exclamation. Dale said nothing, but his beady eyes were bright and inquisitive.

"What are you doing here, Sue?" Goodwin asked heavily.

She smiled nervously and fiddled with a few loose ends of her hair as she came down the steps. "I stopped by to see Anne a while ago," she murmured. "But she wasn't here so I thought I'd wait. I got tired of waiting and had just decided to ride back when I heard you come along."

The words came from her in a wild rush. They were spoken so swiftly that they ran together. There was a breathless quality in her voice and she felt a wild trembling deep down inside as she saw Goodwin peer intently at her.

She imagined that he was staring right through her. Involuntarily her hand crept toward the open neck of her shirt.

"Where's your horse?" Goodwin asked idly.

She colored to the roots of her hair. "I—I left him out in the brush," she said and started to move past the rancher.

He smiled and slid to one side, effectively blocking her passage.

"That's funny," he observed. His smile widened. But there was a deep, speculative shine in his eyes. "Trying to surprise Anne?"

Sue grasped at that straw. "Yes," she said. "That's it." Again she tried to go around Goodwin. She laughed. "If you'll excuse me, I've got to rush now."

Goodwin lunged toward her and grabbed her by the arm. "Not so fast, Sue," he said. His smile was gone and there was a slight edge to his words. "Stay awhile. Anne should be along soon."

Sue looked from Goodwin to Dale and back again to Goodwin. She caught a brief, furtive exchange between them. She thought, too, that Goodwin nodded his head. "Oh, I couldn't," she protested, trying to pull away.

"But I insist," said Goodwin and whirled her around. "Come on. Anne will be disappointed if she finds out you were here and she missed you."

Was he mocking her? Sue could not tell. There was a tight, strained look about him and there was a rough ur-

gency in the way he guided her back up the steps and inside the house. Behind them tramped Harry Dale with jingling spurs.

Sue had to play the game. She went along with terror rising in her throat in a cold, hard lump. The coldness spread into her blood. It numbed her senses so that she was hardly aware of walking. It bordered on panic when Goodwin hurried her through the living room and on to his office beyond. He left her, then, and strode to his desk. She turned to flee, but found Harry Dale leaning in the doorway behind her, nonchalantly rolling a cigarette.

GOODWIN rummaged through the desk's compartments. After a few seconds of silence that seemed to stretch a tight, contracting band around Sue's heart, Goodwin whirled around to face her.

"All right, Sue," he said. "You've got my tally book. Where is it?"

"I—I haven't got—" she blurted, then stopped in confusion. "I—I don't know what you're talking about," she finished lamely.

He came toward her, his heavy tread shaking the puncheon floor. "You gave yourself away that time," he said. "You didn't come to visit Anne; you came to snoop." His voice rose and the muscles along the edge of his jaw stood out like white cables.

He came toward her relentlessly. She stopped when she found the wall was at her back. He held out his hand. "I want that tally book," he said.

There was a hot pain in Sue's lungs. She was gasping for air. "I—I haven't got it."

"I want that tally book—if I have to strip you to get it!" Goodwin warned.

"Let me do that job, Josh," said Harry Dale.

"No, Please!" cried Sue, sliding away from Dale along the wall.

"Will I do?" said a new voice from the doorway.

It was Anne Maynard. In the tenseness of the moment none of them had heard her ride up. In fact, she had come in from the hills and had gone right to the corral without approaching the house.

"Come over here, Anne," directed Goodwin brusquely. "This girl has been rooting around in my desk. She's got a tally book of mine and I want you to search her."

Anne raised her high, arched eyebrows. "Sounds interesting," she murmured and walked over to Sue.

"Keep away from me," Sue warned and suddenly made a grab for her .38 which she wore in a small holster around her waist.

Harry Dale charged in fast, grappled with her for an instant and wrested the weapon away from her. "Go ahead, Anne," he said, "before I search her myself."

"All right," Sue murmured, the points of her shoulders dropping. She reached inside her shirt, drew out the tally book. She gave it to Anne. "You ought to look through it some time and get an education."

"Shut up!" growled Goodwin and tried to clap a hand across her mouth.

She wriggled free and ran across the room. "Or maybe you don't know that Josh paid Dale \$200 to kill my father and Bill's brother!" she cried as Dale and Goodwin both reached her.

Goodwin's hand stretched across her mouth, suddenly dropped away as he saw Anne's face turn white with shock. "That does it," Goodwin snapped. "You should have taken my offer to buy the Long Bow," he told Sue. "It's too late; you know too much."

"You don't mean that you'd—" began Anne hesitantly.

Goodwin shrugged. It was a callous gesture, without feeling.

"Do you think she'd keep quiet now?" he demanded.

"Did you kill her father?" Anne asked Dale.

The gunman shifted uneasily. "Hell, no!" he growled. But his black eyes were restless and uneasy and refused to meet Anne's direct stare.

"Dale," snapped Goodwin, "take Sue upstairs until we decide how we'll—I mean, what we'll do."

"No, you don't," snapped Anne, her gun appearing in her fist. She gave Goodwin a withering look. "I always figured you were crooked,

Josh, and knew how to make a smart dollar. I've closed my eyes to what I suspected was going on. But I refuse to close them to murder; you let Sue go or I'll—"

She never finished because Dale's Colt, drawn with a blinding speed, roared and her .38 went spinning from her numbed fingers as a heavy slug slammed against her weapon. It was slick shooting. Tears of pain swam in Anne's eyes, but she made no outcry.

She was shrewd and calculating, selfish and unscrupulous in her own fashion. Yet, now as the horror of how Goodwin's ambition had sent him twisting down the path of violence and murder, hit her like a blow in the face, she lifted her head defiantly and threw her allegiance toward Sue. It didn't matter that she had never liked Sue. It didn't matter that Sue had Bill Raven whom she had always coveted. What did matter was that Josh Goodwin, in whose house she had lived, was a killer and was prepared to kill again.

"Sue, never mind," she said with surprising warmth and moved toward the other girl. "We'll see this through."

Dale forged toward the girls, then stopped and glanced toward Josh Goodwin. "What now, Josh?" he asked. "There's the two of them." He rubbed his jaw. "Can we count on Anne keeping quiet?"

"Take them into the other room," he said. "And watch them carefully. I've got to think this out."

20



AVEN heard the scuff of Raskall's boot soles as the TR Connected rancher stalked nearer. In desperation, Raven settled his weight on the palms of his hands and gave a mighty upward heave. He felt a sharp pain along his spine, but the timber shifted, slid

a few inches lower. He squirmed partially free.

The sound of the four by four moving in the debris gave away Raven's position. Then he was blinded momentarily by the flare of a match. He got one glimpse of Raskall's twisted face, of a small bloody spot high on his left shoulder and of Raskall's forty-five sweeping in line to cove him.

He moved at the same instant that Raskall fired, hurled himself forward, face down in the dirt. There was the blast of the shot, a stinging sensation across his back, then darkness.

Raskall had dropped the match. But in the stygian gloom he heard Raskall laugh. Afterward, there came the empty click of a gun hammer striking a spent shell. Raskall had used up all his rounds. Forgetting the pain along his back, Raven wrenched and twisted his body along the loose earth until he was completely free of the restraining log. Then he reeled to his feet, swung in the direction in which he had last seen Raskall.

Raskall heard him come and started to back off. Raven guessed that the other man must be frantically trying to reload his gun and he knew he had to forestall that or he was lost.

He charged forward recklessly through the rubble. Then, as he paused for a fraction of a second he heard Raskall's indrawn breath near at hand. He whirled, taking a gamble as to Raskall's exact position, and hurled his one hundred and eighty-five pounds in a straight line to the left. His outflung arms closed around Raskall's hips. Both men toppled to the mine floor. Raskall's gun arced through space. Then they rolled along the ground, butting against four by six timbers, their faces scraping the gravel, their fists flailing.

Raven, weakened by his ordeal under the timber, fought with a fury born of desperation. What little strength remained in him had to be expended and quickly and to the greatest advantage. Blow after blow he drove into Raskall's face and body. And he was aided by the fact that Raskall's left arm was practically useless because of the wound in his shoulder.

He had heaved himself on top of Raskall's, had slid one hand to the latter's throat when he detected a furtive movement of Raskall's right arm. He slid to one side as Raskall's arm slashed upward and a knife blade pricked the flesh along his ribs.

In that total darkness which reduced the fight to a blind struggle guided purely by the sense of touch, Raven again was forced to gamble. He had to trap the hand with the knife before he was cut to ribbons.

Now, with his agonized breathing tearing at his throat, he leaped toward the TR Connected rancher. His spring carried him half across Raskall's prone body. He pinned Raskall down. He made a frantic close upon Raskall's wrist. He knew it was the right wrist because as his hand plunged downward it flicked across the back edge of the knife blade.

Savagely Raven bore down upon that wrist, striving to break Raskall's grip. The TR Connected owner lurched beneath Raven, almost broke loose. Then Raven put all of his weight behind another fierce lunge, bent Raskall's arm at the elbow. As he fell back across the rancher, dragging the arm with him, he sent the knife blade skewering into Raskall's left arm.

Raskall bellowed in pain and suddenly went limp. Raven wrenched the knife out of his grasp, flung it away. Still, wary of a trick, he slammed a hard blow to Raskall's jaw. Raskall moaned and cried out: "I've got enough. My arm. Get a light! I'm bleeding."

RAVEN pushed himself to his feet, fumbled for a match in his pocket and lit it. Crouched over Raskall, the yellow flame illuminating only a small area of darkness, he saw the ghastly pallor of Raskall's face, the blood welling from his arm. "Looks like you cut an artery," Raven told him.

"Damn it. Don't stand there," said Raskall. "I'll bleed to death."

"I'll do something when you show me how to get out of this hole," said Raven grimly, lighting another match as the first one burned out.

Raskall's eyes were muddy pools

of fear. He lifted an arm and pointed weakly behind Raven. "Go to that far wall. Behind two packing cases there are some burlap sacks. They're piled up, but they cover a small wooden panel. The panel opens into a narrow passage that leads into the main mine tunnel."

Raven struck another match, hurried to the packing cases. He hurled them out of his path, pushed the burlap sacks away and saw a small wooden panel half obscured by clinging dirt. He wrenched at it and pulled it open. A current of cool, fresh air blew into his face. That told him the passage led to a part of the tunnel that was near the entrance.

The passage was very low and it meant crawling through. Raven turned back to Raskall. He stumbled over Raskall's gun, picked it up and swiftly reloaded it from shells packed in the loops of his belt.

"Raven!" yelled Raskall frantically. "Put a tourniquet on my arm. Gawd—look at the blood!"

In the light of another match Raskall lay there, staring in horror at the red stream pouring out of the deep channel in his arm.

Raven whipped off his bandanna. Then, striking another match, he handed it to Raskall to hold. He wrapped the bandanna around Raskall's arm above the wound and drew it taut. Raskall winced with pain as the cloth dug into his muscles, but the flow of blood immediately eased.

"All right," Raven said. "Let's get out of here."

"I'm too weak," said Raskall. "I—can't make it."

"You'd better make a try or I'll leave you here. I've got some unfinished business to handle."

"With Josh Goodwin," Raskall murmured.

He sat up, swaying with weakness. Raven helped him to his feet, led him to the passage. "You go first," Raven told him.

He half-pushed, half-shoved Raskall into the opening. The last match he had lit went out. He didn't bother

lighting another. He followed Raskall into the passage, crawling on hands and knees along the damp earth.

Several times during that brief trip Raskall sagged down in a limp huddle, mumbling that he could not go on; each time Raven prodded him into making a further effort.

The passage took a steep downward slant the last few yards. Suddenly Raven heard a faint cry and a thud and he realized Raskall was no longer in front of him. He crawled forward. His groping hands struck blank space. He drew out a match, scratched it alight. They had reached the tunnel. Raskall, coming to the edge of the side passage, he toppled over an fallen the few feet to the ground. Raven scrambled out of the small opening and joined Raskall.

He placed an arm around the TR Connected owner and assisted him to his feet. Raskall was pretty well spent. But with Raven's aid he managed to stagger outside into the open air. There he collapsed again, weakened by his great loss of blood.

BILL LEFT Raskall for a moment to go back for the horse he had seem tethered to an outcropping of rock just inside the mine entrance. The brand on the animal's rump was a TR and he knew, then, that it belonged to Raskall.

"Where are you going?"

"After Goodwin and Dale," Raven told him.

"But what about me?" demanded Raskall. "I need a sawbone. You can't leave me here and—"

"I reckon Goodwin and Dale took my horse when they vamoosed. Right now I need that horse; I'll send someone out for you. But first you're going to do a little writing for me."

Raven dug into his shirt pocket for a much-creased square of paper and a pencil. He dropped them on Raskall's chest. "Take that paper and pencil," he said, "and write down that Lance David shot Bronson and that you and Goodwin planned that frame-up against me."

"Like hell!" snorted Raskall. "I'm not signing myself into the calaboose."

"No?" Raven spoke evenly. He stopped close to Raskall. With a flick of his fingers he loosened the tourniquet. Blood gushed anew from the wound in Raskall's arm. He cried out in horror as it flowed down the arm and soaked into the dry dust.

"Put it back!" he pleaded. "I—I'm weak now. I can't afford to lose any more blood."

Raven watched him with grim indifference. "The tourniquet will go back when you agree to write what I want. And while you're about it, you can write an account of the killings that have been going on in Bradley. You were in with Goodwin on all that business and I mean to have the whole thing in black and white."

"I won't do it," said Raskall.

Raven shrugged and moved toward the horse. "Suit yourself," he said and put one foot in the stirrup.

"Come back!" Raskall cried frantically. His eyes stretched wide with dread as he tried to crawl after Raven. "You win."

Raven turned away from the horse. Going once more to Raskall's side, he re-fastened the tourniquet. Then he drew a white handkerchief from his pocket, padded it against the open wound. He removed Raskall's bandanna and tied it loosely around the bandage.

"That should keep for a while," he said. "Now start writing. First about Bronson. And then about Old Man Bigelow and my brother Chuck. All of it. How Dale bushwhacked Adam Bigelow for two hundred dollars and how he precipitated that fight with Chuck—all on Goodwin's orders."

Raskall whispered hoarsely. "All right." He looked spent and weary. All the vitality had gone out of him.

He groped for the pencil and paper. It was an effort for him to put any pressure on the pencil. But Raven was adamant and forced him to stay at his task until the statement was completed and signed.

Raven took the confession and thrust it in a shirt pocket. He walked

to the horse, hastily swung into the saddle. Raskall, rising on one elbow, leaned toward him.

"You'll send somebody back for me?" he asked.

"I said I would."

"But suppose something goes wrong," said Raskall. "Gawd—if I don't have a doctor in a few hours gangrene will set in and—" He broke off, shuddering.

"That's the risk you'll have to take," Raven told him. "This is the showdown today between me and Goodwin. I'm going to wind it up and one of us will be dead before long. But you've got my word that I'll do what I can. There are a couple of hill ranches between here and Goodwin's place. I'll try to stop off and send somebody up for you."

With that promise Raven dug his heels into the horse's flanks and went galloping off in a cloud of dust.

He pushed Raskall's big bay at a hard gait for several miles, keeping a sharp wather eye out for signs of other riders. He had the evidence to clear his name now and he meant to strike back against Goodwin while the advantage of surprise was on his side.

IT OCCURRED to Raven as he raced up and down the rugged, rolling hills that he might find Goodwin's full crew at the Big G ranch. In that case, he would have to bide his time until darkness or until he caught Goodwin and Harry Dale alone.

Topping the crest of a long, rocky grade he heard a dim shout far off to his right. Twisting in the saddle, he noticed a band of horsemen on a ridge a mile or two away. It was the posse! They had spotted him.

Immediately, the leader lifted his hand, waved it forward in an imperious gesture and sent the posse hurrying forward at a sharp tangent. Raven removed his gun from the holster, fired once in the air in a gesture of decision. Then he returned the gun to leather and sent the bay speeding on.

The bay was well rested and responded admirably. The hills and

draws rushed by in a blur of gray and brown and green. Summer's sun baked horse and rider. Perspiration oozed out of Raven's pores and the gray, drifting alkali settled on his moist skin, putting a thin layer of dust, that was almost like a mask, upon his cheeks.

He gained on the posse, for once when he looked back from the top of a knoll he saw the leaders far behind in a narrow valley. He made no effort to hide his trail. He just rode steadily, getting all the speed he possibly could out of the bay.

Four miles from the Big G he came within sight of one of the small hill ranches. He detoured from the trail slightly to approach a man digging a small irrigation trench near a patch of vegetables. The man saw him, recognized him and started running toward his cabin.

Raven called out to him to halt. The man stopped. He was unarmed and had evidently been trying to reach the cabin to secure a rifle to protect himself.

Raven hastily told the rancher about Raskall and his need for a doctor, requested that the man send someone into town for Doctor Stack and, mean-while, to ride to the abandoned mine to give whatever temporary aid was possible under the circumstances.

The posse picked up no appreciable ground during the delay. Raven estimated that Zents and his men were still four or five miles in back of him. And now he realized with a little twinge of doubt that if Goodwin and Dale were not alone at the ranch he would have a difficult time keeping clear of the posse until he had settled things himself.

However, the risk had to be run. And he would have it no other way, for the showdown rested between Goodwin and Dale and himself. It was part of the frontier code that a man settled his own affairs, fought his own fights.

Fifteen minutes later he halted the bay after a long, hard run on top of a low ridge that overlooked the front yard of the Big G outfit. He had planned to spend a minute or two,

working along the ridge to see if any of Goodwin's crew were about. But the sight of two girls and two men emerging from the ranch-house changed all that.

He recognized Josh Goodwin's bulky form at once. He knew Sue, too, and the girl with her was obviously Anne Maynard. But what made him throw all caution to the winds was the fact that Goodwin and Dale had their guns in their hands and were obviously driving the two girls toward some saddled horses.

Raven didn't know—in fact, he couldn't imagine—what Sue was doing at the Big G ranch. But the scene down there spelled trouble; he clapped his heels to the bay's flanks and sent the animal charging headlong down the slope.

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HE moment the bay's hoofs struck the hard, flinty ground at the bottom of the grade the sound of Raven's wild rush was carried to Goodwin and Dale. They halted, spun around staring in amazement at the mounted figure hurtling toward them.

Recognition was slow in coming. When it did come, consternation was mingled with it. During the brief interval that they stood rooted in the dust in mute surprise. Sue and Anne broke away from him.

Dale whirled, startled after them. But Goodwin's yell brought him back. "Let them go! That's Bill Raven. Burn him down!"

Their six-guns swung into line. The crash of exploding shells drummed in the warm afternoon air.

Raven heard the flat crash of the shots, heard the sibilant whine of slugs zipping past him. He never slackened his pace. He kept the bay headed straight for the two men in the yard. He saw Sue and Anne turn to watch the battle and heard one of

them scream in piercing fashion. Afterward, he forgot everything but savagery of the moment.

Bent low in the saddle, eyes slit-ed, his right hand wrapped around the stock of his Colt, he rode recklessly on. Goodwin and Dale were crouched in the yard, driving shot after shot at him.

Suddenly his own gun swept up and roared. Once, twice the recoil of the explosion sent the weapon kicking back against his wrist. He saw Harry Dale's features contort in a horrible grimace as he staggered back under the impact of heavy slugs that drummed into his chest. His right arm dropped. The gun slipped from his fingers. Then his body slowly unhinged at the hips and the knees and he collapsed in a lifeless heap.

Josh Goodwin flung one more wild shot at Raven's racing shape, then darted toward the house. The bullet struck the bay. Raven felt the animal tremble, its stride faltered and he freed his feet from the stirrups, ready to leap.

Raven fired at Goodwin's retreating figure and missed. Another bullet splintered the door frame as the Big G ranch owner plunged inside the house.

Raven kicked the bay again and again in the flanks. He was in the grip of a destructive fury he could not control. It goaded him into reckless measures.

One of the planks splintered as the bay smashed upward, crossed the veranda. Right on through the open doorway Raven sent the animal. He ducked low as the animal clattered into the hall.

Blinking his eyes in the sudden dimness, Raven blindly swerved the bay toward the right. It was from that direction that the shot had come. Once more the bay reeled and nearly went down as Goodwin's gun spoke a second time. Then Raven leaned out of the saddle, centered his sights on the flash of Goodwin's shot and let drive with two bullets.

Goodwin was at the far corner of the wide living room when Raven's second slug nailed him high in the chest. He sagged against the wall,

fighting to lift his Colt for an answering shot. Rage and pain raked him with cruel spurs. His teeth showed in a snarl. His eyes were wild and frenzied.

He had the gun hip-high when the bay, driven by Raven, pounded across the floor, slammed against the center table, upending it and careened into him. The animal's great shoulders punched Goodwin against the wall with a force that shook the room.

Then, without warning, all the strength seeped out of the bay. His front legs buckled. Raven got to his out of the oxbows, sailed over the animal's head as the bay went down and rolled half over on Goodwin.

SHAKEN and jolted though he was, Raven scrambled to his feet, gun canting upward. Watching Goodwin like a hawk. One glance at the Big G ranch owner informed him that his vigilance was not necessary; Goodwin was unconscious.

Going close to the rancher, he bent down to examine him. His eyes were closed, his face was ashen. Blood soaked the front of his shirt high up on the chest and kept spreading in a wider and wider area. His breathing was faint and labored.

Raven leaped to his feet, gun in hand, when boots sounded along the hall. Then he relaxed as Sue and Anne stormed into the room.

"Oh, Bill!" Sue cried. "I—I didn't know.... I—I was afraid."

She rushed into his arms, buried her head against his shirt.

"It's all right, honey," he said. He held her close for a moment, then pushed her gently away and stared down at her. "What made you come here to the Big G?" he demanded.

Sue clung to him. Her body was warm and pliant in his arms.

"I had to come—it was the only way I knew to help you," she murmured, the words springing breathlessly from her lips. "The hours you've been in the hills dodging the posse have been torture to me." She clutched at his shirt with clawing hands, raised her face to him. "Bill, can you ever forgive me for

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Sam Teel was ready and waiting for the lynch mob.

Election Ticket For Hell

by PAUL CLANE

"I've never sold out, yet!" Sheriff Teel said fiercely, and knew he was telling the truth. But not the whole truth — because he'd never defied Lennon, yet, and he knew that backing up Lennon was little better than taking pay from him. And now an innocent man's life was demanded!

SAM TEEL, sheriff of Camino, was worried. He sat wearily at his desk, one hand rubbing his weathered face, and stared at the men lined in front of him.

"For the tenth time, Jed," he said, "I put Jose Perran in jail to protect him."

Jed Culver shook his head. "Sam,

I seen you as sheriff for a long time. Mostly you leaned a little toward the Cross T, them being the biggest outfit; but never before did you show the streak you're displayin' now."

Teel stood up, his face flushed. Squat, bandy-legged, he glared at the ranchers. "I got a legitimate complaint from Lennon that one of his men was murdered. He named Jose as the killer; it's my job to do what I did."

"Lennon," Culver sneered "Sure, Lennon. Big boss of the Cross T. And who is Lennon, Sam?" The old man juttied out a whiskery jaw. "I'll tell you. He's manager for that Eastern combine that bought out the Cross T; he's headman of an outfit having more election votes than the rest of us put together. Maybe that had something to do with it."

Before Sam could get halfway around the desk to take an angry swipe at Culver, Tim Brophy stepped between them. "Easy, both of you." Brophy was younger than the other ranchers in the room, but less hot tempered. "Look at it this way," he told Sam quietly. "You know Jose as well as we do; he wouldn't kill a man—not even a Cross T man like Buck Kimmer."

Sam sat down. "I know," he admitted. "But a complaint is a complaint; I got to act on it."

Jed Culver started for the door, the others trailing him. "We've had our say, Sam, but if anything happens to Jose so he don't get a fair trial—things'll pop."

Sam Teel watched them stomp to the dusty street, hot under the summer Arizona sun. His tired grey eyes watched as they mounted their horses and rode south toward their border ranches. He got up and went back into the dimness of the cell block. Jose Perran was sitting listlessly on his bunk in the first of the two cells.

Sam looked quietly in at the man. Since arrest Jose had taken refuge in the silence given him by his half-Indian mother. He didn't break it now.

"I want the straight of it, Jose," Sam said.

Jose turned, let his dark eyes rest fleetingly on Sam, and lowered his head again. Anger crowded in on Sam but he pushed it away. Jose was stunned, hurt by this man who had always been his friend.

He clumped out, rage mounting again, but at Max Lennon this time. Sam couldn't forget the insolent way the big, dude-dressed ranch manager had come in. Lennon figured he controlled Camino with his power. Sam hated to think how close to being true that was.

"Teel," Lennon had said, "Jose Perran murdered Buck Kimmer today." Like that, flat out, Sam remembered. Then came his orders. Sam had done as Lennon told him, partly because of that and partly because he knew Cross T was capable, under Nix Barden, their renegade foreman, of lynching Jose unless he got there first.

Jose had not resisted, saying only, "I no kill Buck Kimmer, Senor Sam." His wife, Manuella, cried, but did nothing else. And then, as soon as he was back to the town, Jed Culver and his delegation had come in.

TEEL CURSED fervently. Why hadn't he come out like he wanted to and ask Lennon if maybe the fact that Jose wouldn't sell to the Cross T had something to do with it. Sam knew the whole story behind Lennon's hatred for Jose and for the other five small border ranchers as well.

Between them they owned the hill grazing land that neighbored the burned-up flats of the Cross T. Rumors had gone out ever since Lennon, coming in two years ago, had tried to buy them out to get that valuable graze. Rumors of increased rustling, fence cutting, missing beef in the spring and fall roundup counts. Nothing strong enough for a man to fight—until now.

Jose, Sam knew, had the land with the never failing spring, the big waterhole that had yet to go dry. And he was generous with his water when the other men were faced with drought. Lennon, failing to buy out the ranchers, had gone after Jose. It was plain, even to Sam, that if Len-

non got that water he could thirst the others into selling.

"Why didn't I ask him?" Sam said aloud. He slumped into his chair. What Jed Culver had said began to bore into him. Lennon controlled more votes than the rest of the country put together. "I never sold out yet," Sam whispered fiercely to himself. But, he wondered, could he name one time that he had defied Lennon?

He got up again, restlessly, when Ted Peters, his deputy, came half-running down the street and into the office. His red face was sweat stained, his usually mild blue eyes angry. "Sam, Nix Barden and the Cross T done it this time!"

Sam pushed him into a chair and waited while Peters got his breath. Then the deputy hurried on to say, "They went to Perrans's place and got Manuella and the two kids. She got scared and hauled out her rifle. They roped her and the kids into a wagon like they was beef and then burned the house and barns."

Sam stared in bewilderment. "Why?"

"They said they was holding her as hostage—to see the trial come out right."

Sam could feel his rage at Lennon boil to a tremendous pressure inside him. Barden didn't act except on Lennon's orders, and Lennon was wise enough to see how the public would feel about Jose's arrest. So now this—to make sure Cross T got what it wanted.

Sam said quietly, "You guard the place, Ted." He inspected his sixgun, went out to the shade behind the jail where his paint pony was tethered, and mounted. He felt very old, older than his fifty years, but as he rode into the heat his anger turned to a cold, hard core that gave him strength.

THE CROSS T lay on the flats, southwest of Camino. From far off Sam could see the collection of buildings that housed the big crew who worked Cross T beef the year around. He passed cattle chewing on the burned range grass and shook his head. Lennon had overstocked; now

his only hope of pulling out was to get that summer graze in the hills. Sam turned his eyes southward. In the still, hot air, he could see a plume of black smoke still rising. The remains of Jose Perran's ranch, smoke and ashes.

Sam spurred the paint faster and he was lathered when they rode into the Cross T yard. Half a dozen men were lounging by the bunkhouse, seemingly at ease, but their eyes and buckled-on guns showing the true reason for their being there.

Sam cantered to the steps leading to the big ranch house. Nix Barden swaggered out and looked down from the veranda. His broad six feet was topped by a small head. His black eyes and hair were accentuated by a livid scar running the length of his cheek. Sam thought, "Three trips to the Yuma pen didn't tame Nix much." and without moving from his horse, he said, "I want Jose's wife and kids."

"Take 'em," Nix said. He laughed softly.

Sam drew a deep breath, fighting down the hot rage. He needed control now, not shaking anger. "And every man that kidnapped her and burned that house goes to jail!"

Nix laughed again. "Take us, sheriff."

Suddenly Sam knew. The law was nothing; Cross T held the cards and they could play them any time they wanted to. What was a two-man law force against a crew that included a dozen hand-picked gunmen? It had lain in his mind unacknowledged for some time, but this was the first time Cross T had ever come right out with it.

Sam reached down and pulled his gun and laid it, muzzle toward Nix, on his leg. "I want Manuella and the kids. The rest of you I'll take care of later." His voice was steady, belying the rising anger inside.

Nix said, "There's five guns pointing your way, sheriff. You better ride for town."

"Five bullets travel no faster than the one I got marked for you," Sam said without raising his voice.

There was silence. Neither man

moved. Sam knew that if Nix acted at all he would shoot, and if he moved the men behind him would fire. Either way Sam was sure to go out. But so was Nix Barden.

The door swung open and Lennon came out. Sam's jaw tightened to hold himself in as he saw the smooth face on the thick-bellied body. Lennon wore California pants and a silk shirt; he wiped his hands with a fancy handkerchief to match the shirt.

"Let her go, Nix," he said. He smiled thinly at Sam. "The boys got a little hasty, sheriff; after all, Buck Kimmer was one of us."

Sam said nothing; he waited.

Lennon coughed. "Nix, order that woman and her kids brought out. Get them a wagon."

Sam sat rigidly while a spring-wagon and team were brought around and then Manuella, her lovely, still young face tear streaked, carried the two babies to it. She had been in the house and when she brushed past Nix Barden she drew her skirt aside.

Sam looked at her briefly. "Start for town, Manuella."

He waited until she was dwindling in the distance, hidden by a cloud of summer dust. Then he said, "This isn't the end, Lennon. Your men burned Jose out. I'm coming back after them."

Lennon turned and went inside. Nix Barden snickered. "Bring yourself a slab, sheriff. You'll be ridin' out on it."

Sam wheeled his paint and rode to catch Manuella Perran.

HE ESCORTED her in silence to the jailhouse and gave her a brief moment to see Jose. He understood their quick Spanish talk but turned aside from it. Manuella was telling Jose the full story and adding assurances of her own. Once he heard her say, "The brave Senor Sam," and he wondered at the warmth it spread through him.

Finally he called her away. "Take the kids and go to your sister's up north," he said. "You can make the ten miles by dark. Then stay there."

"I stay here, Senor Sam! I fight

for Jose. They will lynch him. I know this; I hear them talk."

"Jose can be helped a lot better if you stay where you're safe," Sam answered.

From the cell Jose's voice came sharply, "Manuella, do as Senor Sam, he tells you!"

She nodded and said softly, "Senor Sam, we trust you to do what is the right thing."

Sam said jerkily, "Get going or you'll be caught by the dark." He turned away and strode to Jose's cell. "Now," he said, "I want the true story, Jose. And I want it fast."

Jose's voice was soft and he smiled at Sam. "You do much for us, Senor Sam. *Gracias.*"

Sam stirred impatiently. Jose began talking, slowly at first and then more rapidly. "All the time Senor Lennon he come and he buy my rancho. I say, 'No, Senor Lennon. It is mine and my father's and his father's. I do not sell.' He is very angry. And last week Buck Kimmer he come when I am out working and he say, 'Jose, you get across the border and hide out. They are after you this time.' Senor Buck, he is not a bad man. He is sick of the way the Cross T, she is acting. He warn me.

"But I think, 'What can they do? The law she protect me.' Then today Buck Kimmer he ride up to me and say the same thing again. I am talking to his face and the bullet shoots him in the back. How can I shoot a man when I am in the front and he is shot in the back?"

"All right," Sam said. "You hang on, Jose. I doubt if any court would even hold you."

Turning away, he thought, *If a court gets a chance at him.* Manuella's words were disturbing and he took them apart, trying to see Lennon's plan while he waited, watching dark fall. Ted Peters had been sent to supper and when he came back Sam knew what he had to do.

"Keep your ears sharp, Ted," he said. "Send two fast shots if there's trouble."

IT HAD been a long day and darkness was thick when Sam stepped

to the street. The night was nearly as hot as the day but now, at nine o'clock, a thin breeze was cooling off the dusty town. He stopped for a routine look at the Camino Saloon. What he saw stopped him. It was empty but for the barkeep and two dealers, both leaning lazily against the bar.

"Where's everybody?" Sam asked. Where were the loafers, the town bums the range drifters who usually hung around a saloon at night.

"Out," a dealer told him. "Cross T came in and got 'em."

Uneasily Sam walked on to the Oneshot. Inside the doors he stopped. This scene was the same, only there were four dealers here and Max Lennon at the bar drinking a beer.

"Cross T get 'em?" Sam snapped at the bartender.

There was an imperceptible nod and Sam strode up to Max Lennon. Lennon returned his look unwinkingly. "You go to a lot of trouble for a Mex, sheriff."

Sam reached out a big hand and took a handful of silk shirt-front. "Lennon, Jose's family lived on that ranch before yours ever came out of their coyote caves. And they'll be here long after you rot in Yuma."

There was no sound but the breathing of the watching dealers. This was a sight for a man to remember. Sam Teel was coming out hard against the big boss.

Lennon's eyes narrowed and his hand dipped toward the pearl-handled gun he affected. "Those are foolish words from a man elected by the people, Teel," he said slowly.

Sam said, "I'll take my chances with the people, Lennon." He dropped the man's shirtfront and wiped his hand on his jeans. "And you'll take the rest of the night in the jailhouse."

"On what charge?" Lennon's hand rested on his gun butt, lightly.

"Kidnapping, and burning Jose's ranch," Sam said. "Get moving."

Lennon's hand tightened. Sam shot out his left, palm open, hitting Lennon's wrist. His right hand crashed into Lennon's throat, sending the big man against the bar, knees buck-

ling. Sam drew his gun and stood quietly. Lennon, gasping, straightened slowly and moved toward the door, his hands to his Adam's apple.

Sam turned, looking at the men still watching. "One of you run to the hotel and order me and Jose up some grub, will you?" He marched Lennon out and down the street. The few there stood back, staring as Sam Teel prodded Max Lennon, Cross T manager, to the adobe jailhouse.

Lennon found his breath after Sam shut the door of the second cell on him. He started to curse, but Sam cut him off short. "I know it ain't a healthy place, Lennon, what with Nix maybe comin' down for a lynch party. But you got a ringside seat to see orders are carried out."

"My first," Lennon said viciously, "is to have you strung, Teel; no cowtown sheriff tells the Cross T what to do!"

"One did," Sam said softly, and left. In the office he took Ted Peters aside and whispered to him. "Ride fast for Jed Culver and the other ranchers. Tell 'em Cross T cleaned out the saloons for a lynch party."

TED PETERS went out quickly. Sam sat down, wondering how long before Nix Barden swarmed in. Midnight, he figured, when watchfulness would be at an ebb; no sooner because it took time to get a band of men, around thirty loafers besides his own hands, schooled in how to attack a thick-walled adobe jailhouse.

He might have time, he thought, and rolled a cigaret, smoking it idly while he waited. His supper came and he gave Jose his tray first. Then he got a six gun from the rack in the office, added a rifle and handed them through the bars. He unlocked the cell door.

"Wait until I give orders, Jose." He went back to his grub, wondering with amusement how many sheriffs gave suspected murderers guns in their cells.

Lennon's cell was silent. The whole world seemed to have crawled into quiet. Outside Sam could hear none of the usual night sounds. The breeze had died and the warm night air

pressed against the jailhouse, closing

Then Sam heard them. Muffled, slow, but the unmistakable sound of many horses coming down the dusty road. Too many to be Ted Peters back with Jed Culver and the other men. Too many for anything but Nix Barden and his lynch army.

Sam got up and pulled a rifle from the rack. His chances, he knew, were one in a hundred—if that good. If he lost there was only one answer, six feet of dirt out in boothill. He moved quietly to the door, not lighting the lamp. He could see them against the night now, fifty men anyway, splitting at the edge of town and swinging to circle the jailhouse. He patted the rifle.

"Ready, Jose," he called.

And then they were coming in fast. A thin moon rising from behind a distant hill showed him the tall form of Nix Barden. He was in the lead, with ten men directly behind him. Sam dropped a bullet into the dust before his horse.

"No closer, Barden!" He could have shot, he knew, and picked the man off easily. But the law wasn't a killer yet. A man had to have his chance first.

Nix Barden cursed and reined in. From behind him a spot of flame burst in the night and the bullet splintered the door jamb by Sam's head. He ducked back.

"Lennon's in here," Sam shouted.

Nix Barden's voice carried loudly. "To hell with Lennon. I'm running the Cross T now!"

Sam slammed the door. "Hear that, Lennon? They've turned on you."

There was no answer. Then gunfire came from behind the jailhouse. Sam called, "Let 'er loose, Jose," and swung his attention to the men in front. He used the small window to the left of the door, rifle ready. When Barden raised a hand a volley spat against the fourteen-inch adobe walls. Sam fired back, but men were milling now, moving in the darkness, too fast to let the thin moonlight outline them.

Sam kept shooting, slowly, forcing them away from the doors, hoping Jose's shots from the rear were effec-

tive. Only the front and back of the jailhouse had openings, and it would take dynamite to break through the walls.

Sam heard a man scream as a shot told. He fired at the flashes of the men attacking. It was like Bull Run, he thought, remembering back. The steady shooting, and now the screaming as one man or another went down.

Then he heard Lennon's voice raise in a bellow. "Get back! Ride out, you fools!" And he laughed, knowing Lennon's fear was eating at his insides. Once Lennon yelled, "Give me a gun, for Gawd's sake, Teel."

Sam called, "Take what you started, Lennon," and downed a man with a swift shot.

HE FELT exultation but he knew his luck couldn't last; there were too many and already they had narrowed the circle to ten feet. A good rush and they'd be in before he could get many of them. And once they found an opening he knew it was over.

From the rear Jose's firing was steady and from the outside sounds Sam had a hunch it was deadly as well. He emptied his rifle and his pockets of shells. Dropping the rifle he drew his six gun and swung it over the window sill.

Nix Barden yelled, "Take that door," and a rush of men sprang out of darkness, horses' hoofs thundering as they swarmed to the veranda. Sam fired twice, and heard lead hit flesh. Then he backed off to his desk. He heard the door creak as men rammed it. He waited, his hands on two extra guns on the floor by the desk.

The door gave and they streamed in. Sam's hands raised and the two six guns spit lead and fire. The men answered, bullets ripping at the desk top, smashing into the lamp. Sam dropped, firing from under the desk. A hot lance burned through his leg. Another spun him as it smashed his left arm. The gun in that hand thudded to the floor. He kept shooting.

A new sound came from behind the attackers, a booming as of rifles in the pain blazing across his eyes, Sam

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MAD DOG MEAN

By Allan K. Echols

A FACT ARTICLE

WHEN A rancher or farmer uses the word "mad dog," to describe a particularly vicious person, he has good reason for using that figure of speech, because a mad dog can bring him plenty of trouble in the form of sickness and death to both his family and his livestock, and hence is a thing to be dreaded.

A mad dog is a dog in the second stage of rabies, and it is during this stage that he is most dangerous to humans, in fact, to any person or animal crossing his path. He not only spreads this deadly disease among his own kind, but also infects humans, horses, cattle, wolves, foxes, squirrels, rabbits—any living animal. Even skunks!

Rabies which is pronounced "ray-bees" and which is sometimes called hydrophobia, is a disease caused by a virus, which is a germ, so small that it cannot be isolated under the microscope. The virus spreads through the animal's system; it is in his saliva when he bites a victim and is thus transmitted from one carrier to another. The disease is fatal after a certain stage; the virus spreads from the wound through the nervous system to the brain, causing convulsions, paralysis and finally death. Vaccination can prevent it, but nothing will cure it.

There are two types of rabies, the more spectacular, and hence better known, being the *furious rabies*. The

dog or fox or other animal seems to be normal during the early stages of the disease, but suddenly he will become irritated, and the least excitement will set him off on his mad rampage, the phase of his career which brings such fear of the "mad dog," and during which he spreads his death and destruction.

During this frenzied period the dog will run about wildly, roaming far from his natural haunt, his eyes glazed, his tongue dripping his poisonous saliva, and biting at anything and everything in its insane fury. He will even bite at sticks, rocks, old rags, and even eat the. It is during this period that the dog will infect every living thing it bites, including the children it had formerly loved, the sheep or cows it tended, and strange, not to mention any wolf or fox it can corner, any rabbit, skunk or possum. It spreads its disease wherever it goes, and it roams far.

The dog will roam two or three days. Perhaps before the third and last stage of the disease sets in. Paralysis gradually replaces its insanity. Its legs begin to wobble as it walks, it can no longer run, and its jaw drops open. Finally it can no longer walk, and it lies down helpless to move until it dies.

But it may have spread enough virus to cause a reign of terror along its path. On a ranch the animal might bite dozens of beef cattle, and numbers of work horses. These valuable animals take the disease and die, and that costs the stockman money. He is lucky if the dog did not get the chance to bite him.

Cattle, horses and mules are doomed when they are bitten by the mad dog. While they do not run amuck as the dog does, they become highly nervous and aggressive. They paw the ground like an angry bull, butt other animals—and occasionally, but not often, they will bite others of their kind. They quit eating, bellow angrily until the second stage is past, then go into the paralysis.

THE OTHER type of rabies is just as deadly, but in a different

way. It is known as *dumb rabies*, and its very symptoms constitute one of its dangers to owners of dogs. Where the *furious rabies*-infected animals run wild, and its actions warn of its danger, the animal with dumb rabies acts entirely different. He sleeps a great deal, and becomes sad and despondent. He wants to get off by himself and hide, as though he were ashamed of himself. His throat gets sore and his voice becomes hoarse. His jaws won't work, and his legs are weak. He is a pitiable animal, and you are sorry for him.

You try to examine his sore throat; you try to feed him, perhaps to clear away the dripping saliva. He is not vicious, and he does not try to bite you. But his very saliva is teeming with the deadly virus, and in trying to save him—not knowing that this is impossible, you can get some of the virus into a tiny cut or abrasion, or scratch, made by his helpless paws—and then *you* have a case of rabies.

In the cattle country, then, rabies can spread fast from one infected animal running amuck and poisoning every animal he comes into contact with during two or three days, and it can cost the rancher a great deal in lost livestock. There is no wonder that he is ready to destroy all stray dogs on sight, especially in the hot months. They are a constant menace to his life and property.

He also recognizes the danger from rabid foxes, but he seldom comes into contact with them, for the fox steers clear of inhabited sections until the second stage of the disease, when, like the dog, he begins to wander, infecting every living thing he comes into contact with; having no longer

any fear of humans or their habitations, he is even more dangerous than the dog. For he will infect his own kind, and his victims will stay in concealment until they are driven mad, and rush down into the inhabited areas to get in their fatal bites.

So, when a western man says another is "mad-dog mean," he means he is a pretty dangerous character, in deed.

* * *

(Editorial Note: While the above is accurate enough, attention should be called to the specific aspect in which the "mad" dog can be considered "mad". An animal in this state of rabies is better described as "in a frenzy", for the dog, fox, etc., is very sick, in great pain, and *dying of thirst*. "Hydrophobia" literally means "fear of water", and the action of the disease is such that the sufferer's throat muscles undergo spasms which make it impossible for the victim to swallow any fluid. The "mad dog" will bite anything, animate or inanimate, in a desperate attempt to get some moisture into its throat and relieve the thirst; it is this desperation which makes the rabies-suffering animal so dangerous.

(Generally speaking, the incubation period for rabies is a week to ten days, and a person exposed—either through having been bitten, or from the saliva of the victim falling upon possible abrasions in the skin—needs most of all to *keep his head and get medical aid*. To say that fear of rabies has killed more people than the disease itself would be to exaggerate, perhaps, but not to give a false impression. RWL)





TRUE FACT FEATURE

Fat Mr. Ferguson

by

REX WHITECHURCH

In 1870, a woman named Catherine Moody opened a millinery store in Kansas City, Kansas — then the gateway to the west. In 1880, the river town heard for the first time of Big George Ferguson . . .

IT WAS strange enough to see a man like Ferguson selling womens' hats, but to augment this rather singular situation an event transpired which was far more spectacular. Fat George Ferguson killed one of the town's most colorful characters and in such a way as to serve as an introduction to the corpulent salesman of my lady's headgear.

Fat George simply beat the late but not lamented Iron Fist Mike Hudson to the draw; when the gunsmoke cleared away, the loser lay prone in a pool of murky water. Smack between the iron man's small eyes was Mister Ferguson's indelible brand, scarlet and glowing.

Hooked to the other oddities was the smooth and deep-breathing fat man's excellent marksmanship and the speed of his draw. In short his abilities as a gunfighter were uncannily to behold.

Fat George Ferguson, accompanied by the milliner, had been crossing the street from the Planter's Hotel when a group of men spied them and the sample of feminine finery which Fat George clutched in one pudgy fist with gay little ribbons fluttering from it. A loud guffaw of laughter offended the god of peace and Iron Fist, whose voice was by far the

loudest and most insolent, cried out: "Stand back, lady—I'm goin' to shoot your friend's derby stem-winding. Then he'll have to wear that bonnet in his hand. The sun will lend me lots of help—!"

Words and action ran together; the indomitable Iron Fist Hudson cleared leather sharply and the silver shape of his bunglesome weapon (not bunglesome in his hand, however) cast off silver glints when the sun struck it. The milliner screamed and is said to have taken for cover. Whether it was ladylike for a woman to desert a companion in such a precarious position has never been answered by the correct exponents of etiquette. Nonetheless that's what happened. From behind a wooden post which supported a heavy wooden awning, in complete safety, the terrified milliner peered out into the dusty street.

"Come on, you big lummox," she yelled. "He means what he says—!"

WHAT THE comely Miss Moody saw the moment she looked back was described by her in this fashion:

"Mr. Ferguson stood there facing that horrid man who had whiskers all over his face. The latter stood just a few feet off the sidewalk and about

BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

twenty five feet from Mister Ferguson. The others had started running; magically, a gun had appeared in the salesman's hand. I don't know where he got it. Ferguson wore a long black coat, called a Prince Albert then, and a spotless white vest. The big fellow was slightly bent over and smoke curled from the barrel of his weapon.

"The man known as Iron Mike Hudson had not yet lifted his gun in a line with his target, but he had begun to raise the firearm. He must have been startled when Mr. Ferguson produced his revolver.

"Before his antagonist succeeded in lining his weapon on the huge perspiring target, a pistol cracked angrily in the scorching sun. A little wisp of blue smoke rose lazily from Mr. Ferguson's little pistol and Iron Mike Hudson's big firearm went off in the air.

"It seemed, from where I stood, that Iron Mike was engaged in demonstrating a new dance step, one I had never seen before. He lifted his right foot off the ground, then put it down; and he lifted his left foot in the same manner. Then he gave a quick jump, right straight up off the balls of his feet, and when he came down his legs weren't under him. He just slapped down in the thick brown dust, and began to grovel around in it like a hog rooting up dirt.

"Mr. Ferguson waited a second or two, then laughed and said, 'Would any more of you gentlemen like to try the same thing? If so I am here to accommodate you. That man didn't realize that anyone firing at a target as small as the derby on my head, might miss the target entirely, with a gun as big as that-one. If he had missed, he might've hit me smack between the eyes. In that event I probably wouldn't be here now. I am quite sure your friend is dead; you needn't trouble to look. I am sorry, of course, but I acted completely in self defense.'

"Hesitating, he waited a moment longer, and when nobody offered further resistance to his peace and happiness, Mr. Ferguson calmly walked over to the corpse of Iron

(Continued on Page 88)

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**by Frank
Kane**

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(Continued From Page 86)

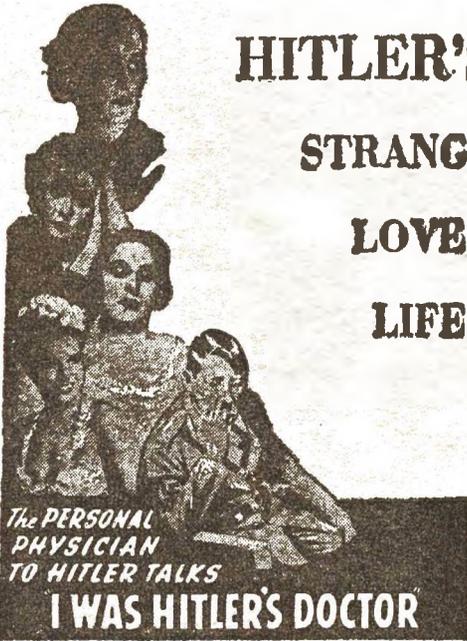
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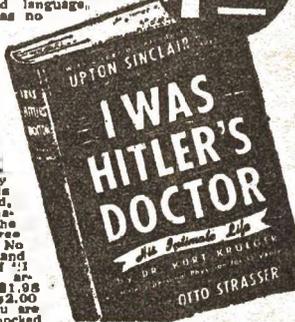
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Fist Hudson and tenderly deposited the pink flowered chapeau upon the back of its head. The body was lying on its face with the nose shoved into the powder of the dust. I could see a little mischevious grin around Mr. Ferguson's pudgy lips as he straightened up and faced Iron Mike's companions.

"Please see that the hat is added to his shroud because I am reasonably sure he will look good in it. It is one of our best numbers.

"Then Mr. Ferguson removed his own hat and stood there a moment longer in the blazing sun. I saw his bald head shining like a reflector on a bracket lamp and almost wept for him. It marked the first time I'd seen him without his hat on his head."

BIG GEORGE Ferguson was a former river gambler and ex-United States marshal of Kansas. He was deceiving in appearance, being quite soft and overweight. He wasn't very tall and his stomach protruded despite his well-tailored and expensive grey suit. It was strange that he turned to selling womens' hats, but he had gone to St. Louis, after retiring as marshal and had found an old friend who had once ran a gambling boat with him. This astute gentleman was engaged in the wholesale millinery business.

Enjoying the work, Big George had traveled up and down the Missouri and over the lonesome trails of the west.

Iron Mike Hudson wasn't Ferguson's first victim. He had killed four men who had tried to avoid arrest at Dodge City, being armed with Colts. Spraddle-legged in a side street near a livery-stable, Big George had shot it out with them, seeing them perish in his withering gunfire. Fat George was a fearless officer.

It is said in an old Kansas newspaper that Fat George Ferguson was very sensitive about his bald pate. He seldom removed his pearl grey derby in public and he rarely invited his customers out to dine, especially if they were women—and most of them were. But the corpulent hat salesman was well liked.

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FAT MR. FERGUSON

Like Miss Moody, his patrons seldom saw him without his derby firmly rooted on his head. He was released from custody after shooting Iron Mike and soon after disappeared. One of his last remarks was, "Now just how did that Jasper know I was bald-headed?" He paused, winked shyly and added, "I didn't want Miss Moody to see that I was bald: I'd kind of set my cap for her."

The sheriff said, "But you took your hat off of your own accord, with her looking on."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Fat George Ferguson, "but I always remove my headpiece in presence of the dead."

Big George, a Harvard graduate, had meant to follow a law career. But it had been so free of excitement he'd discarded the idea. During the time he was Assistant U.S. Marshal crooks stayed out of sight. No man who was ever in this capacity in Kansas has the same record of making only four arrests in two years.

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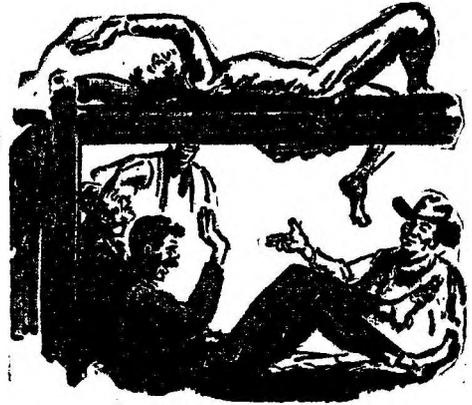
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WHIZZERS

What's In A Name?

By Frank Ball

TRUE FACT FEATURE

ALTHOUGH Two Dot, Montana, is on a railroad, the Milwaukee, it has no reference to the letter "I" (two dots) in the Morse telegrapher's code. For long before the railroad threaded its way through the ranch of G. R. Wilson, the famous two-dot brand was found on hundreds of Wilson's cattle. Old "Two-Dot" Wilson he was known as in them days. And when the railroad came through in the Gay 'Nineties, the station on the ranch was properly named Two Dot.

A name that has been romantically portrayed in history is that of Langtry, Texas. The colorful story has it that the picturesque character, Roy Bean, established himself here in the 1880's, and became "law west of the Pecos."

In fancy, for he had never seen her, he idolized the celebrated English actress, Lilly Langtry, and named "his" town after her. Texans admit that it is a good story. But the files of the Southern Pacific railroad strongly indicated that the town was named for a railroad contractor by the name of Langtry who had charge of the construction of the railroad through here.

Wauneta, Nebraska, is named for the song, Juanita, believe it or not. When the citizens decided on Juanita, they found that there was already a Juanita, too great a similarity. Un-

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

daunted, the fell upon the phonetic spelling of the name.

Probably no town name has been juggled as had Felida in Clark county, Washington. The first postmaster called it Lake View, but there was already an office of that name. It was then named Powley in honor of an old settler. A government clerk misspelled it Polly. There was already a Sara in the region and settlers objected to Polly. The assistant postmaster then called the new office Thomas in honor of his cat. The ambitious citizens rebelled at this common place name. Not to be defeated, the assistant suggested Felidae, Latin for cat. Someone spelled it Felida in the routine of making it official. Tenino in Thurston county of the same state was named by calling as one word, 1090 (Ten-nine-o), the number of a railroad survey station located here. Alki Point, now a part of Seattle, was first called New York by ambitious settlers. It grew slowly and the Indian word, Alki, meaning "by-and-by," was added. Finally New York was dropped and Point added since it is on a point.

The name of the town, Raton, in New Mexico, is the Spanish word for rat. Wagon Mound in the same state is located near a knoll that is shaped like the top of a prairie schooner. Mesilla was built on a little piece of table land rising above the Rio Grande. The word, mesilla, is Spanish, meaning little table.

About all are familiar with the origin of the name, Tombstone, the Arizona town. A prospector was warned that he would find his tombstone rather than a gold mine when he ventured out among the Apache Indians. He found the deposit and named the town Tombstone that sprang into existence.

Phoenix, Arizona, was built on the site of an ancient city of prehistoric people, thus a city rising from the ashes of a former people. The phoenix, or phenix, was a mythological bird that sacrificed itself upon an altar of fire, rising again from its own ashes.

THE WYOMING town of Ten-sleep was named by the Indians
(Continued On Page 92)

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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 91)

because it was ten days' journey from Fort Laramie and also ten days' journey from Yellowstone Park.

When buffaloes were killed and fell from the rocks into the water at a favorite watering place in Wyoming, they made a chug-like sound. Thus was the place named Chugwater. Whicky Gap in the same state was named through the accident of a contingent of the United States army accidentally overturning a barrel of whiskey here.

An old prospector and his dog, Cuyler Adams and Una, respectively, lend a combination of their names to Cuyuna, Minnesota. In the same order, Itasca is taken from the Latin words, Veritus Caput.

In 1849 two rival communities in Yamhill county, Oregon, were each seeking advantages in regard to a school's location when an amicable settlement was reached. Amity was the name given the school by the first teacher. The post office was established in 1852.

There are many versions of the derivation of the name, Eight-Dollar Mountain, in Josephine county, Oregon. One version has it that a tiny nugget of gold worth \$8.00 was once found on this mountain. Another version is that a man wore out an \$8.00 pair of shoes in walking around it. The distance to be covered is 12 miles and exceedingly rough.

After eighteen years of persistent effort, from 1884 to 1902, people in Jackson county, Oregon succeeded in getting a post office in their neighborhood. And with all logic, it was called Persist. (All things come to him who waits.)

A travelling band of Frenchmen and Indians were facing starvation along a river in the present Clackamas and Marion counties, Oregon, when they came upon a herd of elk. They succeeded in killing several and their women hastily secured the blood of one of the beasts and made it into the famous dish known as blood pudding. After feasting several days, the leaders, upon departing, christened the river, Riviere au Boudin, or Pudding river, by which name it has been known since.

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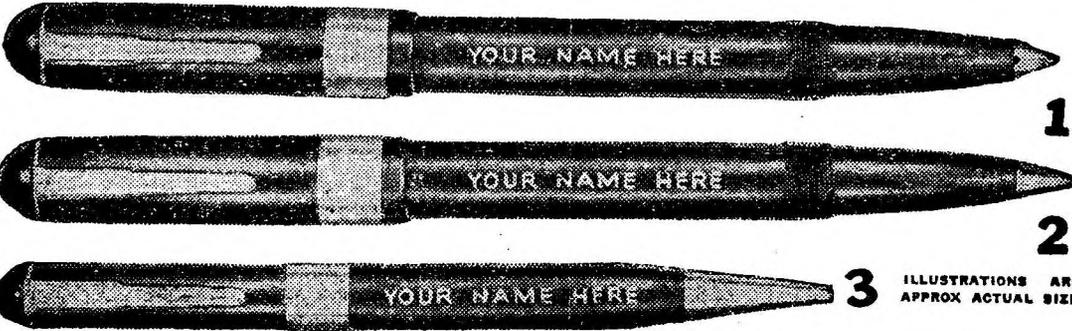
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 82)

continued to fire. And then he realized that the doorway was empty and he was shooting at space.

Outside men screamed and the shooting grew heavier. Sam rose, then slid down as his wounded leg gave out. He fumbled for his gun and loaded it, gritting his teeth as pain and blood welled from his left arm. Then he sat, eyes on the door, waiting for the next rush.

It came, one man alone. The tall dark form of Nix Barden burst in. Sam raised his gun. "Lift 'em, Barden!"

Nix Barden ducked and fired. Sam felt the bullet scorch his cheek; then his finger pulled the trigger, his gun flamed and Nix Barden went backward out the door, a curse bubbling in his throat.

Silence followed, deafening in its stillness. Sam got up, reeling, and limped back to the cell block. Jose stood by the window, gun on the sill between the bars. He turned and showed white teeth in a gleaming smile.

"Senor Culver has come."

"That's it," Sam said wearily.

From the next cell there was silence. Sam eased to it and lighted a match. Lennon quivered in a corner, the cell cot over him. Sam emptied out the cylinders of a gun, except for one bullet, and tossed the weapon through the bars.

"Court'll be startin' in a month, Lennon." He turned away.

He crawled to the desk and pulled himself into his chair. The roar of the gun from the second cell was loud as he sat down. He did not smile, but turned to get a second lamp from the shelf behind him.

Ted Peters, followed by Culver, came in. Sam lighted the lamp and looked at them. "Lennon wouldn't wait for trial," he said. "He took the fast ride out just now."

Culver grinned through the dirt on his face. "When we came in, them saloon bums quit cold. Cross T broke an' ran, too. What was left of 'em, sheriff."

Sam nodded exhaustedly. "Reckon there's enough money in them Cross T pockets to rebuild Jose's ranch?"

ELECTION TICKET FOR HELL

"Reckon," Culver said quietly.

"Leave 'em their horses and duds and start 'em east. Loafers and Cross T both. Town's better rid of 'em." He grinned suddenly. "And every man a vote, Jed."

"There'll be plenty votes left for Sam Teel, come election," Jed Culver answered. But he was talking to silence; Sam Teel had passed out cold.

TWO - BIT RANCHER

(Continued From Page 76)

sending you away the other night? When I think how I tried to hand you over to the sheriff I could go mad."

"It's all right, Sue," he said. "Forget it."

"But I can't forget it," she protested. "I—I even believed, for a while that you had killed Bronson." She ventured a faint smile before going on. "Then, afterwards—after the posse had gone and I was alone I realized what a fool I'd been. And as time went on I nearly went mad worrying about you. Then I thought of how you'd always blamed Goodwin for the trouble and killing in Bradley and it occurred to me if I could find some evidence to back up your beliefs it might help...."

"Good girl," he said, grinning down at her. "But you shouldn't have taken the risk. You might have—"

He broke off to stare over Sue's shoulders at Anne Maynard. They had forgotten about Anne, so engrossed were they in each other. Anne had walked over to Goodwin, had bent down close to him and now rose to face them.

"I reckon he'll live," said Raven, answering Anne's unspoken question. "But he's due to—"

She cut him off. "I know," she said dully. "He played a tough game and lost; now he'll have to pay up."

"Better stay in town for a few days, Anne," he advised.

She nodded and walked to the door. Then she stiffened as the sound of drumming hoofs was borne to them by the wind. "Riders coming," she said. "Might be the posse. Better drift."

"I'm through running," he said.

(Continued On Page 96)

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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 95)

"The time has come to face this thing out with Zents and his posse."

They went out the door. A short distance away, racing across the flats, came seven horsemen. Sun glinted off the silver star pinned to the dusty shirt of the leader.

"Bill, are you sure it's all right?" Sue asked.

"Yeah, I've got a signed confession from Raskall. He names Harry Dale as your dad's killer. Lance David was in on the rustling deal with Raskall. And David killed Bronson in a private fight.

Sue turned to him, her face brightening. "Bill, I—I almost forgot. In Goodwin's desk, before you arrived, I found a tally book with entries showing that Goodwin had paid Dale two hundred dollars for some unnamed service on the day my father was killed as well as on the day your brother, Chuck died."

"Have you got that book?"

"No Goodwin took it away from me. He put it in his coat pocket."

"Let it go," he said. "We'll tell Zents to look for it; that gives us all the evidence we need."

"Tell me about yourself," Sue begged. "The chase in the hills."

Raven gestured to the approaching riders. "That can wait. We'll have plenty of time to talk and I've lots of things to say to you."

Sue met his eyes. In her glance was a sweetness and a shining promise that filled him with a turbulent excitement.

"I know, Bill," she whispered. "Special things."

They smiled at each other—in the way that a man and woman in love smile at each other. Then, with his arm around her waist they went forward to meet Sheriff Zents and the posse.

THE END

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THE MAIL POUCH

Referring to the "Man of Mystery" story by Lee Thomas, in the June 1948 issue of your magazine, it may interest you to know that Buckskin Frank Leslie appeared in an Oakland, California, pool hall in 1942, where he obtained light employment. He was then well past eighty.

Several weeks later, he departed, taking the pool hall revolver with him. It is thought that he may have committed suicide shortly afterward.

These, and other details, omitted by Mr. Thomas, are given by Walter N. Burns in his book entitled "Tombstone," published by Doubleday Page & Company in 1927.

G. G. Krause

Dear Mr. Krause:

There is no conclusive proof that the doddering old man who appeared in an Oakland, California, pool hall in 1924 was Buckskin Frank Leslie of Tombstone, Arizona, fame.

This old swamper, then in his eighties, mumbled something about being Buckskin Frank, but it has never been established that he actually was the famous gambler. And the mystery surrounding the whereabouts of Frank Leslie's death, and what caused his death, remains as much of a mystery as ever.

No man seems to *know*. Some *claim* that Buckskin Frank died in the Yukon gold rush. Others claim he died in a Mexican revolution. And then, there is this unsubstantiated story that he was the old swamper in the Oakland pool-hall.

But none of it seems to be able to be proved, and the mystery is still with us.

Lee Thomas



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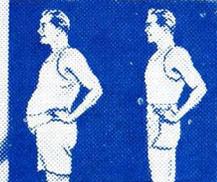
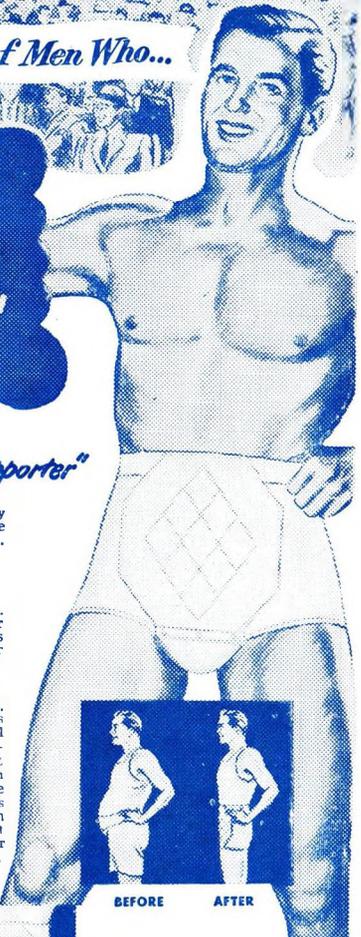
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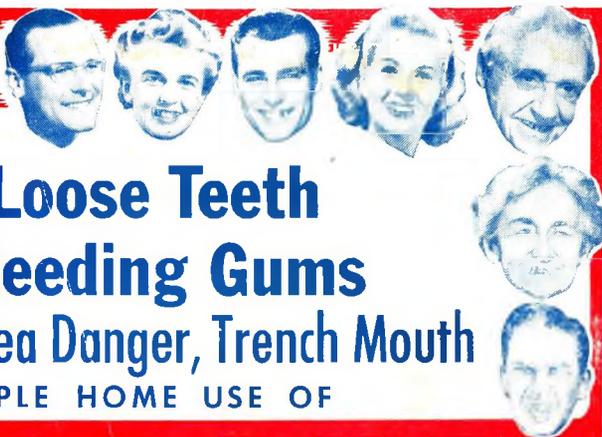
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Check These Danger Signals
Then Check This Coupon!

- Bleeding, swollen or tender gums
 - Loose teeth
 - Pus Pockets
 - Bad breath caused by tooth rot
- Even one check shows you need ORADENT'S help!

MARVEL INDUSTRIES, Dept. SF-101
230 Grand Street, New York City

I want to see for myself what ORADENT can do.

- Send C.O.D. I will pay \$2 postage.
- Enclosed find \$2 in full payment.

TRY ON MONEY BACK GUARANTEE.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

Zone: _____

State: _____