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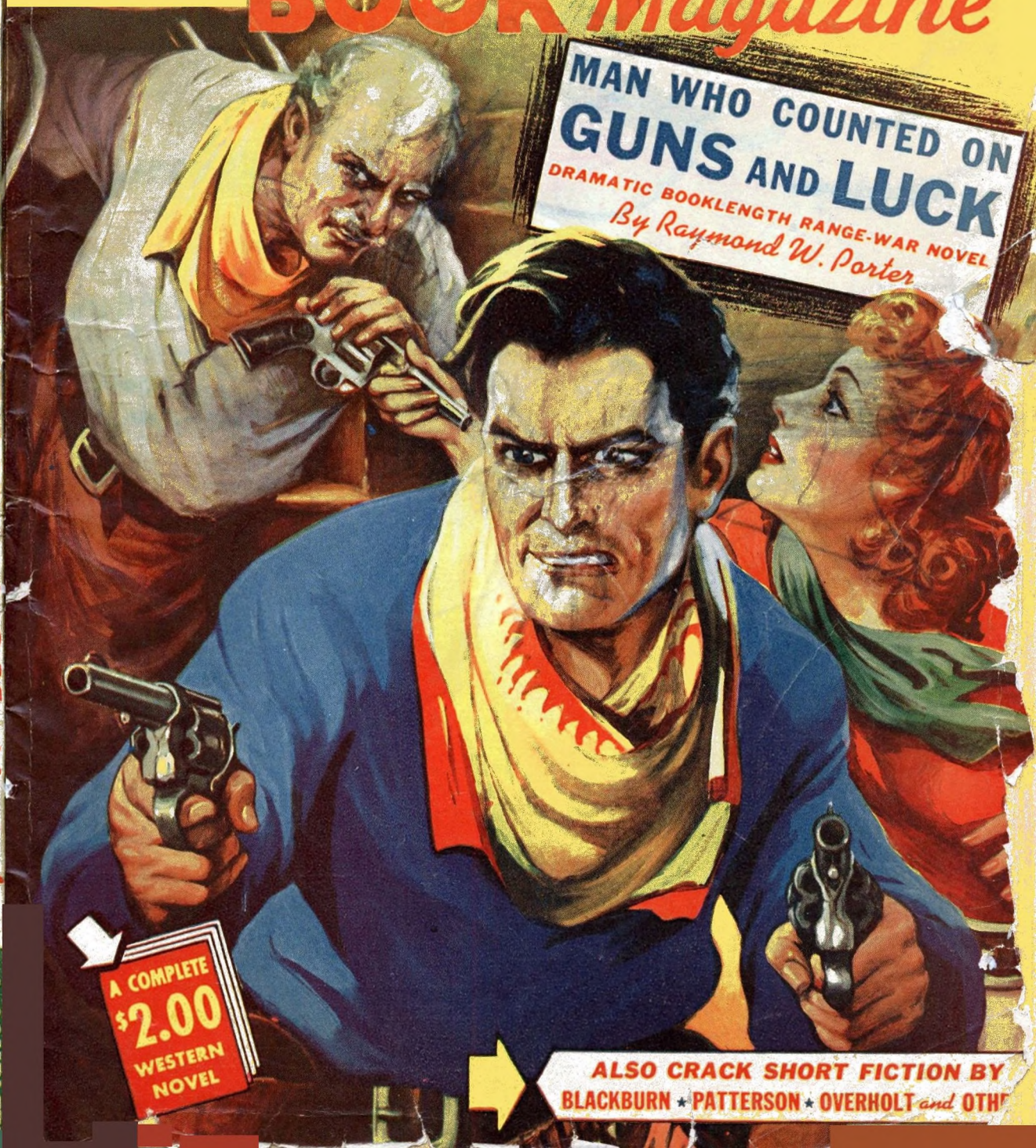

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COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

VOL. 15 NO. 5 | A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE | JANUARY, 1944

ROBERT O. ERISMAN
Editor

★ ★ GREAT RANGE-WAR NOVEL ★ ★ Page

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JANUARY, 1944—ISSUE

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Man Who Counted on

The door smashed inward. He pushed

THE man at the desk smiled a little as he made out the check for five thousand dollars. He had a smile coming, for the man he made the check to was dead.

Signing his name with a flourish, Byrd Buckley picked up the check and waved it over the lighted lamp to dry the ink.

"Stick 'em up!" said a voice from the shadows behind him.

Byrd Buckley lifted his hands quickly, so quickly that he still held the check. It was snatched from his fingers by the man with the gun.

"This ain't no good to me," he growled, glancing at the check. "Open that safe."

Buckley turned obediently to the big square iron safe at his right, quite willing to hand over the small amount of cash in it. Just before closing time he had taken the day's sales to the bank, and all that remained was some change with which to do business in the morning.

"Don't tell me that's all you've got!" the robber snarled.

The robber glanced from the paltry pile of silver and low denomination currency to the check. "Five thousand dollars!" he muttered. "You got plenty in the bank."

A new fear hit Buckley: The man might kidnap him for ransom. "No, I haven't! That check's no good."

"Who is this Joe—Joe what?" The robber was trying to make out the name

Guns and Luck

SMASH NOVEL By RAYMOND W. PORTER

Clara aside and let his gun blast

Cold-deck killer? Bushwhacking rustler? Ruthless land-grabber? — Rufe Beaverstock? Not old Rufe, every honest citizen's saddlepard. Not old Rufe Beaverstock, who had come to Tulleride range to save the cattlemen, to back the law, to guarantee the end of all cow-thieves and gun-hirelings!

of the payee.

"Joe Carlisle," Buckley supplied, growing more harassed with the questioning. "He's an Indian. He's dead."

The robber's voice was sarcastic. "You wrote a check for five thousand dollars to a dead Indian, huh?"

Sweat trickled down Buckley's fleshy neck. "It was just a—a joke."

"I ought to bash your head in!" the stick-up man muttered in disgust. Then he faded into the shadows as there came a pattering of hoofs.

The hoofbeats slackened, quieted into silence. Then there were footsteps and a hammering at the front door.

"Buckley!" A man could be seen peering through the wooden slats which protected the glass windows.

"He sees me!" Buckley rejoiced.

After thinking this over, the robber was forced to agree. "All right," he muttered. "Go to the door and see what he wants. But remember, I'll be settin' here with a gun on you, and I can hear everything you say."

TO STAND UP FOR HIS OWN RIGHTS AND FOR HIS NEIGHBORS'!

BUCKLEY moved hurriedly away, and with every step toward the door he blessed his unknown caller. There would surely be some way of tipping him off.

As he unfastened the chained bolt which held the door from the inside, Buckley pondered the advisability of leaping out the instant he had the door open. This would put the other man in danger, but this made little difference to Buckley. Could he, himself, get away without getting shot?—that was the question.

He got a firm hold on the door, prepared to throw it back and leap into the darkness of the street. Then to his dismay he felt the door moving back under pressure from the other man, who immediately blocked the doorway.

It was Rufe Beaverstock, who did a good job of blocking any doorway. Beaverstock wore two guns, as usual, and a scowl. The scowl was part of his stock in trade, like his guns.

"Why, hello, B-Beaverstock!" Buckley thrust out his hand eagerly. "I'm mighty glad to see you!"

Beaverstock gave him a cold stare. "What in hell's the matter with you?"

"N-nothing. I—I'm just glad to see you."

Beaverstock grunted. "You're up to somethin', Buckley! What is it?"

If there was anybody in the world who could deal with the robber, it was Rufe Beaverstock. "You must have come in answer to my prayer!" said Buckley fervently.

"What are you talkin' about? I told you I was comin'."

Buckley spoke distinctly, so the hidden robber would be sure to hear. "And here you are! With them guns you always carry—ready to smoke out this gang of thieves that have been devilin' us."

Beaverstock was puzzled and suspicious. "I'm ready to go to work, all right, but you don't need to make no speeches. I don't like the way you're actin', Buckley. If you're tryin' to double-cross me—"

Buckley was thinking of taking a dive behind some nearby sacks of feed, but he hesitated now. Unless he could warn Beaverstock of the hidden bandit, such an act might draw the fire of the big gunman as well as that of the robber. "Of course I'm not!" he denied vigorously. "Did I ever try to double-cross you?"

"Not *me*." Beaverstock closed the door. "I'm ready to talk business."

Buckley didn't know what instant the robber might decide to shoot both him and Beaverstock, and he longed to shout a warning and throw himself to the floor to break the terrible suspense. Only Beaverstock's watchful eyes kept him from doing that. He knew that Beaverstock's first impulse in case anything unexpected happened, would be to start shooting. Beaverstock didn't trust him. Beaverstock didn't trust anybody. He couldn't afford to. He had killed too many men.

Beaverstock glanced at the dimly lighted area around the desk. "You alone?"

It would take but an instant to say "No;" It would take but an instant to shout a warning. And it would take but an instant to get a bullet through the head.

"Yes!" he said. "Yes, of course!"

BUT HIS nervousness was too evident; and Beaverstock apparently didn't believe him. Beaverstock walked cautiously toward the desk.

"What's this?" the gunman asked, picking up the check which Buckley had dropped on the desk.

"Just—a check."

"Five thousand dollars, huh?" Beaverstock mouthed the words as though

he could taste them. "Pretty nice. Pretty nice for Joe—what's his name?"

"Joe Carlisle," said Buckley weakly.

"Who's he?"

"He an Indian."

"An Indian? You must be buyin' a lot of baskets."

Buckley saw he would have to make some explanation—anything except the truthful one. While he floundered for one, realizing that he had told the listening robber at least part of the truth: that Joe Carlisle was dead, he muttered, "This—this is another deal."

"Yeah? What kind of a deal?"

Buckley was near the breaking point. "It's none of your business!" Then placatingly, "Is it?"

"Might be. Is this Joe-what's-his-name the Indian you've picked to hold the bag for us?"

"No!" Buckley was frantic now. "He's dead!"

"Huh?"

"Joe Carlisle is dead. That check—don't mean a thing."

Beaverstock crackled it gently in his hand. "Don't it? You seem to be kind of worried about something."

There was a silence, during which Beaverstock's eyes were stabbing the shadows about the desk. Then he walked slowly back toward Buckley. "What are you worried about, Buckley? Did I butt in on you at the wrong time? You wasn't expectin' me, was you?"

"No—yes—"

"You was awful glad to see me, wasn't you, Buckley?" There was a gleam in Beaverstock's eyes now which Buckley had seen there before, and which he recognized only too well. Buckley knew he was in more danger, now, of being killed by Beaverstock than by the hidden robber. Buckley knew he would have to tell the truth, and quick. The words were in his throat when Beaverstock lifted his guns, and the thunder of them filled the big darkened store.

Buckley felt the smash of them, though they were not turned upon him. He fell back against a counter, thinking he had been shot, and only vaguely aware that Beaverstock's smoking guns were pointing toward the bins behind which the robber was hidden.

Completely inert, unable to do more than cling to the counter, he watched Beaverstock move slowly away. And now he realized that Beaverstock had shot the robber.

A moaning filled the store, arose to a high pitch, then shattered into a coughing spasm. Then there was silence. Beaverstock turned away from the body of his victim.

"What kind of double-cross was you pullin' on me, Buckley?"

Buckley made a frantic explanation, and Beaverstock seemed to be partially convinced. "Robbin' you, was he? Hm-m-m- I'll find out about that. If he was a friend of yours—"

"I never saw him before! He made me open the safe, and just then you come along. When I said I was glad to see you, I wasn't fooling!"

BEAVERSTOCK holstered his guns. "That's the reason you was actin' so funny, huh? Well, I knowed there was somethin' wrong with you."

He seemed satisfied till he saw the check again, but he didn't have time to ask any more questions. A slender, sharp-eyed man, who seemed to be too young for the sheriff's badge he was wearing, came in. He did not see the body of the robber at once, and seemed none too pleased to discover Beaverstock.

"So it's you!" he said.

Beaverstock grunted. "You still playin' sheriff, sonny?

The young sheriff turned pale, and looked younger still. "You still playin'

badman?"

Beaverstock smiled, but the scowl remained permanently wedged beneath his bushy brows. "Badman? Huh! Somebody's been tryin' to scare you, I reckon."

The sheriff glanced at Buckley. "What's the trouble?"

Other men were coming into the store, and still others could be heard running in the street, but once inside, they came slowly.

"I was robbed. Beaverstock shot him." While Buckley made excited explanation and pointed out the dead man, Beaverstock stood back and enjoyed the situation. He heard himself praised by Buckley, and received the grudging acknowledgment of the sheriff: "Seems that you 'happened along' at just the right time."

But the sheriff had his suspicions, too. "What," he asked Beaverstock, "are you doin' in Tulleride?"

"I'm doin' your job, sonny boy. I've been hired to stop the cattle stealin' that's goin' on around here."

It was an insult, made deliberately, and those who knew Beaverstock knew the purpose behind it. And they began to move quietly away.

The sheriff was too young, too sensitive perhaps. His voice was choked as he said, "You get out of town!"

Beaverstock said, "Maybe you'd like to run me out."

The sheriff snatched his gun, to chop it downward at Beaverstock's head. It was the way he had handled other tough customers, and it was done with flashing speed. But Rufe Beaverstock was not taken by surprise. Neither did he seem to be in any hurry. He moved aside, seeming to do so leisurely, and sent his first smashing to the sheriff's chin.

The sheriff landed on the floor, flat on his back. He made no move to get up, and his eyes took on a glassy stare. Nobody offered to touch him, and nobody made any sound for several seconds. Then Buckley said, "S-somebody get Doc Pinkston!"

Doc Pinkston was physcian, coroner, and undertaker. He also doctored horses and cows. He said the sheriff's neck was broken. No, he wasn't dead —not yet.

Citizens of Tulleride thought Beaverstock should have been put in jail at once, but there was no one to tackle the job. There were only three deputies: One was sick with scarlet fever, another serving papers in a distant part of the county, and the third was nowhere to be found. That left only the jailer, whose business it was to keep men in jail and not to put them there, he said, and who did nothing without orders from the sheriff.

So Beaverstock remained free—free to ride away if he chose, and escape any penalty for what he had done. But Beaverstock walked the streets of Tulleride that night, he drank at Sercomb's Saloon, and he carefully explained how he had shot the robber and how he had broken the sheriff's neck.

NOBODY blamed him for shooting the robber, and he also had reason for cracking the sheriff on the jaw, some admitted. Was a man to take a buffaloing without any resistance? Especially since he had done nothing wrong but talk sassy to the sheriff? Of course, he hadn't intended to break the sheriff's neck; he had hit him harder than he intended. That was all.

It only proved again what every man should have known by this time: Rufe Beaverstock was a law-abiding citizen, not a rag-tag-and-bobtail bum to be ordered out of town. Quite handy with his guns, and with his fists—a man to stand up for his rights, a man for all men to admire.

And thus he invited their admiration.

He asked them to believe he was sorry that he had broken their sheriff's neck. He had come to Tulleride to help the sheriff. He had come to help the cattlemen of Tulleride Plateau. He guaranteed to stop all cattle stealing. He had done it other places. He would do it here.

Could it be, by any chance, that Sheriff Huser hadn't *wanted* to see the cattle stealing stopped? No, that couldn't be. Beaverstock only wondered, that was all. He wondered why he was so misunderstood, and he grew maudlin over his beer.

When the saloon was closed, he went down the street to the Hoover Hotel and registered for a room. He talked as long as Four-Bit Hoover would listen to him, and then he remembered his horse. He talked to his horse on the way to the livery barn.

He fed and watered the animal, himself, since there was nobody at the barn, and then he remembered that he hadn't finished his talk with Buckley.

Buckley was in bed, but not asleep. Buckley was expecting the call. He had stayed away from Beaverstock that evening because he didn't want anybody to get the idea that there was anything between them. People might get curious. Since Beaverstock had come to help the cattlemen and since Buckley didn't own a cow, there might be questions asked.

It was just as well for them to talk when all the rest of Tulleride was sleeping. Buckley let him in quietly and took him upstairs to his own room. He saw that Beaverstock was drunk and worried some for fear that he might have talked too much. He questioned him a little.

"Where you been all evening?"

"Up town, Sercomb's, Pop Weevil's eatin' place—why?"

"Who you been talkin' to?"

"Everybody. I've been tellin' 'em how it happened. I didn't mean to break his neck."

"You been talkin' about—anything else?"

"Sure. I told 'em what I'm here to do."

The windows were closed and the shades down. It was warm in the shut-up room, and Beaverstock's liquor breath was giving it a stale beer flavor. Buckley opened the door into the hallway a little bit.

"You didn't tell 'em too much about that, did you?"

Stretched out on the bed, Beaverstock scowled up at him for a moment. "You mean—our deal?" He sat up on the side of the bed abruptly. "You think I'm drunk, huh?"

"Well, you ain't exactly sober."

"All right, I'm drunk. But I still got sense enough to know what I'm doin'."

"I hope so."

"LISTEN, friend. Drunk or sober, I know what I'm doin' and I'm able to take care of myself. And you know it, don't you!"

"Well," Buckley smiled ruefully, "I've never seen you when you couldn't."

"And you won't. My brain's as clear as a bell. Ding, ding, ding!" He tapped his forehead gravely.

"Sure, sure," Buckley agreed. "But don't you think you'd better go to bed now?"

"Maybe so." Beaverstock lay back on the bed. "Seems to me I wanted to talk to you about somethin'—what was it? Oh, yeah!" He sat up again. "Who's goin' to hold the sack for us this time?"

"Maybe we'd better wait till mornin' to talk about it."

"We'll talk about it now! What's the matter with you?"

"All right. We'll talk about it now—if you can get it straight. We've got to be careful about this. I don't like it very well, workin' the Plateau country. Everybody knows me here."

"They know me too," Beaverstock boasted. "Everybody knows me everywhere."

"That's the trouble. I'm afraid they'll find out you and me are partners."

"Humph! I ain't no prouder of it than you are."

Many times Buckley had doubted the wisdom of forming a partnership with Rufe Beaverstock, and he wished that he could end it. But he couldn't. It would go on until—well, he hated to think what the end might be.

He alone was responsible for the beginning, and it had seemed such a brilliant idea then. He saw how he could use Beaverstock, and he hadn't anticipated how he could get rid of him when he was no longer useful.

And that time had come. Beaverstock had degenerated into a wanton killer. He had become dangerous and untrustworthy. He was no longer content to take orders, but had assumed actual as well as nominal control of the Cattlemen's Protective League.

It was Buckley's brain-child, the Cattlemen's Protective League, but it had grown far too boisterous to suit him. And the more conservative cattlemen were pulling out, refusing to do business with a man like Beaverstock, and some of them were no doubt beginning to suspect the true workings of the organization.

"Maybe you think you could run it by yourself," said Buckley, hopefully.

"I know damn well I could. Why?"

"If that's the case I might as well step out."

Beaverstock glowered suspiciously. "What kind of double-cross you tryin' to pull now?"

"What makes you think I'm tryin' to double-cross you every time I make a suggestion?" Buckley asked hotly.

"Because you're a double-crosser. The whole thing's a big double-cross. And it was you that thought it up."

Buckley couldn't deny that he had thought it up, and that it was a big double-cross. But at first it had not been so. At first, he had intended to organize a protective association which would serve the cattlemen honestly. He had thought he could use a man like Rufe Beaverstock to good advantage.

Even then, Beaverstock was getting himself a reputation as a gunman—too much so to suit the sheriff of Bear Creek County, who thought he was using his guns too much to continue on the county's payroll as a deputy sheriff. Beaverstock had cleaned out a bunch of rustlers by the simple method of lining them up and shooting them.

IT WAS then that Buckley conceived the idea of forming the Cattlemen's Protective League (there was a Cattlemen's Protective Association, but it didn't protect) and putting Beaverstock at the head of it. There was just one drawback. Cattle rustling became very unpopular, after Beaverstock's one-man cleanup campaign.

Then came Buckley's most brilliant idea. He would supply the rustlers as well as the protection.

In order to do this, he had to take Beaverstock into his confidence. Beaverstock agreed that it was a brilliant idea. Furthermore, he agreed to handle all details of hiring a crew of gunmen, stealing the cattle, and then selecting a victim or two to bump off as the rustlers.

For a time, the plan had worked perfectly. The cattle rustling was profitable, and the tribute collected from the cattlemen for breaking up the rustling was pure gravy. The effectiveness of

the scheme lay in the fact that Beaverstock's promise to stop rustling was always fulfilled.

He became a hero to the rough-and-ready element of the country. He had a cure for cattle-rustling that couldn't be beat—a good old-fashioned dose of .45 lead.

What he did, of course, was lawless. He would come lugging in a dead man or two and say, "There's your rustlers, boys!" The accused never denied it, so were presumed to be guilty.

His methods had so much popular approval that the elected officials wouldn't arrest him and bring him to trial. Gradually, he became over-confident and over-bearing, and careless. He picked out the wrong men to kill, and accuse. His ruthlessness shocked the more sensitive, and his unfairness challenged the more reasonable and the just. And the more intelligent ones began to see through his bloody scheme.

It was fast coming to an end, and it would doubtless be a bloody end. Buckley said, "Yes, I thought it up. And you carried it out. I did nothing at all, you know, except to think it up. There seems to be no more need for thinking, so I might as well turn it over to you."

This thrust was too sly for immediate effect on Beaverstock. But the man had an instinct which warned him of danger. "You're tryin' to pull somethin', Buckley. I don't know what it is. And you ain't gettin' out. You're in this thing with me, and you're goin' to stay!"

"Be reasonable, man! You don't need me any longer. I'm busy. I've got my business to look after, and—well, this is not my kind of business."

"The double-cross is your kind of business. I ain't trustin' you for a minute."

"Then that's all the more reason why we hadn't ought to be partners. If you can't trust me, you ought to be glad to get rid of me."

Beaverstock growled, "If I take a notion to get rid of you, I'll get rid of you, all right."

Panic cornered Buckley. He edged nearer the door.

"Where do you think you're goin'?" Beaverstock asked.

"No-nowhere. I just—need a little air."

Beaverstock chuckled. He was never so delighted as when he was able to scare somebody. "What you need is a little guts," he said. "I don't know why I want to put up with you. You're a crook. You're a coward."

BUCKLEY lashed his failing courage. "And you're drunk! You don't know what you're sayin'!"

Beaverstock yawned. "I'm gettin' sleepy. Wha'd I come up here for? Oh, yeah. Who's goin' to help us catch the rustlers this time?"

Buckley deeply regretted his promise to pick out the next victim. He had done so because Beaverstock insisted. Tulleride Plateau was Buckley's home territory and he knew everybody, and thus could make the arrangements better.

"An Indian named Carlisle," he said. "He's goin' to join your crowd and help you get the PXB cattle—"

A queer light in Beaverstock's eyes stopped him. "Carlisle?" the big gunman repeated. "Joe Carlisle?"

He had remembered the name on the check.

"No, no. Joe Carlisle is dead, I tell you. This is his son, Young Carlisle."

Beaverstock stood up. "That's somethin' else I wanted to talk to you about."

"W-what?"

"You've had time to think up a good lie. Tell me, what was you writin' a check for five thousand dollars to a dead Indian for?"

In the dead silence, Buckley heard a sound downstairs. "Wait," he whispered. "Wait a minute."

"You ain't thought up a good one yet? Well, I'll wait—another sixty seconds."

There were soft footsteps, now, on the stairs. Buckley pulled the door almost shut, leaving a crack. The steps came up the stairs.

"Pop?"

It was Clara's voice. What was she doing out this time of night? Buckley forgot some of his own fright, and some of his caution, as a new worry gripped him. He pushed the door back a little.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

His daughter came hesitantly toward him. "Just out riding."

"Riding! With who?"

Her voice was a small, but firm echo in the long hallway. "Andy."

"Andy Thorne?"

"Yes. I—didn't know it was so late."

"You never know what time it is when you're out with Andy Thorne!"

She came up to him. "Don't be mad, Pop—what are you doing up so late?"

He tried to send her away, then, but she wouldn't go. "What's that I smell?" she asked.

"Do you smell something? Never mind. Go on to bed!"

She sniffed suspiciously. "Pop, have you been drinking, all by yourself?"

"No, certainly not! Get out of here and let me alone!"

Beaverstock appeared to be enjoying the situation; for a man who found pleasure in killing people, he had a rare sense of humor and could enjoy the simpler pleasures too. Such as Buckley's embarrassment now.

Increasing his humorous bent was the beer he had drunk, and he suddenly snorted a laugh. Buckley jumped, and the girl gave a startled cry. Then she pushed into the room, her eyes wide with wonder, looking very much like a little girl who had found something surprising and terrible. Beaverstock's specialty was scaring big men, not little girls, but this was funny, too.

"Who—who is he?" she asked.

"He's a friend of mine," Buckley said shortly. "You go to bed."

CLARA seemed to think her father needed some protection—and she didn't know the half of it. "He's drunk!" she said. "What's he doing here?"

"Your papa has been telling me some bedtime stories," said Beaverstock. "Come in and let him tell you some. He's a dern good story teller, ain't he? Did he ever tell you the one about the dead Indian?"

Clara said, "I know you!"

Beaverstock appeared modestly pleased. "You do? Don't remember that you and me ever met before—which is a pity. Your papa never told me he had a gal like you. Maybe he didn't want me to know it. Haw, haw!" He winked at her.

"You're—Rufe Beaverstock! What are you doing in this house?"

"Why, your papa and me is friends. Didn't he just tell you?"

"Friends?" She looked at her father.

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning," he said. "Good night." He tried to push her out and close the door.

"Not so fast!" Beaverstock seized the door and threw it open. "Don't you see the little gal don't want to go away? She wants to stay and talk some. My! Ain't she purty?"

He leered down at her. She stood rigidly facing him.

"You ain't scared of me, are you?" he said.

"No. Why should I be?"

He cackled indulgently. "That's right. I don't eat little girls. I like

little girls." He put out his arms benevolently.

He was just drunk enough to think it all pretty funny, but the girl didn't seem to see any humor in the situation. She slapped him.

He looked surprised and vaguely annoyed. "Don't you like me? I ain't goin' to hurt you—" Again he reached for her.

"Don't touch me—don't—!" she screamed.

Beaverstock grabbed her, and seemed a little bewildered now. "Shut up!" he said. "I ain't goin' to hurt you. You're too purty."

Buckley rushed at him. "Turn her loose!"

This was a threat he knew more how to handle. He held the screaming girl with one hand and with the other knocked Buckley across the room.

"Shut up!" he told the girl again, and when she kept screaming, he put his hand over her mouth. She bit him. He swore and slapped her.

By this time Buckley was on his feet again, picking up the first thing he could get his hands on—which happened to be a chair.

Beaverstock tossed the girl on the bed, met Buckley's headlong charge with a leisurely sidestep and kicked him violently through the doorway and slammed the door.

He looked at the girl, huddled on the bed, and began to laugh. "Ain't we havin' fun?"

She began to cry, softly and frantically. "Don't touch me—don't touch me!"

"Why not? You wouldn't break, would you, if a man just touched you?"

He walked up to the bed.

"Pop!" she yelled. "Pop!"

"You don't want me to hurt your papa, do you? Why, me and him is friends—good friends. Let's me and you be friends. Huh?"

THE door smashed inward and Beaverstock turned indolently to deal with Buckley again. But it wasn't Buckley. It was a man Beaverstock had never seen before—a hatless young man with scrambled red hair, a man who was big enough to command Beaverstock's immediate respect, and he came into the room as fast as Buckley had gone out.

"Andy!" yelled Clara. "Andy!"

Beaverstock had barely time to straighten up and turn around when Andy hit him. Beaverstock was sure he had been slugged with some vicious, invisible weapon. His head snapped back, and his feet left the floor.

He clawed at the bed, but managed only to break his fall. It seemed that he had dived into inky darkness, and when he was able to see light again, he realized he was on his back and had been knocked completely out. It was the first time in his life this had happened to him.

He was more astonished than angry and he gathered himself together slowly, and somewhat painfully. The red-headed man was standing there looking at him, so how was he to know the red-headed man was only waiting for him to get up, so he could knock him down again?

But he found out, to his further confusion and sorrow. It was all wrong, him being knocked over like a sack of flour. Nobody could do that to him. He'd blow the man's brains out! He fumbled for his guns, found one of them gone, but the other was in place. He grabbed it.

"You sure that's the way you want to settle it?" asked the red-headed man.

Beaverstock perceived his missing gun in the stranger's hand. And Beaverstock perceived that it would be very foolish to force a gunfight with a man who already had him covered.

"I'll kill you!" he said, inadequately.

He couldn't express his astonishment and his mounting anger.

"All right. But it's goin' to be dangerous."

Beaverstock sat back on the floor, spraddle-legged, and looked at the red-topped apparition. Not only was he quite a young buck and quite a big one, he was also pleasant and harmless-looking. He didn't look as though he would use the gun he had in his hand. But Beaverstock had run into many harmless-looking customers who were anything but. So he used the discretion which had kept him alive for so long.

"Who are you, anyhow?" he asked, swallowing his anger.

"Andy Thorne's the name." Quite pleasant, almost cheerful.

Beaverstock thought he was being laughed at, and that was a new experience for him too. He didn't like it. "Do you know who I am?" he asked, glowering.

"Yep." There was no fear or awe or hatred in the answer. It was casual and care-free.

"Who am I?" Beaverstock growled, not believing anybody could be so indifferent about knocking him down.

"Don't you know? Gosh, I must have hit you harder than I intended to. The way you hit the sheriff." There was a little chuckle mixed up with this. "*Your* neck ain't broke, is it? No, I see it ain't. Too bad."

Buckley and his daughter were standing in the doorway, bug-eyed. They looked funny. But Beaverstock didn't laugh at them. He knew that he looked funny, too, sprawled out on the floor.

HE MOVED his head slowly back and forth, up and down. "No, my neck ain't broke. I ain't hurt at all. I'm just—surprised. You took me by surprise."

"I guess I did," admitted Andy Thorne. "Maybe I ought to whistled when I come in."

Buckley scowled some more. "Kind of tough, huh? And a smart-alec too."

"Nope. I'm kind of dumb, my old man says. And he says I ain't half tough enough."

"Is your old man Andrew Thorne?"

"That's him."

"Humph! That runt. How'd he get a brat like you?"

"Nature plays some funny tricks, don't it?"

Beaverstock wagged his head. "It shore does!" He got up cautiously. "That's my gun you got there, ain't it?" He extended his hand to take it.

"If you don't mind," said Andy Thorne, "I'll keep it for awhile. You see, I don't carry a gun much, myself. That shows how dumb I am, my old man says."

Beaverstock smiled a little. "You ain't so dumb," he said softly.

"Ain't I?" Andy smiled. "That's right nice of you, I'll tell my old man what you said. Of course, he won't believe it. He thinks you're a dirty, lyin' pup."

Beaverstock's flesh began to crawl. "Oh, does he? I don't recollect as he ever told me that."

"He'll tell you, if he sees you." He said it blandly, and with unconcern.

Beaverstick said, still with the smile and the eternal scowl, "I'll be lookin' forward to seein' you, old man. And you, too—the next time."

"Maybe there won't be no next time. Maybe you'll be tuckin' your tail between your legs and runnin'."

Beaverstock weighed his chance of getting hold of his holstered gun, but he was practically covered. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, you'll get hung, of course, if the sheriff dies. And if he gets well, he'll kill you."

"Will he? Well, well. I wonder." But his sarcasm lacked its usual sting;

his confidence in himself was strangely shaken. "Reckon I'll be gettin' along." He tried to imitate the red-head's nonchalance. "It's gettin' late and I'm keepin' you folks up." He walked stiffly out of the room, with a stiff fixed smile, while Buckley and his daughter backed off and gave him plenty of exit space.

"How'd that thing get in here?" Andy asked, as the front door closed.

Buckley said, "He was drunk. He didn't know where he was." The troubled, questioning eyes of his daughter bothered him. Not for the world would he have her know of his association with Rufe Beaverstock.

"Andy sobered him up!" Clara glanced proudly at him. "I could hardly believe it was you!"

Andy was having a hard time believing it, too, as he reflected on his violent outburst and the surprising results. Andy did not approve of violence. He had seen too much of it in his father, and he had long since made up his mind to take things easy. He saw no sense in fighting; he maintained that he could get what he wanted much quicker and easier by making friends than making enemies.

AND his theory seemed to work out fine, for him. He invariably got what he wanted, and it was seldom that he had to fight anybody. Had be encountered Rufe Beaverstock under ordinary circumstances he would have doubtless made friends with him.

Now, he was amazed and troubled over the change that had come over him when he heard Clara's frightened cries. All of his placid good humor, all of his reasoning faculties had been suddenly swept away, and he was on fire with one violent purpose. If all his convictions and his habits could thus be destroyed in an instant, they could not be very solid and dependable; and life had suddenly become filled with dangerous uncertainties.

"But now—what will he do?" Clara asked anxiously.

Andy hadn't thought about that. He became aware of the gun in his hand, and remembered the way Beaverstock had said something about seeing him again. It was all the bluster of a beaten bully, of course.

"He'll probably skip the country. If he knows what's good for him, he will."

"Why, Andy! You're really getting tough!"

She was deviling him now, and he marvelled at the bundle of contradictions she presented. She wanted him to be tough, didn't she? And yet she was afraid of what Beaverstock would do to him.

"You know what I mean," he said. "The Law will be after him."

She looked a little disappointed. "Maybe you should have taken him to jail."

"Me? I'm no Lawman."

"I understand any citizen has the right to arrest a lawbreaker—if he can."

It seemed that she was deliberately prodding him into a return engagement with Beaverstock, yet he knew this wasn't so when she added, "If he was in jail, he couldn't hurt anybody."

Andy shrugged this aside. "They'll get him. Somebody will get him."

Buckley made it obvious by his silence that he was waiting for Andy to leave. His failure to express any appreciation for Andy's quite welcome interference was equally obvious.

All of this Andy blandly ignored, but Clara couldn't and she guided him to the door. Then she took him suddenly by the arm. "He may be out there laying for you!"

Andy dismissed this idea lightly. "Not him; he's one of these show-off kind. If he wants to get me, he'll try to do it when there's a crowd around."

It wasn't so easy to dismiss this thought, however. A gun fight with Rufe Beaverstock didn't appeal to Andy, who found many reasons why he would come out second best in such an affair. All of his life he had been told by his old man that he was a dumb cluck who couldn't and wouldn't stand up for himself. When he was a kid, he let little boys bully him. It was just a kind of game they played, he was so much bigger than the others and it was fun for them to pick on him. He understood that and he let them, and they understood that he was letting them get away with it.

It was a game they understood quite well, but grownups didn't. They would say, "Look at that big Andy Thorne—afraid of those little kids!" And his father would say, "I ought to beat your head off! I ought to tie a rock around your neck and throw you in the creek! You ain't no son of mine!"

ANDY couldn't explain it to his father. He couldn't explain anything to his father. All of which didn't trouble him a great deal, for nothing troubled him a great deal. He grew up serenely indifferent to his father's ravings, his father's fights and troubles. It seemed that his father was in a continual uproar about something, always going to beat somebody's head off, or stomp them into the dirt, or run them be out of the country. Little Andy couldn't be bothered. In spite of the general belief that he didn't have the intestinal membrane it takes to enclose a dime's worth of pork sausage, most people liked him.

That was because he liked most people. He particularly liked Clara Buckley. And he knew that she liked him. But not till tonight, right now, had he seen in her a serious respect for him, instead of a mere amused tolerance. And never before had he seen anyone show any anxiety over his safety.

Moved by another disturbing impulse—a hot, grateful impulse which he could in no wise understand or control, he kissed her. Right there with her old man looking at him. It wasn't the first time he had kissed her, but it was the first time he had done it so publicly.

Then he walked off in the darkness, feeling a little ashamed, and strange, and lost. Something was jabbing him in the groin, and he realized that he had shoved Beaverstock's gun under his belt. It bothered him as he walked and he carried it in his hand till he found his horse, which he had abandoned abruptly a few minutes before, and then he put the gun in his saddle pocket.

The light of a distant fire across the river caught his attention momentarily, but did little to distract his uneasy thoughts. He knew what it was—a Mohave cremation ceremony—and he paid little heed to it as he rode in that general direction, heading for home.

He remembered that he had heard old Joe Carlisle was dead, and he could see figures dancing about the funeral pyre, and he could presently hear the weird chant of the Indians. In his disturbed mind these figures were like his own troubled thoughts weaving in and out of the flickering light of his reason—distorting things, not quite real.

He had knocked a notorious gunman down. He had taken a gun away from him. Hadn't he? He couldn't quite believe it had happened, and it gave him no exhilaration. Clara's screams, they were real enough. They pierced him, set him on edge, and put his heart to pounding, and for an instant he thought he was hearing them again. But it was only in memory.

He was facing a fight which he couldn't laugh off, and he wondered what he could do about it. He wasn't mad. He didn't want to fight. Except

for that fleeting moment when he had heard Clara's screams and had rushed into the house to discover Beaverstock there, he had felt no anger against the man. It was not so much of an anger then as it was a hot, blinding flash of concern for Clara, and as soon as he had knocked Beaverstock down, it was gone. He saw the man was drunk, he saw that Clara wasn't hurt, and as far as he was concerned, it was all over.

HIS natural inclination was to go to Beaverstock, return his gun, and offer to shake hands with him. And with most men he believed that would be the best and only sensible solution. But he knew that Beaverstock was not a man you could shake hands with, after you'd knocked him on his ear. He knew Beaverstock by reputation, he had heard his father talk about him a great deal, and all the unfavorable things he had heard about the man were borne out in his first meeting with him.

No, he would have to fight Beaverstoc—gun-fight him, no doubt. This certainly filled him with a sort of calm regret. It was not fear. He had never been afraid of anybody. He was not even afraid of being called a coward; and that is the test of any man's courage. He just didn't want to fight. You have to be mad at somebody to want to fight; and Andy wasn't mad at anybody. He never had been.

"I guess there's something the matter with me, all right," he told himself. "It's like the old man says. There's somethin' lackin' in me, a wheel missin' somewhere."

On the other hand, Andrew Thorne's wheels were all in place and whirled into high gear when he heard about the fight. Andy mentioned it in an off-hand manner after breakfast. He knew his father would hear about it, and he wanted to prepare him for what was to come.

It was like preparing a charge of dynamite by inserting a fuse and lighting it. Andrew Thorne was sixty-five years old, weighing one hundred and thirty-five pounds (with his forty-five on). He jumped to his feet and yelled: "Beaverstock! You had a fight with *Rufe Beaverstock?*"

"Wasn't exactly a fight," Andy said carefully. "I just knocked him down, and got one of his guns—"

"*You* knocked him down?" yelped Thorne. "*You* got one of his guns?"

"He was drunk."

Thorne looked at his giant, red-headed offspring in wide-eyed amazement. "Was he dead drunk, layin' in a ditch?"

"Nope. He was down at Buckley's house."

"Buckley!" snorted Thorne. "The rat. The cheat! The swindler. Somebody ought to stomp him into the ground—what was Rufe Beaverstock doin' at Buckley's house?"

"He was—well, he didn't know just what he was doin', I guess."

Thorne grabbed his hat. "Well, I want to know what he's doin'!"

"Why?"

"I'll bet my last cartridge that Guy Eckleman sent for him!"

"Eckleman?"

"Yes, Eckleman! The dirty skunk. The low-down cow-thief. I ought to have beat his brains out a long time ago."

"Guy Eckeman ain't botherin' you. What do you want to lay everything on him for?"

"Aint botherin' me, huh? The snide! The snake! He ain't been botherin' me lately because he don't dare to. He bothered me plenty when he had a pack of gunslingers to back him up!"

All of this was ancient history to Andy and he was tired of hearing about it. He knew that his father's grudge against Guy Eckleman dated back almost thirty years, and he felt sorry for

his father because he could not rid himself of the hallucination that Eckleman was still his mortal enemy. At one time he might have been—that was when men fought for land and cattle instead of acquiring them in the legal, peaceful methods of the present day. That was thirty years ago, six years before Andy was born.

THE fight between the Ecklemans and the Thornes went back even farther than that. The Thornes had come to Tulleride Plateau in the old, old days, and they were happy, peaceful days. Andy had listened to his father tell about these times, and he thought it would have been nice to live in a land which was free for the taking and plenty of it for all who came. Newcomers were welcomed then, and everybody was friendly, even the Indians.

Then came the railroad pushing across Kansas, and came the demand for cattle and more cattle. That meant grass and more grass. Water and more water. Men and more men. Money and more money.

Andrew Thorne was just growing up. He was fired by the excitement of this conquest. He took the family fortunes in his hands, he dominated his aging, peace-loving father, and his three brothers—although two of them were older than he. And he dominated everyone he came in contact with—or beat them down to where he could.

The Ecklemans at this time were newcomers, mere upstarts. They were a huge family, and they were tricky and ruthless. From mere laywire settlers, who begged and stole what they had, they quickly built up their possessions and their power, and finally they challenged the rule of Andrew Thorne, himself.

They challenged him and they beat him, though it took ten years to do it. They killed his two brothers, they killed and proselyted his hired gunmen, they drove his father to the grave, and they finally drove Andrew Thorne and his one remaning brother into exile.

Andrew was then thirty-five years old, in mid-life, but he was an old and broken man. Still the fires in him never went out completely. He swore to come back, to have his vengeance, and to regain his lost power and glory. His brother, Tyrone, had had enough Their paths separated, and for five years Andrew licked his wounds and planned his return conquest.

He went back to Tulleride Plateau not with a force of hired gunmen, for he had no money to hire them. He went back with a bride, a covered wagon, and one team of horses. The Ecklemans laughed when they saw him. They laughed, and let him stay.

It was all a careful plan of Andrew Thorne's to present a picture of humility and defeat, so they would not molest him. It took more years of careful planning and preparation, wise dealing in cattle and land, and then at last Andrew Thorne was ready to challenge his perennial foes. And this time he was victorious.

Sometimes with gun-power only, sometimes with the law in his hands, sometimes with both, he rode against the Ecklemans, and he rode them down. Well—not entirely down. But almost. Right now he was after the very last of them, Guy Eckleman. And he hated Guy Eckleman above all the others. The youngest of the tribe—he was fifteen years younger than Andrew—Guy Eckleman had been the one to administer the final humiliation in Andrew's previous defeat. As a young upstart of twenty, he had horse-whipped Andrew in the streets of Tulleride.

Now, Andrew was sixty-five, and Guy Eckleman was fifty and should have been in the prime of life, but Andrew had him licked—almost.

"So he sends for Rufe Beaverstock!" snorted Andrew Thorne. "So he's goin' to start somethin', is he?"

"What makes you think he's goin' to start something, and that he sent for Rufe Beaverstock?" asked Andy.

"Because that's the way he fights, with hired gunmen!"

ANDY didn't remind his father that he always kept hired gunmen on his payroll and used them to enforce his edicts when more peaceful and legitimate methods failed.

"You go down to the barn and tell Pike to get ready to go to town with me. Take three or four men along," said Thorne.

Pike Gaskin bore the title of foreman of the ranch, but he was a good deal more than that. Pike was a gun-fighter who had been with Thorne during most of his come-back fight against the Ecklemans. The "three or four men" would not be chosen on their reputations as international peace proponents, you could bet on that.

Andy delivered the message obediently, because he was accustomed to obedience; but he added a word of caution and advice to Pike, which he seldom had the temerity to do.

"The old man thinks somebody's goin' to start a fight, so he intends to start one first," he said. "But it ain't his fight. It's mine. And I want you to stay out of it, and keep him out of it if you can."

It surprised Pike almost as much as it had Thorne to hear Andy talk about fighting, but after he had heard the circumstances he agreed that it was up to Andy to take part, at least, in the proceedings.

The idea of riding into town with his father and a crew of gun-fighters didn't appeal to Andy. So he hit the trail at once and was across the valley and cutting through the hills when he saw the others leaving the ranch.

He didn't like the position he had been forced into, and he was becoming more and more annoyed over the idea of rushing off to start a fight. He was in a bad humor when he got to town, and for the first time rode straight down the street without bandying words with anybody, leaving a trail of curious stares. Nobody had ever seen Andy Thorne act like that before.

Striding into the Hoover Hotel, he growled at Four-Bit Hoover, who was behind the desk, "Where's Rufe Beaverstock?"

Hoover's neatly plastered hair cracked under the agitated movement of his scalp as he looked up, "Beaverstock?" he muttered. "*You* want to see Beaverstock?"

"Yep."

"What about?"

"Personal business," snapped Andy. "Is he here?"

"I—reckon he is. Upstairs."

"What room?"

Hoover hesitated. "Room 200, but —I don't think he's awake yet."

Andy went up the wide, boot-scuffed steps, turned back toward the front of the building to one of the two rooms which overlooked the street. He hammered on the door, listened to the creak of bed springs, and then an irritated, "Yeah?"

He tried the door. It was locked. "Open up!" he said.

There was more creaking, a short silence, then, "Who the hell is it?"

"Andy Thorne."

This brought a surprised, "Huh?" Then another silence. "What do *you* want?"

Andy felt a little foolish, now. "I brought your gun back to you," he said.

The sounds in the room now indicated Beaverstock was getting on his clothes, and he took his time about it. His footsteps came cautiously to the

door, which he unlocked and threw suddenly open. He was fully dressed and wearing one gun, on which his hand rested.

HE SCOWLED silently and Andy stared. Finally Beaverstock grunted. "So you brought my gun back, huh?"

"Yep. Here it is."

Andy was holding Beaverstock's emptied gun by the barrel with his left hand. His right was near his own holstered weapon.

Beaverstock's eyes didn't leave Andy's face. "You ain't no damn fool!"

"That's what you said last night. But I'm not so sure."

Slowly the big gunman extended his left hand. "I don't know just what your game is, but since you've dealt me a hand—" Very carefully, he reached for the gun. When he had his grip on the handle of the forty-five, he withdrew it, just as carefully, from Andy's hand.

His puzzlement seemed to grow. "Now what?"

Again Andy felt that he had done a useless, perhaps a foolish thing. "Now —it's up to you," he said.

Beaverstock's scowl lay like a claw on his forehead, but a chuckling noise came out of his throat. "You're pretty nervy, kid!"

Andy still didn't see it that way. "You was drunk last night. You said somethin' about wantin' to see me again."

"Did I? Well, I'll be damned! So you're Old Man Thorne's kid. Where is the little old blister?"

The question was answered by a rush of feet downstairs and Thorne's excited query, "Andy here?"

Then he came bounding up the steps and down the hallway, to stop short at sight of Beaverstock.

"Well, well!" said Beaverstock, still good-humoredly. "I was just askin' about you."

"Yeh?" Thorne moved up and down on the balls of his feet. "What was it you was askin' about me?"

"I was askin' if you was still the same cocky little runt you used to be. I see that you are."

It was obvious that Thorne misunderstood the situation entirely—Beaverstock facing Andy with a levelled gun in his hand. He didn't know the gun was empty, and that Andy had just given it to Beaverstock.

"You haven't changed much yourself, looks like," said Thorne. "Maybe you don't know who the boy is."

"Yeh, I know."

"Then you know I'd blow your brains out if you hurt him!"

Beaverstock was amused. Andy wasn't. He saw how ludicrous it must have sounded to the gunman. "I ain't goin' to hurt your little boy," Beaverstock guffawed. "I wouldn't dare to, seein' as how you feel about it."

And he tossed aside the empty gun.

Thorne rocked back on his heels, then forward on his toes, and all but crowed. "All right, laugh it off, if it's any easier to take that way. I see you ain't changed much when it comes to knowin' when you're beat, either."

"I got to hand it to you." Beaverstock went on with his horse play, much to Andy's embarrassment. "And you done it without firin' a shot!"

Thorne was immune to this coarse jesting. "It's a good thing for you *nobody* fired a shot."

Beaverstock's eyes narrowed. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Take a look out front, if you don't believe it."

STILL keeping an eye on the old man, Beaverstock turned to the window which overlooked the street. "Them's your jockeys out there, huh? And if any shootin' had started, they'd

have come on the run, huh?" He chuckled. "I wonder what would of happened, if they had? Maybe they wouldn't of got very far, after all."

His glance went past Andy and the old man, and Andy looked down the hallway carefully for the first time. The doors of a half a dozen rooms were open, and in each of them lolled a watchful figure.

Thorne wilted for an instant, but only an instant. "I knowed you wouldn't be alone!" he snorted. "I knowed you'd bring your pack of hoodlums with you. Eckleman sent for you, didn't he?"

"Eckleman? Why, no, not exactly. Nobody sent for me."

"You're a-lyin'!" Thorne shouted. "He hired you, and I know what you come for!"

It was a shock to Andy to hear his father call this man a liar to his face, with half a dozen opposing gunmen at his back. But it seemed no great surprise to Beaverstock, or insult either. "What do you think I come for?" he asked.

"To start a fight. Eckleman hired you to try to run me out of this country!"

Beaverstock laughed unpleasantly. "Who's startin' a fight? Me or you?"

"I'm here to stop it before it gets started. I'll shoot it out with you, personal, right now." He yelled, "Pike!"

In an instant there was a pounding of feet through the little lobby and up the steps. Pike was there, and Bill Otocheck, Barrel-Roll Dunbar, Phil Carnejo, and Sleepy Gamble.

The lurking figures down the hall were now alert, each in the shelter of a doorway.

"See that they stay out of this, Pike," Thorne ordered. Then to Beaverstock, "If you want a free-for-all fight, you can have it. But I'd a lot rather have it out with you, alone. What do you say?"

Andy felt that all of this was completely uncalled for. It might be bluff, he knew, but it was the kind of bluff that might be called. Then there would be massacre. He stepped in front of his father, towering over him, and thus his back was to Beaverstock. "There's no sense in this!" he said.

"Shut up! Get out of the way!" Thorne lunged at him and tried to push him aside, but bounced off Andy's bulk.

Beaverstock growled, "You're goin' to make so much stink, you old polecat, that I'll have to kill you, I reckon."

Thorne yelled, "Here I am. Start shootin'!"

Beaverstock wagged his bushy head, "Not now. I'm goin' to see Eckleman first."

Thorne taunted, "What for? More orders? Ain't he told you what to do yet?"

"No, I ain't seen him yet. Since you think I've made a deal with him, well, maybe I can. If I've got to kill you, I'd like to get paid for it."

Thorne appeared uncertain. "If you ain't seen him yet—if he didn't send for yau, what are you doin' here?"

"If you'll give me a chance, I'll tell you."

THORNE relaxed a little. "I'm listenin'."

"I reckon you've heard about the Cattlemen's Protective League."

"I heard you had some kind of skin game. What about it?"

"The Cattlemen's Protective League stops cattle rustlin'. We stop it the only way it can be stopped—by killin' the rustlers. I hear you've been havin' some trouble in this country with rustlers."

"And you're goin' to stop it?"

"If I can get you and the other cattle-

men around here to join the League, I am."

"What does it cost to join?"

"Just fifty percent of your average loss to thieves. You can figure that yourself from your own tallies."

"Is Eckleman goin' to join?"

"Yes."

Thorne snorted derisively, "I thought you hadn't seen him!"

It was one on Beaverstock, but he rallied quickly. "I haven't seen him, yet. But I've got a bunch of men workin' for me, you see. Beeson!"

One of the figures down the hallway moved. "Yup?"

"You seen Eckleman, didn't you?"

"Yup."

"And he told you he was goin' to join?"

"Yup."

Thorne rocked back and forth, lifting himself on the balls of his feet, then settling back on his heels. "Now I know it's just a frame-up. You a-promotin' it and Eckleman a-joinin' it. And you've got the gall to ask me to join up with your killer-crooks and cow thieves!"

Beaverstock's hide was thick, but this seemed to get under it. "Them's strong words, little man!"

"They ain't strong enough. There ain't no words strong enough and low enough to use on you and Eckleman. All I can say is, just keep off my range." He turned abruptly, as though he were anxious that this should be the last word, inadequate as it admittedly was. "Andy! Pike! Come on, get out of here."

While Andy did not like the high-handed way his father dealt with the matter, he was glad enough to have an end to the tense situation. He was finding out that he had a set of nerves, after all—which could be stretched just so far. He felt a sullen resentment against his father for making such a scene, and at the same time he knew that he would have to back him up in this. If trouble came—and it looked quite likely now—it would be largely because his father asked for it.

"Sixty-five years old," he calculated bitterly, following his strutting little sire down the steps, "and he acts like a kid that ain't had his ears knocked down yet. Grandpaw didn't raise him up right, that's all."

He was anxious to get his father out of town, but Thorne wanted to walk the streets for awhile. He wanted everybody to know that he had come to town to shoot it out with Rufe Beaverstock, and the gunman had backed down.

"Beaverstock's a big bag of wind, that's all," Thorne told Jerry Sercomb when he and his gang lined up there for drinks.

Sercomb had a careful tongue. He drew seven glasses of beer and set them out before he answered. Previously, he had heard all that Thorne had to say.

"Maybe he is and maybe he ain't," was his decision.

Thorne gulped his beer and wiped the foam off his whiskers. "He's got a rep—I don't know how in hell he got it—but that's all he's got, a rep. And he won't have that long, if he sticks around here. I'd like to hear what Eckleman's got to say when he finds out that the big gunfighter he hired to run me out of the country won't fight!"

ANDY drank his beer. "You've had your say. Now, let's get home."

"What's your hurry? You gettin' scared of him now—after you licked him once?"

Andy looked appealingly at Pike, who was shoving his glass back for more. Pike didn't seem to be listening to the wrangle. The others were

equally indifferent. They were hired to fight, not talk. They were content to let their garrulous little boss do the talking for them. They would follow him blindly into any kind of fight, and Andy couldn't quite understand it. He acknowledged the power which his father had of making other men serve him loyally and willingly, fight for him and die for him—but Andy didn't feel it himself.

It troubled him to see these five gun-fighters calmly accepting the situation, knowing they might be called on any instant to kill or be killed, showing no trace of concern or even interest. Perhaps they had trained themselves not to show their true feelings. But that didn't explain the loyalty they had for their rambunctious little leader.

They worked for him, Andy knew, because they liked him. He was their mouthpiece, expressing the feelings they all had about themselves and their outfit—the PXB was the best damned outfit in the world, and they were the toughest damned crew, and they could lick their weight in wild cats and take on Rufe Beaverstock and his crew for good measure. They couldn't say this because they adhered to a code of modesty which forbade them to brag. But little Old Man Thorne could say it—how he could say it! He didn't abide by the hypocritical rule which held other men's tongues.

Nor did Thorne confine his bragging to himself. He was bragging now about Andy. "Reckon you heard what Andy done to him last night, didn't you?"

Sercomb hadn't heard.

"Andy knocked him down, took his gun away from him, and kicked him in the face!" the old man reported gleefully, although a bit inaccurately.

"Didn't do no such thing!" growled Andy.

Thorne turned on him sternly. "You told me you did!"

"I didn't tell you I kicked him in the face."

The old man shrugged. "Well, that just shows what a damn fool you are. When you had him down, you ought to have stomped his brains out. Of course, he ain't got no brains—"

He broke off. "Ain't that Jim Guenther going down the street?"

Jim Guenther was a deputy sheriff.

"Where's he been hidin' out?" Thorne wanted to know. "Why don't he throw Rufe Beaverstock in the calaboose?"

Sercomb said carefully, "Maybe you'd better ask him."

"I will. Hey, Guenther!" Thorne strode to the swinging doors, holding them open. "Come here!"

Guenther was a very tall man, who held his head down and forward as though he were continually ducking under doorways—which he had to do quite often. He was on the other side of the street, and he came obediently at Thorne's summons.

"Where the hell you been?" asked the cowman.

"I've been down to the Indian camp."

"You know Rufe Beaverstock broke Clyde Huser's neck?"

"Yes, I know it."

"What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothin'. The sheriff told me not to arrest him. He said to tell him not to run off, that's all. He's goin' to take care of Beaverstock, himself."

"With a broken neck?"

GUENTHER moved his long drooping shoulders. "When he gets well. He said it was up to him to do it."

Thorne said the sheriff was a locoed yearling that didn't have sense enough to tote a toy pistol, but he was plainly pleased with the young officer's determination to do the job, himself. "You tell Clyde Huser that he'll never have

another chance at Beaverstock. I'm goin' to run him out of the country."

Guenther offered no objections. He seemed to show but little interest in the affair.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow?" Thorne demanded. "You act like you've been to a funeral or somethin'."

"I have."

"Huh? Now, who's dead?"

"Joe Carlisle."

"Oh, yeah. Poor old Joe—say, *you* didn't go to no funeral, though. They burned him, didn't they?"

"Yes, they burned him. And they damned near burned me!" The deputy showed some sign of agitation now. "I went down there to stop it."

He stepped to the bar and called for a beer.

"Stop what?" Thorne demanded.

"The cremation. It's against the law."

"Against what law?" snorted Thorne. "Some addle-brained bunch of shysters gets together and passes a 'law' against the Indians takin' care of their dead in their own way—the way they done it a hundred years before the white man set foot in their country! A 'law' my hindend! Them Indians have laws that's got more sense than any lawyer in this country—"

Thorne was launched on one of his favorite subjects, and it took quite a while to get back to the deputy, personally. "You ought to have more sense than to go messin' around there. You know they don't allow no white men down there when they're havin' a cremation Wha'd they do to you?"

"They tied me up to a tree. They piled brush around me. They set it on fire! Them—them heathens!"

"The hell they did!" Thorne seemed to enjoy the idea. "How'd you get away?"

"They turned me loose. They was just tryin' to scare me." His hand shook as he lifted the beer.

"Looks like they put it over, all right. Maybe that'll teach you to stay away from their camp."

Guenther said, "I'm goin' to teach *them* a lesson. I'm goin' to throw them savages in jail—every one of 'em. I'm goin' to put a stop to their heathenish goings-on!"

He left under a barrage of Thorne's jibes and warnings. All of this served to get Thorne's mind diverted from Beaverstock and Eckleman, and presently he was ready to go home.

But on the way he continued to talk. It was less boastful and more charged with a feeling which Andy could understand.

"I'll never rest till I've got the Old Place back," he said. "I know Pap and Rem and Hank ain't restin' under Eckleman's feet."

WHEN he talked this way, Andy could see a glimmer of sense to all the fighting. He knew that his father had come back to Tulleride Plateau with one great determination in his heart—to reclaim the land in which the Thornes had been buried, land which had fallen to the conquering Ecklemans.

The "Old Place" which his father referred to was the original ranch of the Thornes. There was only a small tract of land connected with it now, possibly three or four hundred acres, and the house was occupied by some of Eckleman's hirelings. But out back of the house, beneath five large oak trees, was the Thorne family burying ground. Here rested all of the Thornes, including Andrew's father and his two brothers, Rem and Hank, who were killed in the first conflict.

This was sacred ground to Andrew Thorne, and he had sworn a vow to recover it from the family foe. When

Andy heard his father talk about this, he felt a stirring of the same passion which moved his father. At times like these they were more nearly like father and son.

"I thought," Andy said, "you had that all fixed."

They were riding ahead of Pike and the others, in one of the rare instances in which they found themselves alone.

"I have," said Thorne. "The Old Place will be mine in another few weeks, just as soon as the Title Law goes on the books.

"Then there won't be no more fightin'?"

Thorne gave his son a contemptuous look. "There'll *always* be fightin'. As long as there's any *men* left to fight."

It should have crushed Andy perhaps and made him ashamed, but it didn't. Andy was used to thrusts like this, and he didn't mind them. Serene in his peaceful convictions, he was entirely above, or below, these little angry jabs.

"There's goin' to be fightin' *before* I get hold of it, too," Thorne went on. "That's why Beaverstock is here."

"But what can he do? You've fought it out in the courts, and it's all legal. Ain't it?"

"Hell, yes! It's legal enough. But that don't mean anything. You've got to beat them skunks with lawyers, and then you've got to beat 'em with six-guns. I know 'em. I've fought 'em for forty-five years."

Andy was just as obdurate in his opinion. "But I don't see what Beaverstock can do about it even if, as you say, Eckleman sent for him. The courts have decided in your favor. You are gettin' the title to the land. Makes no difference what Beaverstock does, he can't change that by startin' a fight."

Thorne squinted sharply at him. "Can't he?"

"Don't see how he can."

Thorne was quiet for a little while and when he spoke it was almost as if another voice had entered the conversation. "What if he bumps me off?" And it might really have been another voice—the voice of some of those Thornes who lay beneath the five oak trees.

Andy was shocked. It was the first time he had ever heard his father admit any possibility of death. "You?" he muttered.

"It could happen," the old man said gruffly.

But it couldn't! Andy was sure of that. His father was Andrew Thorne, and Andrew Thorne was indestructible. "No—no, I reckon not."

Again there was silence, and Andy's heart was making a frantic signal for fresh air, and he realized that he had not been breathing.

"What if it did," said Thorne, "what would you do?"

IT WAS such an astounding thought, so unforseen. How could Andy answer that? "Why—why, I don't know."

"Would you fight?"

"Fight? What for?"

Thorne roared. "Fight to hold what you've got, By Gourd! Fight to get the Old Place back!"

Andy was thrown into a vast confusion. "But—why? What would I have to fight for? It's all fixed, ain't it?"

"Fixed!" snorted the old man. "Everything's 'fixed' for you, ain't it? I've done all the fightin'. I've got back all the land they took away from us. I fixed it all up fine and dandy for you, didn't I?"

Here was a new idea for Andy. He began to see himself as his father saw him, and he began to see his father a little better. "I never thought about it that way," he said solemnly. "I

reckon that's a fact. I've been—takin' a lot for granted."

Thorne was somewhat mollified. "I want you to have things," he said. "That's the reason I've been fightin' for 'em—one reason. But, By Gourd, I don't want you to let that low-down, thievin' Eckleman outfit take anything away from you after I'm gone."

"But you ain't—goin' nowhere!"

"Ain't I?" Thorne smiled on his son more like the patriarch he was. An old man, knowing that he must die, trying desperately to foresee the course of his son's life, after he had gone. "I'm sixty-five years old."

"But that ain't old!"

Oh, but it was old. It was very, very old—to a man of twenty-four. Even Eckleman, at fifty, seemed an old man to Andy.

And here was another tragedy, which both Andy and father were vaguely aware of, yet about which neither ever spoke. Because Andrew Thorne waited till he was forty years old to marry, he was two generations removed from his son instead of one.

Thorne quickly recovered his customary aplomb. "Course it ain't old. I'm good for a long time yet—and I mean *good*. I'll outlast Guy Eckleman and Rufe Beaverstock and the whole damned caboodle!"

"Sure you will!" Andy quickly agreed.

But he was shaken and thoughtful as he rode on. Each was silent and a little embarrassed by their unaccustomed lapse into intimacy.

Andy could not forget that his father had accused him of failing to do his duty in helping to fight the family battles. These fights had been in later years mostly word of mouth combats, court battles, and financial maneuvers. Andy had wearied of it all. He had been fed up on his father's boastful, threatening tirades, and had gradually assumed the attitude that it was none of his business.

But now he saw himself in another light. He saw himself as a shirker, a lazy, good-for-nothing son who was letting his sixty-five-year-old father do all the work and carry all the load, for *him*: for certainly he, and he alone, stood to benefit by his father's aggressiveness. He would inherit all the property, and he had done nothing whatever to help accumulate it. He had stood back, he had laughed, he had criticized—and he would get everything handed to him on a platter.

FOR THE next two days he prowled about the ranch alone. He was surly and silent. He didn't eat or sleep very much, and he rode aimless miles.

He had to talk to somebody about this thing, and there was only one person he could confide in to this extent. Clara.

It was mid-afternoon when he got to Tulleride and he knew Clara would be at the store. He didn't like to go there, for he felt conspicuous hanging around and talking to her when she wasn't waiting on customers. She was always so busy, flitting about the big general store, seeing customers that bored clerks didn't notice.

Of an evening it was different. Then he had her all to himself, and he was allowed to feel his importance and his usefulness in the scheme of things.

But this time he couldn't wait till evening. He found her in one of her rare moments of idleness, as there were no customers in the store. She was talking to a couple of clerks near the dry goods counters, and when she saw him she didn't smile and wave for him to come on back as usual, but turned away from them quickly and came to him.

"I was in hopes you'd come today!"

she said.

"Why? What's up?"

"It's something Yreka told me—you know her?"

"Yreka? Oh, yeah, she's the Indian gal. Married Young Carlisle, didn't she?"

"Yes. You know old Joe Carlisle is dead. That's Young's father."

Andy nodded.

"Well, Young drinks a lot, and he's been drunk ever since the cremation. Joe Guenther tried to stop the cremation, and they scared him half to death and he's raising a big fuss about it—but what I wanted to tell you was something Yreka told me." She seemed reluctant to tell him, or unable to find the right words.

He waited.

"Yreka says that Young is mixed up with some plan to steal your cattle!"

Andy could have ordinarily laughed that off, and he tried to, now. "Is that all? Why, them Indians are always stealin' cattle. It don't amount to anything."

"But this does. Rufe Beaverstock is behind this!"

For a moment, Andy was still untouched by this news. The expose of a rustling scheme was of no importance, compared to the personal problem which was facing him. "That don't surprise me—" he began, and then the significance of it flashed upon him. Didn't this prove his father was right, after all? Was this a part of a bigger scheme, a plan which Eckleman was engineering?

"Is Eckleman in this?" he asked.

He could see that Clara was thinking his thoughts. "I don't know. Yreka doesn't know that, and I doubt if Young does. He has been hired by Beaverstock."

"And Beaverstock has been hired by Eckleman, my old man says."

They were standing near a side door, which opened quietly, and an Indian entered carrying a saddle. He looked at them, then moved stealthily past.

"Where are you going, Birdsong?" Clara asked sharply.

"See Buckley."

"What do you want to see him about?"

"See Buckley," repeated the Indian, and walked on.

CLARA said, "Maybe I'd better see about this. They're always bothering dad, trying to sell him stuff they've stolen.

She tried to overtake the Indian, but he glided quickly around a corner and got to the railing behind which Buckley sat. Buckley was busy at his desk.

Andy followed Clara and heard the Indian ask, "Want to buy a fine saddle?"

Buckley looked up. "Hello, Birdsong. Where'd you steal that saddle?"

"No steal saddle. Buy him. Sell him cheap."

"You're a liar, Birdsong," Buckley said indulgently. "Come on, now, where'd you get it?"

Birdsong said, "No use burn him up. I took him."

"Burn it up? You mean—is that Joe Carlisle's saddle?"

Birdsong said, sullenly, "No use burn him up. Fine saddle."

Andy and Clara listened, their interest drawn momentarily to this talk.

"Sure it's a fine saddle," Buckley said. "But, hells fire, man! They'll scalp you if they find out you stole it."

Birdsong was a man of convictions. "No use burn him up."

It seemed to Andy that he had a pretty good argument on that score. The Mohave custom of burning all the personal possessions of a man along with his corpse was indeed a useless destruction of property.

"Burn everything else up," Birdsong was saying.

"Burn money you give, burn everything—but no saddle. Him fine saddle."

Andy glanced quickly at Clara, and saw that she had caught it, too: "Burn money you give—" What did he mean by that? Surely Buckley hadn't given money to be burned with the corpse!

"Are you sure—?" Buckley began, and then looked around. He saw Clara and Andy then. He stared, and his voice lashed out with sudden harshness, in sharp contrast to the indulgent tone he was using with the Indian. "What do you want?"

Andy supposed the question was addressed to him, since this was usually the way Buckley spoke to him, but it was Clara who answered. "Nothing," she said, spiritedly. "I tried to head him off, so he wouldn't bother you, that's all."

Buckley waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. "All right, he's not bothering me. I want to talk to him."

Clara and Andy turned to walk away, and Clara said, "I'll talk to Yreka again and find out everything she knows. She'll do anything to keep Young out of it—why, here they come now!"

Young Carlisle, a big beak-nosed buck, was striding down an aisle in the hardware section, while his wife, a handsome, nut-brown woman, followed at his heels.

Clara hurried forward to meet them, and they stopped at sight of her, but gave no indication that they had ever seen her before. "I want to buy saddle," said Young Carlisle. His tongue was a little thick, and he weaved slightly.

"All right," said Clara, with all the graciousness she bestowed on the best white customers. She led the way to the saddle racks, and Andy loitered near.

"I want this one," said Young Carlisle, indicating the fanciest, silver-trimmed number in the store.

"That costs a hundred dollars," said Clara gently.

"All right. I pay twenty-five dollars down."

Clara looked surprised. "Have you got twenty-five dollars?"

YOUNG Carlisle drew a handful of silver and currency from his pocket. "Twenty-five dollars," he said.

Clara didn't take the money. She looked at Yreka, and an unfathomable message passed between them. Andy watched all of this with some impatience—his thoughts revolving around the question which was uppermost in his mind: Was his father right? Would there be another showdown fight such as had once driven him from Tulleride Plateau?

Slowly, Clara took the money. "I'll see if—we can sell it to you that way," she said.

Young Carlisle followed her toward Buckley's desk, and he saw Birdsong at about the time Birdsong saw him. There was a brief moment of indecision on the part of Birdsong, very brief, and then he whirled and ran out of the side door, leaving the saddle.

Everybody watched Young Carlisle as he strode to the saddle and picked it up. "Birdsong steal saddle?" he asked.

Buckley said, "He brought it in here."

Young Carlisle said, "My father's saddle."

Buckley said, "It's a fine saddle."

And it was. It was as good in every respect as the one for which Young Carlisle wanted to pay a hundred dollars—except for the shininess of the new one.

"You wanted a saddle," Clara said, quietly, moving up beside him. "There

it is."

He stared down at her, with a little light coming into his opaque eyes—a fierce, defiant light. "My father's saddle!" he said.

"It *was* his saddle," she contradicted gently. "Now, it's yours."

"Nuts!" was Young Carlisle's astonishing response.

Clara looked at her father.

"There's no use to burn up a good saddle, Young," said Buckley. "You might as well take it, since—it's here."

"This is my father's saddle!" Young Carlisle repeated sternly. "He needs saddle in Happy Hunting Ground."

Clara made a motion of helplessness, and her father shrugged. "All right, Young. Whatever you say. Burn it up if you want to, but according to the law you're entitled to your father's property."

"That is *White man's* law," the Indian pointed out contemptuously.

At once he became more amiable, however. "I want to buy saddle," he said. "I give you twenty-five dollars now. I pay you the other in two weeks."

Buckley wagged his head in amusement. "You want to pay a hundred dollars for a saddle, and you're goin' to burn up one just as good. Does that make sense?"

Young Carlisle took the money from Clara's hand and thrust it at Buckley. "You told me I could have saddle if I —"

"All right, all right!" Buckley interrupted hastily. "You can have the saddle. Take it along. Take it along!"

Young Carlisle went out carrying both saddles, and his wife walked behind him. She hadn't said a word.

"I'll have to get her alone to talk to her," Clara said. "Maybe she didn't tell me everything—at least she didn't tell me she was going to give Young that twenty-five dollars."

"Was it her money?" Andy asked, absently. His interest in the Indians was limited mostly to the possibility of getting information out of them about the pending cattle raid.

"YES. She saved it up, penny at a time, taking it out of the money she earned making baskets, and kept it hidden from him. I made her do it. Young spends everything he can get his hands on for liquor. He has wanted a fine saddle for years, like his father's, but of course he wouldn't work for it. They caught him one night trying to break into the store, and he confessed he was after a saddle. Dad wouldn't prosecute him, just gave him a 'big white father' talk. Of course, it didn't do him any good. He's just a lazy good-for-nothing. Yreka is a wonderful girl. It took a lot of courage for her to come and tell me about the rustling gang."

"Just what did she tell you?"

"She said that Young had been hired by Beaverstock to help steal your cattle. That's about all she knew. She was trying to talk him out of it—why, that's why she gave him the twenty-five dollars, of course! He hired out to Beaverstock so he could get that saddle, and she promised to buy it for him."

"Will that stop him?"

"Possibly. They're just like children —very bad children, sometimes."

"Yeah. Rufe Beaverstock's a bad boy, too. I wonder if we could buy him a pretty saddle and get him to call the whole thing off?"

Clara had an idea. It brightened her eyes, and they danced with a daring light. "We might get Young to *take* the job!"

"Do what?"

"Go ahead and take the job—and then tell us all about it."

It was very simple, an elementary kind of double cross, but Andy hadn't

thought about it simply because his mind didn't work that way. "You reckon he would?"

"I don't know, but we can try it. Now that he's got the saddle, he'll be hard to deal with. We can tell him that he need not pay the other seventy-five dollars—but, of course, that isn't worrying him any. Maybe we can find something else he wants as bad as he wanted the saddle."

Clara declared she would go to see Yreka about it, and try to make the arrangements with her first. "She looks very submissive, trailing around at his heels, but you'd be surprised how she manages him," she confided.

"Red or white, they're all the same," Andy said.

"What?"

"Wives."

She knew she was supposed to laugh, and she did a little. "How would you know about that?"

"Well, you see, there was my first wife—she led me with a lass-rope, then my second wife, who used a halter. My third wife wasn't so bad, but I swore I wouldn't get tied up with no woman any more."

"And here you are about to get roped again!"

"What makes you think that?"

"Why, I've got my lariat around your neck. Can't you feel it?"

As a matter of fact he could. He could feel it around his neck, and away down in his heels, every time he looked at her. And he knew that she was of more importance to him than anything else.

"Better get away from that horse's neck," he warned. "Don't you know where you're at?"

She looked somewhat startled, as if she had forgotten where she was, and what they had been talking about.

So often it was that way. They might be talking about important things, or things they regarded as important, and then a word of some kind would set them off, probably a jesting word that had no meaning whatever to anybody except themselves, then the world would go whirling off and they would be utterly alone.

THIS cattle stealing business was certainly important, since it might start another rangeland battle for survival, and yet it had all been driven from Andy's mind in an instant. And apparently, from Clara's.

"Oh!" she said. "Andy!"

Those few inches between them was still a space, and it had to be maintained, under the circumstances. He grinned down at her. "Here I am, away up here."

"There's going to be trouble. I feel it in my bones."

Andy felt that, too—probably because she did. "That's what the old man says," he muttered. "Say. Do you think I've been wrong all the time about—him fightin' everybody?"

She seemed instantly to understand what he was trying to say, and what was troubling him. "So that's it. I knew you were worried about something more than just the cattle rustling."

He waited. "Well, do you think I'm wrong?"

"No! I think you're right. I think you're the rightest man in the world. I don't want you fighting everybody the way your father does. I want you good and easy-going and—just the way you are!"

This sent a warm flash of gratitude and self-justification through him. She thought he was right. So he must be right.

"Of course," she went on, "I can see his point, too. He thinks you—should help him more. He wants you to be more serious, and take on more responsibility."

"No he don't! He wants to run the whole show himself. He's never given me a chance to take any responsibility."

"Maybe that's because he thinks you are—are not ready for it yet."

"He thinks I'm a dumb cluck, and says so."

"That's just his way of talking. He doesn't really think that."

"Oh, no? You don't know my old man."

"I think I know him better than you do."

After a moment, he nodded. "Maybe you do. I don't know him very good. Anyway, I didn't until just lately. I've got to know him a little better. He thinks I'm layin' down on the job. He thinks I'm not fit to take over things when he—if he—if I ever had to."

"He's wrong," Clara said quietly. "He's very wrong about that."

Again her words warmed, and cheered him. This was what he needed, and had to have frequently—a contact with her which made him feel that he was of some importance in the world.

"And you're going to show him that he's wrong!" she said.

"I wish I knew how!" he said fervently.

"By breaking up that cattle stealing scheme of Beaverstock's."

It was at least something definite and practical, and he was anxious to make the attempt. However, Clara convinced him that he should do nothing until he saw Yreka again and learned all she could about it.

Obviously, Andy had to stay out of this deal, and he realized vaguely that it was a ticklish one involving feminine subtleties with which he was entirely unfamiliar. The Indian woman was anxious to keep her husband out of it and would not want him to be used as a stool pigeon. On the other hand, Clara explained, Yreka liked her very much and would do most anything for her.

IT WAS a big favor to ask and Clara wondered if she could do it. Yreka trusted her. Yreka was her friend. And this was almost like betraying her, asking her husband to take the double-dangerous job of double-crossing Beaverstock.

Clara wondered what reward she could offer him great enough to be worth the risk. She knew that her gratitude would be the only reward Yreka would want. And her gratitude would indeed be great if she could help Andy to trap Beaverstock. It was not simply a matter of trapping a cattle rustler. Nor was it even a matter of heading off a possible range war which would surely result in wholesale tragedy. It was even more than that: It was a matter of enabling Andy to strike a blow in his own defense, prove to himself and his father that he was not a "dumb cluck who wouldn't stand up for his own rights."

Andy's pacifism, Clara knew, bordered on an inferiority complex, which had been instilled in him by his father. All his life, Andy had heard his father belittle him, and he had gradually accepted his father's judgment. He admitted he was not a fighter, he honestly believed that he wasn't—when he could have licked any man in the country, including a handful like Andrew Thorne. It was ridiculous to see him cherishing such an erroneous illusion about himself. It was an idea he had seized upon to protect himself from the jibes of his father. He didn't really think it was foolish to fight, when he had something to fight for. Clara knew this, and she was going to give him something to fight for. "And may God forgive me, and protect him!" he prayed.

She went to the Indian village that evening, and found Yreka alone in her wickiup. The hut was clean and orderly, and Yreka was weaving a basket.

"Why," Clara asked, "did you give Young that twenty-five dollars?"

"He wanted the saddle," Yreka said, as though Young's wants were something she should not question, only fulfill.

"He's wanted that saddle for a long time. Why did you give it to him now?"

Yreka said, "To keep him from stealing cattle."

Although this was as Clara had divined, it did not make her mission any easier. "This man Beaverstock," she began carefully, "is a very bad man. You know that, don't you?"

"Maybe so. He's bad if he gets my man to steal cattle."

"Exactly. And since he has already told Young about it, he is apt to try to hold him to it."

Yreka's eyes glowed darkly. "Young promise me he wouldn't do it."

"Did Young ever break his promise to you before?"

Yreka's hands, which had continued to work with machine-like precision, were suddenly caught in the stillness which settled over her. "He has broke his promise this time?"

"Not that I know of," Clara said hastily. "But there is always the chance he might—if Beaverstock gets after him again. There's only one way to make sure he won't. That is to trap Beaverstock, and stop the cattle stealing."

Yreka went on with her work, and Clara gave her plenty of time to think it over. "How you trap him?" Yreka asked presently.

"We can do it with Young's help—I think. He can go ahead and take the job, just as he told Beaverstock he would. Then he can tell us what the plans are."

THERE was a stricken look in Yreka's black eyes, and Clara felt treacherous. "It's very important, Yreka, or I wouldn't ask it. It's—" It was too hard to explain, and too much involved in her own mind—"it's the safest way to do it, I think."

The Indian woman looked at her steadily. "It is safe for my man? Or for yours!"

Now they were down to the fundamental issue. It was her man against Clara's. And for the moment they were enemies, watchful, suspicious.

"No, Yreka. It isn't safe for either one of them. It's very dangerous."

Her honesty won back some of Yreka's confidence. "Then why we do it?"

"Because it is more dangerous if we don't. Look at it this way—for this is the way Beaverstock is going to look at it, you may be sure. He has told Young what he intends to do; now if Young backs out, Beaverstock will be afraid he will tell. And Beaverstock will run no chances. You understand?"

Yreka understood. She was rigid with this sudden understanding. "He won't tell!" she said.

"Whether he does or not makes no difference. He will have to convince Beaverstock that he won't. And that will be hard to do." Clara added a thrust which was unfair and she knew it, but she couldn't resist. "As a matter of fact, he has already told, you know."

"Only me!" Yreka said quickly. "And I told just you." She grew suspicious again. "You tell anybody?"

It was hard to tell the truth, and yet it was impossible to tell anything but the truth, looking into her black, searching eyes. "Yes," Clara said, "I told Andy."

Again they were at swords' points.

"Why you tell him?"

"If anybody has a right to know, it's certainly him! It's his cattle they are going to steal."

A rush of hoofs and the barking of dogs drowned out their argument. Young Carlisle rode up, and leaped from his shiny, new saddle which was mounted on a scrubby spotted pony, and came into the hut. He froze up for an instant at sight of Clara, then began a hasty search in the straw mattress and blankets which were spread on the floor in one corner.

"Where is gun?" he demanded.

"What you want with a gun?" Yreka asked.

"They come after me, put me in jail!"

"What for?"

"Nothing! I done nothing!"

Yreka said calmly, "Then they won't put you in jail."

"They got Chief Tansak and Tall Timber and Oglethorpe and Paca!"

"Oh—for that!"

Young seized her. "I won't go to jail for that! Give me gun!"

Clara cried, "What is it, Yreka?"

She didn't hear the step behind her, but both Young and Yreka heard it. They swung toward the doorway and Jim Guenther, the deputy sheriff, stood there, his head lowered to a level with his shoulders.

"All right," he said. "Give him a gun, if you want me to shoot him."

YREKA was in front of Young as if she were trying to hide him, and, stretched to her full height, she was almost as tall as he. "You no arrest my man," she said. "He done nothing."

"Nothin' much," Guenther said sarcastically. "Just tied me to a post and built a fire around me."

"They just scare you."

"You're damn right they did! And now it looks like they're the ones that scared."

Clara interposed, "I'm sure Young didn't mean any harm to you, Mr. Guenther."

He stared through the gathering shadows at her. "Oh, I didn't know that was you, Miss Clara!"

"You're not really going to arrest him, are you?"

His head moved stubbornly. "Got to do it."

"They didn't actually burn you, did they?"

"No, but they burned the old man."

She found out that he was talking about the cremation. "But they've been doing that all the time! It's their custom."

"It's against the law, the way they do it—without gettin' no death certificate filed, or nothin'."

"Why, yes, I suppose it is against the white man's law. But it doesn't hurt anybody."

"How do you know it don't?"

"How could it?"

Guenther fixed her with a stern look. "You believe you'll go to Heaven when you die?"

"Well—I hope so."

"Then you wouldn't want anybody burnin' up your body, would you?"

Clara knew most of the standard arguments about cremation, but she couldn't believe the deputy sheriff was concerned with the theological aspects of the matter.

"No, I don't want to be cremated—not for several years, anyway. But that has nothing to do with it. These people are not trying to make us adopt their customs, and we've got no right to make them adopt ours."

"We've got laws to enforce, and it's my duty to enforce 'em," the deputy said, with finality. "Come on, young buck, you're headed for the hoosegow."

Instead, the young buck headed for the open spaces with a flying leap that took him past the deputy sheriff. The

officer drew his gun and fired once, before Young Carlisle got his horse—and before Clara got to the deputy. She ran into him and nearly knocked him over. By the time he got straightened up, Young was well on his way.

"I'll get you for obstructin' justice," the deputy yelled at Clara as he ran for his own horse.

The following day, the town of Tulleride was in a turmoil. The Indians, who usually kept to their side of the river except for trading trips, gathered along the wide main street and collected in force near the county jail where Chief Tansak and three of his companions were held. Young Carlisle had so far eluded capture.

Thorne came riding into town about noon. He was alone. When he spotted Andy in front of Buckley's store, he reined over to ask, "Where the hell you been? What's goin' on, anyhow?"

Andy hadn't gone back to the ranch that night. He had been waiting and hoping for some word from Young Carlisle, and he knew that one sure way to blow up their plan was to tell his father about what he had learned. This would only confirm his father's firecracker convictions, and he would start popping off. Even if he could be counted on to restrain himself and work in secrecy, he would take everything into his hands and Andy would lose the chance of making good on his own hook.

"Jim Guenther put Chief Tansak and some more Indians in jail," he said.

"What for?"

"Because they burned old Joe Carlisle, I reckon."

THORNE snorted. "The damn fool! Is he tryin' to start an old-time massa-kree?" He looked up and down the street and his eye came to rest on the group of Indians near the jail. "They won't stop at burnin' up a corpse. They'll burn down the jail, burn up the town, maybe. And I don't know as I'd blame 'em much."

"No tellin' what they'll do," Andy agreed. "They're all steamed up about it."

Thorne glanced at him sharply. "You look like you was kind of steamed up, yourself. What's it to you?"

"Nothin'. No more than it is to you."

Andy's conscience was bothering him a little over keeping secret the information which concerned his father as much, if not more, than it did him. He was also getting nervous with the waiting.

Thorne grunted. "Humph! Well, I'm going to see Clyde Huser and make him turn them Indians loose."

He had always been foremost in championing the rights of the Indians to dispose of their dead in accordance with their ancient customs. It was only natural that he should be in the thick of any fight, and here was one that appealed to him for reasons other than the mere fact that it was a good fight.

For years Thorne had carried on his crusade to recover the bones of his family from the possession of the hated Ecklemans and to liberate their souls from the torture which they must be undergoing. He had thus convinced himself that his fight with the Ecklemans was on a high moral plane, and he could even shed a tear or two when he was in the proper mood over the desecration of the bones of his forefathers.

So he felt himself more capable of understanding the Mohave point of view. They, likewise, cherished their dead. Any other method of disposal would have been for them a desecration and would have created untold agony for the departed souls.

So he wheeled his horse and rode away with a show of indignation and a secretly growing enthusiasm over the prospects of a renewal of this perennial

row.

Andy watched him ride away, well aware of the fact that he had a great deal of influence with the sheriff, and found himself already considering the Indian crisis solved. This habitual reliance on his father to solve all problems was hard to break.

I ought to tell him, he thought. He can handle it better than I can—

"Andy!"

He turned at the sound of Clara's voice, which was suppressed with excitement. "It's all fixed, Andy," she whispered. "Yreka found Young and told him what we wanted him to do, and he's going to do it!"

Exultation swept Andy's doubts away. "How did you fix it?"

"I just asked her to ask him—of course, if it hadn't been for me he would have been shot, and he wants to show his gratitude."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Then how are we goin' to find out anything?"

"Yreka is going to tell me. It's the best way, for if Young came to you they might see him. We've got to be very careful that *nobody* finds out—you haven't told anybody, have you?"

"No."

SHE SAID, "Wasn't that your father?"

"I didn't tell him."

She looked relieved. "It's better that way. All we've got to do now is wait till we hear from Yreka. Then —"

Then the real job would start.

Clara was suddenly overcome with misgivings. She had been so absorbed in getting her plan into operation that she had almost forgotten the dangers. If harm came to Andy, it would be her fault. She had practically pushed him into it.

"Then," Andy finished, "maybe *I'll* get a chance to do something."

That was it. That was why she was doing it. Here was Andy's chance to do something. Here was his chance to prove what he could do. And, she told herself, it was worth all the risk.

After she had gone back into the store, however, she could not stifle the fears and misgivings that continually arose in her. Was she doing the right thing? What if Andy got killed?

Over and over these thoughts whirled through her mind. She looked across the store at her father, sitting at his desk. She trusted his judgment in all things, and had always confided in him.

Why shouldn't she tell him about this? He might help her. It would help just to tell him, and ask him if he thought she was taking too much risk. He didn't like Andy very well; but that was because he hated Andy's father. Anyway, he would advise her what to do.

Of course, she had pledged Andy to strict secrecy and had asked him not to tell *his* father, but that was different. That was *his* father. He was such a terrible little tyrant. Completely impossible. While her father was so good and kind and understanding. It couldn't hurt anything to tell him.

She went up to his desk. "Dad I—want to talk to you."

He stopped his work at once and sat back in his chair. "I thought you would."

"Why?"

He smiled. "I know when you've got something on your mind."

"Maybe you know what it is."

"No. But what ever it is, let's have it."

"It's—about Andy." She caught the flash of disapproval in his eyes, and a queer reticence came over her. For a moment she was sorry she had come to him.

"Well?" he said, making an obvious effort to appear indulgent. "What about Andy?"

"I've done something—I don't know whether I should. But you know how his father lords it over him—"

His look stopped her. It was a look of bitter hatred, and it revealed an ugliness in him which she seldom saw.

"Yes, I know," he said shortly. "Go on."

It was too late to stop now. "I found out that Rufe Beaverstock was going to steal some PXB cattle and I told Andy about it—" Again she stopped, the words dying in her throat. Another change was coming over him — a strange, astonishing change. His face was turning pale. He sat up straight, clenching his hands.

"How did you find that out?" he asked harshly.

SHE stammered. "Yreka told me. Why?"

"Yreka! The b —" He choked, staring at her in silence. Then, more naturally, "You mean Young Carlisle's wife?"

"Did you know about it?" she gasped.

"Me? Why, no, of course not!"

But she was almost positive that he had. She was bewildered and very sorry that she had confided in him.

"Just what did Yreka tell you?" he prodded.

She explained everything, and he listened without moving. Then he sat back in his chair. "This is very interesting," he said. "I'm glad you came and told me about it."

Clara wasn't. She felt that she had betrayed Andy. She had made him promise to keep the secret, and she had told it.

"I don't know why I did it," she muttered. "I'm going to have him tell his father all about it —"

"Oh, no!"

She was astonished at his vehemence. He relaxed again, and smiled at her fixedly. I think you did just right. This will give Andy a chance to show his mettle. That's what you want, isn't it? You want to put him to a test, don't you, and see what he can do?"

Was that really what she wanted? "No! I don't want to put him to any test! I know all about him. He's fine. He's good and he's brave. But nobody else knows it. I want everybody else to know it, too!"

"Of course, of course. I understand." He patted her hand. "Don't worry about it now. You've been very clever. I'm proud of you, pet."

Byrd Buckley's pride in his daughter was a genuine thing. He disapproved of Andy largely because he thought no man was good enough for his daughter, and still he was wise enough to know he could not keep her forever. He wanted her to be happy, and he was about to resign himself to the idea that she could be happy only with the son of Andrew Thorne, one man he hated and feared.

It all went back to the time Thorne was in open warfare with the Ecklemans. It hadn't been Buckley's idea to sell Thorne defective ammunition — that had been Beaverstock's scheme, when he was called in. And it had worked quite well. Thorne could prove nothing, but he hadn't been fooled.

Buckley had often regretted his part in this deadly fraud, not because it resulted in Thorne's defeat, but because it forced him into a partnership with Beaverstock and Eckleman. Buckley was not above driving a sharp bargain, and his trading with the Indians had been a series of sharp bargains, but he didn't often indulge in the cruder forms of outlawry. Now, more than ever, he was sick of his association with Beaverstock but he was forced to play along

with him.

He saw that it was up to him to get word to Beaverstock that he was being double-crossed. Naturally, he didn't intend to reveal the fact that his own daughter had planned the double-cross. Nor did he especially want any harm to come to Andy, knowing how much this would hurt Clara. But this consideration weighed nothing against the necessity of keeping Andy from trapping Beaverstock, and thus revealing the whole plot.

Buckley hated to run the risk of being seen with Beaverstock, but he had to see him right away. He slipped out of the store by way of the rear store room, then went down the alley to the back of the Hoover Hotel.

An outside stairway led to a small balcony, all in plain sight of anyone who came along the alley. However, there was no one in sight. Everybody seemed to be out front, watching the excitement there; so Buckley went quickly up the stairs and into the long hallway which ran the length of the building.

HE KNEW that Beaverstock's room overlooked the street, and he counted on finding him there, where he could see what was going on. Buckley got down the hall without meeting anybody, but as he came to the door of Beaverstock's room, a voice halted him.

It was a guard, who stood in an adjoining doorway. "Where do you think you're goin'?"

Buckley said nervously, "I've got to see Beaverstock."

"What about?"

"It's a personal matter."

The guard approached cautiously. "Put your hands up!"

Buckley sputtered, "But I'm a friend of Beaverstock's!"

"Maybe so," grunted the guard. "Get your paws *up!*" With a gun in one hand, he patted Buckley about the hips and under the arms. "Aw right," he said. "Now, wait a minute," and he rapped on the door, once sharply and twice lightly.

Beaverstock appeared.

"This lug says he's a friend of yours," the guard announced.

Beaverstock grinned. "All right, Beeson. Come in, friend."

Buckley stepped inside quickly and Beaverstock shut the door.

"Is all of this manhandling necessary?" Buckley asked irritably.

Beaverstock chuckled. "Beeson thinks it is. He looks after me pretty good. This is the first time you've been to see me, ain't it? I thought maybe you was mad at me, or somethin'. I reckon I was a little drunk the other night —"

"Never mind about that. This is not a sociable visit.

Beaverstock's smile faded. "Not sociable?"

"I've got something to tell you, that's all. Did you hire Young Carlisle?"

Beaverstock nodded.

"Well, he's going to double-cross you."

The permanent wedge-like from settled deeper between Beaverstock's eyes. "He's goin' to — what?"

"He's going to find out just what your plans are and then tell Andy Thorne."

Beaverstock began to smile again, but the frown was undisturbed. "Oh, is he?"

"Does this Indian know your plans?"

"Not yet."

Buckley felt much relieved. "Good. Then you won't tell him. You can get rid of him somehow."

"But I *will* tell him. I don't want to get rid of *him.*"

Buckley nodded, understandingly. "Handle it any way you want to. It's up to you, now."

"Sure, it's up to me, now. And much

obliged to you, my friend."

A thumping of hoofs and then a shout came up from the street, and they went to the window to look. They saw the trail of dust which Andrew Thorne left behind him, and heard him yelling at Jim Guenther.

"The sheriff wants to see you!"

Thorne's voice carried plainly along the street, but not Jim Guenther's sullen response. Presently the two men rode away together.

In a little while they came back. Guenther went into the jail and a moment later the four Indians filed out.

THORNE held up his hand. "My friends!" he orated. "You're free to go now. You have been released on your own recognizance. That means you will have to come back if they send for you. But I don't think they will. I don't think they can make the charges against you stick."

His copper-skinned audience was spell-bound, under the magic of his words and his deeds. "The sheriff turned you loose because I told him how it was. I thought you was gettin' a raw deal and I wouldn't stand for it. I think you've got a right to run your own business in your own way, as long as you don't bother nobody. And if anybody bothers you, I won't blame you for burnin' his pants off."

This idea seemed to meet with instant approval. Thorne held up his hand again. "But if this thing comes to trial, don't run off, and don't fight any peace officer that comes after you. Come along peaceful and I'll be here with the best lawyer in the state."

Andy stood back at the edge of the crowd—just a part of the admiring audience. In spite of his cockiness, Andrew Thorne was a leader, a man who stood for the right, a man who always had his way. And Andy admired him. Andy only wished he was more like him.

The crowd broke up slowly.

"Come on. You can go home now."

Andy was startled. This was his father speaking to him. This cocky little man, he reminded himself, was his old man.

"Yeh, pretty soon," he mumbled, and moved away to avoid questioning.

Later in the afternoon he saw Yreka going into Buckley's store, and he waited anxiously. In a little while she came out, and he started in. He met Clara at the door.

"You got word from him?" he asked.

"Yes! But let's don't stand here talking. Come on back."

Over a momentarily deserted dry goods counter spread with colorful bandanas, she explained, "Beaverstock is pulling the raid tonight! All of his gang have orders to gather at the fork of the Lazy River and Big Fish Creek at nine o'clock, each to go by a different route. Young doesn't know what the plans are after that."

"That's all I want to know. Tonight at nine o'clock, Lazy River and Big Fish Creek!"

"But—what are you going to do?"

It was all cut and dried, as far as Andy was concerned. He was going out there and round up the gang.

"By yourself?" Clara asked.

"Why not?"

Clara said, "Now you're talking like your father!" And there was no approval in her voice.

"But there's nothing to it," he insisted. "I'll get there first and pick out a spot where I can see what's goin' on, and then when the right time comes I can step in and take charge."

"Andy, you're an idiot!"

He grinned. "That's what my old man says."

"You think you can go out there by yourself and 'take charge' of a whole gang of men like that?"

"Listen, I've seen my old man ride into a bunch of rustlers and—" He saw the look on her face and broke off with an aimless gesture.

"That's entirely different," she said.

"What's different about it?" he demanded.

"Well, your father is — entirely different. He can get by with things like that. He's so little and so—loud. He just out-talks them."

"He out-shoots 'em, too."

ADDED to her anxiety was a kind of wonder, now. "I thought you didn't like your father's way of doing things."

"Some things he does all right."

"And you think you can—" she hesitated, "do things the way he does?"

"I can handle this thing," he said sharply. He saw her fears and her doubts, and he resented them. And he refused to ask anybody to go along with him.

"This is my job," he said, "from here on out."

It was no doubt a foolish thing to do, but he felt he had a right to be foolish once in his life. It might be his last time, as well as his first; but it was already doing strange and stirring things to him. It was cutting him loose from invisible ties that had always held him, and he felt actually free for the first time—free to act on his own initiative in an important matter. Nobody to boss him, nobody to heckle or belittle him.

Clara seemed to understand. She said, "You're right, Andy. It's—it's your job now. Good luck."

He rode westward out of town, as if he were going home, but when he reached the timbered Puma Hills he swung south instead of north. Keeping to the western ridge of them he could overlook Lazy River valley, and he could see in the distance the line of trees which marked the course of Big Fish Creek, which flowed southeasterly to join the river.

Both moon and sun were in the sky, the full moon rising above the sharp peaks of the Clawhammer Mountains to the east, and the sun settling down upon the rounded sandy slopes which formed the western boundary of Lazy River valley. There were no clouds, and the haze which sometimes lay over the valley had been swept away by a brisk wind, which now was dying away. The night promised to be light and still.

Andy reflected that this, too, was in his favor. He could hear all sounds and see well in the moonlight, and yet could keep concealed by taking advantage of the night shadows.

He kept to the timber until he reached a point just above the junction of the two streams. Twilight was filling the valley now and he waited a little while for the light of the sun to fade, before he turned into a ravine which dropped downward toward the river. Tying his horse to the root of a fallen cottonwood tree which blocked the ravine, he took the rifle from his saddle and went the rest of the way on foot.

A V-shaped bluff with the crumbling point extending out into the water, formed the fork, and on top of this were willow trees. It offered a good vantage point, and Andy decided to wade the shallow water to get to it.

He had just stepped into the water when a voice halted him.

"Goin' swimmin'?"

There was a chuckle in it, a rasping kind of laugh which Andy remembered quite well. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the bulky figure of Rufe Beaverstock beside the light trunk of a tall cottonwood. He could also see the gleam of the sixgun which the other man held.

"Maybe," he said, testing his voice and finding it light and careless and

well under control, but there was no way of controlling the sickening thud of his heart. "Are you?"

"Naw," said Beaverstock. "I'm fishin'. And it looks like I've caught somethin'."

ANDY gripped his rifle tightly and wondered if he stood any chance of turning around and getting in a shot before the sixgun cut him down. He was standing in the edge of the water, facing the middle of the stream; it was an awkward footing, and it was quite likely that he would slip and fall if he tried to turn quickly.

"The big ones always get away," he said, making a joke of it. One hell of a joke. He had started out to do big things, hadn't he? All by himself. Going to round up the gang, wasn't he? Just like that. There was really nothing to it, all he had to do was get there first and get the lay of the land and then walk out and take charge—

His stomach turned over with a flop, like the big fish that got away.

"Not all of 'em," said Beaverstock. "I've got hold of one now that won't."

"What are you goin' to do with him?" Andy badgered.

"I'm goin' to leave him layin' right here on the bank." This grim jesting seemed to please the big gunman immensely.

"Don't make sense to me," said Andy, turning warily.

"Is that a rifle you've got? Oh, I see you was goin' huntin'. Not swimmin'.

Andy turned around. He was holding the rifle in the crook of his right arm, pointed downward. All he had to do was lift it hip-high, rip it back, and let it go. Yes, that was all—and do it before Beaverstock could pull a trigger.

"Go on," said the gunman. "Have a try at it."

Andy stepped up on the bank, and was one step nearer the other man. Another two or three steps and he could reach him with the barrel of his rifle. A thrust with it would be quicker than trying to shoot. He understood now why men fought with bayonets.

"You'd just as well try your luck," Beaverstock went on, like a jocular barker at a carnival. "You can't lose — no more than you would by not tryin'."

There was so much joking, Andy wondered if Beaverstock really meant to kill him. "What have I got to lose?" Andy asked, in a careless manner of one taking a free chance on a kewpie doll.

"That's the spirit! You've got to die sometime."

"Sure. Sometime." He took another step, and it was another step toward death. The chill certainty of it swept him and he saw the expectant gleam in this killer's eye.

"And it won't be long now," said Beaverstock softly.

"And it won't be long now," said his lips. His mouth was dry, his lips stiff. "What do you want to kill me for?" he asked.

"Humph! I didn't expect you to whine."

Andy wasn't whining. He was only talking for time, time in which he could take another step. If he was close enough, even after he was shot, he might be able to get his hands on the man. "I just asked you a question, that's all."

"Since it's a question, I'll answer it. You've got that comin' to you anyway. There's so many things you don't know about this deal. All you know is what the Indian told you."

HE WAITED for some corroboration, but Andy was silent.

"You thought that was pretty smart, gettin' the Indian on your side. And I guess it was. But you was pretty

dumb, comin' down here by yourself. I thought you would bring your old man along. I wanted to knock both of you off at the same time. Then my job would be all over."

"What's your job?"

"To stop the rustlin' in this country."

Andy's mind refused to deal with any facts except the fact of death, so near at hand.

"You're on Eckleman's range here, you know," Beaverstock went on. "You're a rustler. So's your old man. I plug you and say, 'There's your rustlers, boys.' And that's all there is to it."

"But you couldn't get by with that. You couldn't prove nothin'. Nobody would believe you."

"I don't care whether anybody believes me or not. And I don't have to prove anything. They would have to prove that I'm a liar. And they can't do it. Eckleman will swear we caught you stealin' his cattle, and who's to say we didn't?"

Although the prospect of being shot had not been a pleasant thing to face, this was very much worse. He couldn't reason it out, he couldn't pick the flaws in Beaverstock's scheme if there were any; for rage and desperation were blacking out his reason. He was on the point of doing just what the killer had been coaxing him to do when something began to pound in his head: Don't do it! Don't do it!

That's what it sounded like to him, but as the pounding grew louder he realized it was the beat of hoofs. Suddenly they were all around him. He heard his father shout, "Here he is! There he goes!"

There were shots and a yell.

"Go after him! Don't let him get away!"

This was his father, still yelling. Andy came out of his trance and began to see what was going on. He saw a man falling from his horse, and he heard familiar cursing.

"He crashed through the brush and found his father lying on the ground. "Are you hurt?"

"No, you damn fool! I'm makin' mud pies!"

He was writhing on the low muddy bank, trying to keep from sliding into the water. Andy lifted him and carried him in his arms to a grassy spot out in the moonlight. The inert body was so small, so easy to carry. It was like carrying a child, a badly hurt child—but not like listening to one. He cussed as only a man with a long lifetime of practice could cuss.

Profanity was his ether. He poured it on himself, and he poured it on Andy and everybody else. Andy interrupted the steady flow of it to ask him where he was hit.

"In the guts!" he roared. "What in hell did you come out here by yourself for? Why didn't you tell me about this?"

Andy was feeling for the wound and he found it. He found blood that was hot to the touch, flesh that was seared and torn. He was dizzy, as if he himself had been losing this blood. He could feel the bullet in himself, he could feel it in his stomach—the pain, the nausea, the rage.

But he couldn't cuss like his old man. All he could do was mutter, "Here — I got to get your shirt off."

"What for?"

"Got to tie you up —"

"Take your own shirt off! Don't pull me that way!"

A RIDER came pounding down the slope toward them.

"Andy!"

It was Clara. She slid from her saddle and came running to him, wanting to know if he was hurt. He was a bit confused and the pain was still in his stomach, and he didn't answer at once.

"You *are* hurt!" she cried.

"No," he said. "No, I'm not hurt."

"Honest?"

Thorne sputtered, "It's *me* that's shot! You damned nitwits!"

"Oh —!" Clara seemed to be considerably relieved. "It's you, Mr. Thorne!"

"Yes, it's me, Mr. Thorne! What in hell are you flutterin' around here for? I told you to go home!"

"Yes, but I couldn't! I had to know—"

"You know too damned much, anyway. Andy! Get me up from here, and get me on my horse."

"You can't ride a horse," Andy told him.

"The hell I can't! Get my horse!" But he couldn't even sit up. He tried to, very hard.

Andy said to Clara, "I'll get Doc Pinkston and a spring wagon. You stay here."

"You ain't goin' to haul me off in a wagon!" yelled Thorne. "I can ride, dammit! I can—" His voice broke—"I ain't no corpse, to be hauled around in a wagon. There ain't no cow thief in the world that can kill me! There ain't *nobody* can do it—there ain't no bullet big enough—" He choked. "—it ain't no bigger than—the end of your finger! I'm a man! It's just a little old chunk of lead—"

And he was just a little old man, a sobbing little old man, that you could pick up in your arms and carry like a child. He was just finding out how big a forty-five caliber bullet is, when it's in a man's belly. He was just a little man, finding out how big Death is.

They took him home that night in a spring wagon, and he didn't know it. He was saved that humiliation by Doc Pinkston, who shot something in his arm, and stopped his wild ravings.

He didn't come to until about noon the next day and he looked up at Andy and Clara and Doc Pinkston who were all standing around his bed. And he said, "Dammit to hell! What are you all gawkin' at me like that for? You think I'm goin' to die? Well, I ain't!"

His voice was gone, it was only a hoarse whisper, and the fire in him was almost gone. He wasn't fooling anybody, not even himself.

"Am I goin' to die, Doc?" he whispered.

The Doc said, "You're hit pretty bad."

Thorne looked at all the faces, and he looked at Andy longer than the others. "You think I'm goin' to die?" he asked.

Andy shook his head. "There ain't no bullet big enough to get you—that's what you said, yourself!"

"Pussywillow!" said the old man.

His breathing was painfully loud in the still room.

"You know damn well I'm goin' to die. And so do I. I've been workin' and fightin' for sixty years. I'm tired."

He looked tired and almost peaceful. He had probably been neither tired nor peaceful for sixty years. "I've been tellin' myself and everybody else what a rip-snortin' son-of-a-gun I was. I don't know whether I fooled anybody else or not, but I never did fool myself. You know why I done it?"

HE WAS looking at Andy, but Andy didn't say anything.

"I done it because I was—so little."

In the face of this confession, Andy was ashamed of being so big. He could feel his bulk, and the room got smaller, and the other people in the room got smaller, and he was standing there among them, an awkward abnormity.

"If I'd of been a big man, I reckon I'd of been like you—easy going, lazy, not afraid of nobody."

Andy was bewildered. Was this what his father really thought about him?

"But I was a little man, and I had

to fight everybody to show 'em they couldn't lick me."

Andy looked down at his father and knew him, at last. Now, that his father was dying. Why had he waited to say this until he was dying? Why, Andy wondered miserably, hadn't he been able to see it all, until now?

Pike Gaskin came softly into the room, hat in hand.

"Pike!"

This sounded more like Andrew Thorne. And the foreman said, "Yes, sir?"

"Did you catch Beaverstock?"

Pike looked worried. "No, we didn't. Not yet."

"Then what in hell you doin' standin' around here?"

"Well, I—I just wanted to see how you was gettin' along?"

"Never mind about me! Go get Beaverstock—and I mean *get* him!"

He was the old warrior again, and Andy saw that he had been under a delusion. His father would not die in peace. His father would die as he had lived—fighting, forever fighting.

"Yes, sir," said the foreman, and left.

"What are you goin' to do after I am dead?" Thorne fixed a stare upon his son, a stare which held much of the old disapproval.

"I—I don't know. What do you want me to do?"

The old man glanced at Clara. "You'll marry her, of course."

"If she'll marry me, I will."

Thorne nodded. "She will." Suddenly he barked at Clara, "Won't you?"

"Yes," she said.

Thorne shut his eyes and pain twitched his lips. Doc Pinkston stepped up to the bed and felt his pulse. Thorne threw off his hand impatiently, "Get away! Don't bother me."

He glared at Clara. "Your father's a crook," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

She paled a little. "I know you don't like him, Mr. Thorne," she said steadily. "But he isn't a crook."

Thorne snorted. "He's a cheat. He's a double-crossin' dog. And you're his daughter."

"Mr. Thorne," Clara said, very pale now. "You're a dying man. If you weren't, I'd slap your face."

Thorne chuckled. "You're his daughter, and I never thought I'd be content to see a son of mine marryin' his daughter. But I am. You're all right. You'll do."

Clara said, coldly, "Thanks. I'm glad you approve."

"Oh, it wouldn't make any difference to you whether I approved or not. You've made up your mind to marry him and you will. I knowed that when you come and told me that he'd gone down there by himself tonight. But just remember this, he ain't goin' to have anybody doin' his fightin' for him, now. He's got to do it himself."

Clara said, "He will!"

ANDY was silent. He was crushed with his failure, not entirely because he had failed, but because he felt himself responsible for his father's condition. If he hadn't taken the bit in his teeth and gone out alone after Beaverstock, this wouldn't have happened. If he had come to his father in the first place, as it had been his duty to do, his father would have handled the whole thing—and would have done it successfully. Andy was sure of that.

"Will you?" Thorne asked, glaring at him. "Will you fight to hold what I got for you? Will you carry on the fight till you beat Guy Eckleman and get the Old Place back?"

He didn't seem to expect an answer to his question, which was merely an expression of his scorn.

"No, you won't" said the old man.

"You'll set around on your hindend. You'll let 'em take everything away from you! As soon as Guy Eckleman finds out I'm dead, he'll move into my territory. He'll take over my range. He'll run you out of the country!"

It was all bitterly humiliating, because Andy felt that he deserved it. He did not even feel the resentment which usually protected him, for it was impossible to carry his resentment to his father's deathbed.

Thorne looked appealingly at Doc Pinkston, who sat on the foot of the bed, thoughtfully pulling at his stubbled white beard. "Doc, I can't die! I *won't* die!"

The Doc said, "Maybe you won't, Andrew."

The old man lifted an arm in a gesture toward Andy, then let it fall helplessly. "You see what I'm up against, Doc? I *can't* die, I tell you!"

"All right," agreed the Doc mildly. "Don't do it, then."

Thorne swore. "You think I haven't got a chance, don't you?"

The Doc said carefully, "I don't think any ordinary man would have a chance in your condition. But you're no ordinary man, Andrew. Maybe you'll pull through. Maybe you'll never die like ordinary mortals."

Thorne was staring at him with all the terrible hope, with all the tragic desire to live that filled him now and kept him alive—as if the doctor had the power of life and death over him.

"Maybe I won't," he hoarsely whispered. "Maybe I ain't!" Presently, he said more calmly, "I'll tell you one thing, Doc. I'm goin' to live for three weeks."

"Three weeks? Why, for just three weeks?"

"Because that's when I get the Old Place back. I can't die till then. They're countin' on me."

"Who?"

Thorne was staring up at the ceiling. "No mortal man," he muttered. "No ordinary mortal."

Presently he muttered, "I'll send for Ty. That's what I'll do—I'll send for Ty! He can run the ranch if I—when I—"

Again he appealed to the Doc. "How long have I got?"

The Doc pulled his beard. "That's hard to say, maybe a day or two, maybe a week."

"But not three weeks?"

Slowly the Doc shook his head. "I don't see how you can."

Desperation burned brighter in the old man's eyes. "I got a brother," he explained. "Ty's about my size, the damned little runt! He run out on me, before, and I ain't had nothin' to do with him since. But he can help me, now. I'm goin' to send for him."

"How can he help you?" asked the Doc.

"He can make out that he's me, if I die before three weeks is up!"

THIS was too fantastic for the practical old doctor to consider. "What good would that do, even if he could?"

"Three weeks from now the Title Law will be on the books. Then I get the old ranch that I've been fightin' for. If I die before then, Eckleman will start somethin', sure as hell. But he won't dare, as long as I'm alive!"

The Doc murmured a noncommital, "Well?"

"Well! Don't you see? I'll get my brother here. Nobody knows anything about him,—nobody but you three." He gave each of them a burning, searching look. "Then when—if I die, he'll take my place. Eckleman won't know I'm dead."

"But other people will know it," Doc Pinkston pointed out. "You couldn't keep your death a secret, you know."

"Why couldn't I?"

"For a number of reasons. In the first place, a man has to be buried when he dies. You can't bury a man secretly. That's against the law."

"Law!" snorted Thorne. "Hell! Why couldn't I?"

"Yes, that's been your policy, Andrew, whenever the law stood in your way. But after you're dead, you're going to have to change your policy, I'm afraid. You may be up against another Law then."

"I reckon a man can say how and where he wants to be buried, can't he? I reckon a man's family will respect his dyin' wishes, won't they?" His eyes turned to Andy, fired with the new challenge.

"I'll do whatever you want," Andy said. "But I don't think you could keep folks from knowin'. Everybody on the ranch would know it, and it would sure leak out."

In spite of all their arguments, Thorne clung to his idea and pledged them to secrecy. He dictated a telegram to his brother, and ordered Andy to take it to Clementine Junction, forty miles away, so it wouldn't go through the office at Tulleride. "And stay there till you get an answer!" he said.

Clara followed Andy as he left the room. "Can you—forgive me?" she asked.

"For what?" There was nothing to forgive her for, though he knew quite well what she was talking about. He was hurt and disappointed to learn that she hadn't enough confidence in him to let him carry out the scheme alone—and yet if she hadn't gone after help, where would he be now? She had undoubtedly saved his neck, but he wasn't grateful to her for that. He would rather have died than have things turn out this way.

"What did you go and tell him for?" he asked roughly. "After you had fixed it up for me, what did you have to spoil it for?"

She said, meekly, "I don't know. I just couldn't let you go out there by yourself after a whole gang of men—"

He laughed harshly. The "gang" had turned out to be one man, and even that one man had been too much for him.

"What happened to the rest of them, anyway?" she asked suddenly.

"Beaverstock was there alone, waitin' for me."

"Then—why, Young must have double-crossed us!"

Andy grunted. "Must have. Well, I've got to get goin'." He walked away from her.

SHE was still at the ranch when he got back from Clementine Junction the next day, and she met him at the gate. He dreaded to hear what she had to tell him, and waited stonily.

"Did you get an answer to the telegram?" she asked anxiously.

"He nodded. "He's comin'."

"Oh!" She seemed queerly disappointed. "How soon?"

"Soon as he can get here," said Andy impatiently. "How—how is he?"

"About the same, I think. He slept a little. But he's awake now, and anxious to see you."

Thorne was propped up in bed with his head bandaged until only his eyes, nose, and mouth were visible.

"My God!" Andy muttered. "What's happened?"

"Did you get an answer?" Thorne demanded.

Andy stared at him in astonishment, and Clara answered for him. "He's got an answer. Where is it, Andy?"

Andy fumbled for the telegram and handed it to her. Thorne seized it eagerly.

"What's the matter with his head?" Andy said. "He wasn't hit in the head!"

Clara smiled a little. "It's his idea. He will tell you."

"So he's comin'!" Thorne rejoiced. "I knowed he would. The damned little runt. He never thought he'd get any of my money. He'll come a-runnin', all right."

He looked up at Andy. "What you gawkin' at?"

"Your head! What's the matter with your head?"

Thorne chuckled grimly. "I got shot all to hell. You know that."

"But you wan't shot in the head! You was shot—"

"I was shot in the head!"

Andy glanced in bewilderment at Clara and she said, "Your father has decided that he was shot in the head. That way, it will be easier.

"Easier?" Andy echoed. "What will be easier?"

"Dyin'," said Thorne, his eyes gleaming with sardonic mirth.

"I thing it's silly!" Clara burst out. "But your father—"

"'Your father'," mimicked Thorne, "is runnin' his own funeral." He explained, "With my head wrapped up like this, everybody will think I'm shot in the head. Nobody knows any different but you and her and Doc. You ain't goin' to tell."

"But what—"

"When Ty gets here, nobody else is goin' to know about that, either. And when I die, he's goin' to crawl into this bed with his head wrapped up like this!"

Andy found his explanation almost as astonishing as his appearance had been. "But—why—?"

"So nobody'll know I'm dead!"

Thorne seemed to be enjoying the idea, and Andy grappled for some good reason for this ghastly hoax. "But what do you care if—if you die, why don't you want folks to know it?"

"I've told you why! As soon as I die, Guy Eckleman will move in on my range. He brought Beaverstock in here to start this fight. Both him and Beaverstock knowed I wouldn't join that stinkin' outfit. They knowed I'd fight 'em if I caught 'em on my range. That's what they wanted. They wanted to kill me!"

Not so long ago, Andy had scoffed at this idea. But now he had every reason to believe it true.

"Well—" Thorne's rasping whisper sank to an almost inaudible level—"it looks like they've got me." He drew himself up on his elbows. "But I'll lick 'em—even after I'm dead, I'll lick 'em!"

CLARA went to him. "Don't get excited, Mr. Thorne. You know what the doctor said—"

He shoved her away. "They ain't goin' to know I'm dead. They ain't goin' to know they've killed me. I won't have 'em crowin' over my dead body. I won't have 'em trompin' my bones, like they have Pap and Hank and Rem and all the rest! You understand me?"

Andy muttered, "Yes, I understand you."

"All right." Thorne sank back. that you do what I tell you to."

"Yes, sir," Andy said.

Thorne was exhausted, breathing hard. "When Ty comes, I'll turn things over to him, so he'll know how to run the ranch after I'm gone."

It didn't hit Andy just then, because he was still numbed by the prospect of his father's imminent death, and was trying to accustom himself to the tragic effort of his father to arrange to keep his death a secret.

But it hit Clara, and hit her hard—The fact that Thorne intended to turn the ranch over to his brother, the fact that Andy would have to stand aside and would likely come under his uncle's

domination, as he had always been under his father's. Clara saw that Andy's shackles would remain, handed on from his father to his uncle. She perceived that Andy would be free only when his father died. She had wanted him to die. She knew it was wicked, but she had wanted him to die. So that Andy could be free. But now—

Now, she was pale and trembling, staring at Andy.

And Andy wondered vaguely why she was so disturbed, and he set it down to the same causes which moved his so strongly.

"You hear me?" rasped Thorne.

"Yes, sir."

"Ty says he'll arrive Wednesday night at Clementine Junction. You meet him there. Nobody's to know anything about it."

And nobody did. The train got in at midnight, and there was no one at the little junction station but the depot agent. Andy found that his Uncle Ty, whom he had never seen before, bore little resemblance to his father except in size. Uncle Ty was a mild-mannered little man. He spoke piously and without profanity.

On that twenty-five-mile ride to the ranch, alone at night, with a family death hovering over them, they became more intimate than would have been possible under other circumstances. Uncle Ty was a farmer. There was nothing of the braggart about him. He spoke self-deprecatingly about his farm, which, Andy learned, comprised 1600 acres of the choicest land of the Rio Grande valley. He had more men working for him than Andy's father had.

"Just Mexicans," he said. "I don't pay 'em much and they don't work much. We take things pretty easy down on the Rio Grande."

It warmed Andy's heart to hear somebody else talking this way, and he was glad his uncle had come.

The sun was brightening the eastern sky above the peaks of the Clawhammer Mountains when Andy and Uncle Ty got home. Approaching the house, Andy was gripped with the dread which always took hold of him when he returned after a forced absence. He had kept almost constantly at his father's bedside, and Clara had stayed there to help and be with him.

IN THE pale light of breaking day, she was waiting for them, and Andy could see that she had news—bad news. But she didn't speak. She only looked at Uncle Ty, staring at him till he said apologetically, "I'm Uncle Ty," then under her cold stare, added more formally, "I'm Andrew's brother."

"Are you going to do what he wants you to?" she asked.

"Why—I don't know. What does he want me to do?"

She glanced at Andy, and he said, "I didn't tell him."

Uncle Ty looked from one to the other questioningly. "Tell me what?"

"He wants you to take over the ranch," Clara answered, looking him over. "Do you know anything about running a ranch?"

"Why—not much. I'm a farmer."

Clara looked triumphant. "Then you can't run this ranch, can you?"

"Why—I don't know—"

"He's got a 1600-acre farm," said Andy. "He works more hands than we do."

Clara was very quiet. "He wants you to crawl in his bed when he dies, wrap a bandage around your head, and pretend that you are him! Will you do that?"

Uncle Ty gasped. "Why—I don't understand—"

"You will when he tells you about it," Andy said brusquely. "Come on."

As Clara moved to follow them, she

said, "Pike's dead."

Andy swung about. "What?"

"They found his body. They found Young Carlisle too. Beaverstock run off a bunch of your cattle and Pike was on his trail."

This, then, was the bad news he had seen in her eyes. It added to the sense of impending doom that hung over him: His father was dying, the enemies of his father were gathering their forces and had struck their first blow. When and where would the next one fall? What could he do about it?

He couldn't leave his father, on his deathbed. And he didn't dare to take matters in his own hands again, so long as his father lived. His first attempt to do that had brought on the present tragic state of affairs.

"Andy!" Thorne's voice, throttled to an exhausted pitch, was still caustic and far-reaching. "What the hell you talkin' about out there? Where's Ty? Didn't he come?"

"Here I am, Andrew," called Uncle Ty, his voice filled with sad, brotherly benevolence.

Thorne's fiery eyes seemed to have burned the holes in the bandage through which they blazed. "You talk like a dam' preacher. Are you a preacher?"

"No, no, Andrew. I'm a farmer."

"A farmer!" snorted Thorne. "I might have knowed it. A damned farmer. You think you can run this ranch?"

Still with benevolence, Uncle Ty said, "I think I can, Andrew."

"Humph! A farmer! You know how to shoot a gun?"

Uncle Ty smiled. "Have you forgotten the old days?"

"The 'old days' are still here! My foreman has just been killed. My cattle have been run off. Guy Eckleman and Rufe Beaverstock are closin' in on me. And look at me! Can't even set up in bed!"

UNCLE TY said soothingly, "Take it easy, Andrew. You always was one to worry. Let me handle everything."

"Can you handle Guy Eckleman and Rufe Beaverstock?"

"I'll do my best," said Uncle Ty modestly.

"Your best will have to mighty damned good. I've got some good men, all they need is somebody to take charge of 'em. Can you boss men? Can you make 'em fight?"

"I reckon you've forgotten the fights we used to have, Andrew," Uncle Ty reminded him gently.

"No, I haven't forgot. That's the reason I sent for you. I didn't know you'd turned into a damned farmer."

"I'm sorry we haven't kept in closer touch with each other, Andrew."

"Humph!" Thorne regarded him disapprovingly. "You look mighty soft to me."

"I can still do a pretty good day's work."

"Well, all right. You've got a lot of work ahead of you. Of course, there ain't nothin' you can do till I die. You've got to keep under cover till then."

"Maybe you won't die, Andrew."

"I *won't* die! I'm goin' to keep on livin'—in you! Do you understand?"

"Y-yes, I think so."

"You've got to take my place! Can you do it?"

"I'll try. But I don't see any use of waiting till you die. I can start right now."

"Kinda anxious, huh? But everybody knows I'm shot all to pieces, and can't get out of bed."

"Does Beaverstock know how bad you're hurt?"

"I reckon not."

"Then if I wrap my head up and let myself be seen, he and other folks will think you're not hurt very bad."

Thorne's eyes burned a little brighter. "By Gourd! You ain't lost all your brains, anyhow!"

This little flare of excitement seemed to consume him.

He wilted down, while they watched in silence.

"Good idea—Ty," he whispered hoarsely. "You—go ahead. I can't last much longer. Can 't last till we get title to the Old Place—"

After a pause, he said, "When I die, don't bury me."

They looked at one another wonderingly.

"Andy—come here."

Andy stepped closer to the bed.

"You go get Chief Tansak."

"You mean bring him here?"

"Yes, bring him here. I want to talk to him."

Andy didn't know what he wanted with the Mohave chief, but he was determined to carry out his wishes to the last.

Chief Tansak dozed on the bank of the river, surrounded by a dozen dogs. His fishing pole was stuck in the mud. The Chief opened one eye and looked at Andy sourly.

"My father wants to see you. He's —sick."

"Your father?"

"Andrew Thorne."

The chief opened the other eye and sat up. "Sure. I come." The chief hadn't forgotten that Andrew Thorne had got him out of jail. Without another word he rode the twelve miles to the ranch, half-naked, entirely dirty, astride a fine golden-colored gelding, followed by his dogs.

There was a brief dog fight at the ranch, which Andy broke up by locking his Irish settler in a feed room, and when he got into the house, Chief Tansak was standing by the bedside.

"I'm goin' to die, Chief," Thorne was saying.

THE Chief nodded, and grunted.

"You want to do me a favor?"

The Chief nodded and grunted again.

"I want you to cremate my body."

This time the Chief grunted, but did not nod. "You white man," he said.

"After a man's dead, it don't make any difference whether he's white or red, I reckon."

Andy listened in numbed silence. He wanted to protest, but he felt that he had no voice in this matter, which concerned not the living but the dead. He felt that he had already lost his father, that his voice was coming from another world. Chief Tansak might have been a priest, acting as guide and intermediary for the departing soul.

Andy turned to Clara and found the same kind of spell on her. Uncle Ty was staring in strange fascination at the Chief.

"You good man," said the Chief. "I burn you."

Clara's fingers sank into Andy's arm. "You can't let him do this!"

Thorne turned his weirdly burning stare upon her. "What do you care?"

"It's—not decent!"

"Decent?" A chuckle rattled in his throat. "You think it's decent to put me in the ground and let the worms eat me up?"

She said no more. She merely clung to Andy.

"What have you got to say about it?" Thorne asked Andy.

Andy muttered, "Nothin'."

"And you?" Thorne looked at his brother.

"Why—I hardly know what to say, Andrew. This is—well, I never heard of anything like this, but—I guess it's none of my business, if you want it that way."

"I want it that way! And I don't want none of you to try to change it after I'm dead. I want Chief Tansak

to take my body and burn it, and I don't want any white man to be there and see it. You understand, Chief? I don't want any white man to know that I'm dead."

"No white man allowed at ceremony," said the Chief.

Thorne seemed satisfied. "You'll keep your mouth shut about it. You Indians are good at that. Lots better than us whites." His eyes were closing, and the fire in them was dying out. "Everything's fixed now, ain't it?"

These were the last words he said. He died quietly and contentedly—so different from the way he had lived. Andy could not believe that he was dead. He could feel his influence more strongly than ever.

If he was dead now—and his hand was growing cold—if he was dead, he had survived death. He had willed to go on living, and his presence was everywhere.

They could burn his body. They couldn't destroy him. And keeping his death a secret was only keeping people from believing a falsehood about him. If people were told that he was dead, they would think he was gone. So it wouldn't be right to fool them.

The Indians took the body of Andrew Thorne away that night. They came after the ranch was in darkness, and they went away in the dark. Silently and solemnly, they carried him away like the messengers of Death and Darkness.

There was a weird strangeness and unreality to it all which held Andy in its spell. He was an outsider, an onlooker.

Nobody spoke to him and he watched as from a distance, a very great distance, unable to interfere and not wanting to. He couldn't have stopped them, no more than he could have stopped Death itself when it entered the house.

AND when they went away, and when at last morning came, nothing had changed very much. It might have all been a fantastic dream. Everywhere about the ranch, work went on as usual. So far as the ranch hands knew, and so far as the world knew, Andrew Thorne still lived. And there he was in bed, if they cared to look at him.

. . . And how was the Old Man this morning? Feeling better this morning, much better. Ate a hearty breakfast. Thought he'd be up in a day or two . . . Well, well, that was fine. But just what everybody expected. Hell, you couldn't kill the Old Man! . . .

Andy felt little grief. He felt only a complete submission to the living will of his father. To all intents and purposes that will remained in the person of Uncle Ty. Andy accepted him as the living expression of his father's dying wishes. Others would accept him, for awhile at least, as Andrew Thorne in the flesh.

There was one person, however, who refused to accept him either in the flesh or the spirit. That was Clara. Her hostility was evident at once. Andy couldn't understand it.

"He's runnin' the ranch now," Andy said. "It's just like the old man was still runnin' it."

"That's just it, Andy!" she said. "Oh, don't you see? You never had a chance as long as your father lived. And now—now *he* steps in. He's got no right to be here. He can't run this ranch—not the way things are now. If he was anything like your father, he might do it. But he isn't. He's just a mealy-mouthed old fraud!"

Andy resented this. There was also a deeper resentment slowly building up in him. She had shown her lack of confidence in him when she went for help. And she was responsible, even more than he, for the death of his father.

"I think you'd better go home," he told her gruffly.

She flushed. "Do you think you can send me home like a child?"

"You're actin' like a kid."

"Not as much as you are, I hope! Letting your uncle boss you around—letting him take the property that is rightly yours—"

"I don't deserve anything! I never did anything to help the old man."

"And you're not going to get anything! And neither is that old fossil of an uncle. Both of you are going to lose everything. As soon as Beaverstock finds out your father is dead—and you can't keep it a secret for long—all hell will break loose!"

"I can't keep anything a secret as long as you know it!" He turned around and walked away from her.

For a moment she was blindy furious, and then suddenly her anger was gone, and she was fearfully alone. They had never quarreled before. She had often got mad at him, but he would only laugh. And then she would feel ashamed of herself, and it was all over.

This time he hadn't laughed. This time she had hurt him deeply, and he might never get over it. He needed her now more than ever. And he had told her to go home.

It was the only thing to do. She went to the stables and got her horse, refusing a ranch hand's offer of assistance. It was the hardest thing she had ever done, to ride away and leave Andy, knowing the danger he was in, feeling useless and unwanted. What could she do to save him? How could she make him see his peril? He was still bound by the shackles his father had put on him. The only difference was that now his uncle would rattle the chains. Unless he threw off these chains and asserted himself, he was doomed. Doomed actually to die! He didn't have the spirit, he didn't have the daring and the initiative to fight the crafty and overwhelming force he was up against—not so long as he bowed to the wishes of his dead father.

What could she do to arouse him?

She had seen him truly aroused but once. That was the night he knocked Beaverstock down. What had aroused him then? Her screams. Her danger. If anything could arose him it would be her peril, not his. But she was in no danger. She was riding away from danger.

When she got back to town, she stopped at the store to see her faher the first thing. Previously she had sent him word that she was helping Andy take care of his father, but hadn't seen him since the night Thorne was shot.

She saw him at his desk talking to some man, and she didn't notice who it was till they both looked up. Recognition came as a shock.

This was Guy Eckleman.

She had seen him in the store many times, and she had seen him talking to her father often. But it was different now.

There was no positive proof that he was behind the plot to kill Andrew Thorne, but Clara had listened to Thorne's denunciations and accusations until she was ready to accept them.

ECKLEMAN was a quiet-spoken man with steel gray eyes and a trap-like mouth. He arose courteously and took off his hat. Clara stared at him, gripped by uncertainty and fear.

He smiled gravely and spoke her name. The smile changed him, banished the hardness of his mouth and reminded her that he was a friend of her father's and couldn't be as bad as Andrew Thorne had said. But his eyes didn't change and either did her feelings toward him.

"Back at last?" said her father. It

was a reprimand for having gone to the PXB ranch and for staying so long, and yet it carried a hesitant kind of anxiety.

"How—how's the old man?" he asked.

She said carefully, "He's been pretty bad."

"You think he'll get well?"

New doubts assailed her. Why was her father so anxious about Andrew Thorne? He hated him, that she knew.

"Doctor Pinkston said that he would probably never die like an ordinary mortal."

And he hadn't! This, she told herself, was the tragedy of it all. If he could have died like an ordinary mortal, if all his hatreds could have died with him, leaving Andy free and unencumbered, free to be himself—

"He—he knows who shot him, of course," said Buckley.

Clara couldn't her eyes from Eckleman's face. "Of course," she answered quietly.

"I reckon he cusses me all the time," Eckleman said with a forced laugh.

She nodded.

"Maybe he thinks I had something to do with—this."

She said, "Yes, he does." She talked about him as if he were still alive, because she knew the grim necessity of keeping his death a secret; and yet it didn't seem to her that she was deliberately deceiving them. She didn't think about him as being dead.

"I reckon he cusses me too," said Buckley.

Again she wondered at his anxiety. "He didn't say anything about you—much."

Buckley turned to a boy who had just come up. "What is it, Arthur?"

Arthur, who worked in the bank across the street, recited rapidly: "Mr. Frisby says for you to come over to the bank. They've got Birdsong over there. He's tryn' to cash a check for a thousand dollars you give to Young Carlisle."

Sweat was glistening on Buckley's forehead, and his temperature seemed to shoot up suddenly higher. He muttered an oath and started out.

Clara's surprise was mixed with a new sense of dismay. She didn't understand it at all—why had her father given Young Carlisle a check for a thousand dollars? One answer left her shaken and filled with dread. Could this have been the payoff, resulting in Young Carlisle's betrayal of Andy?

She hurried after her father, across the street, and into the bank. She noticed that Eckleman was coming too, but keeping in the background.

Jim Guenther, the deputy sheriff, and Tom Frisby, the bank president, had Birdsong corraled in the banker's office.

As Buckley rushed in, Frisby handed the check to him and asked, "What about this?"

Buckley snatched the check, scarcely glancing at it, and thrust it in his pocket.

"I didn't think you'd want us to cash it," said the banker.

"No," said Buckley. "No, of course not."

"This man wouldn't tell us where he got the check," the banker went on curiously.

"It's all right," said Buckley quickly. "I—I'll take it."

THEY waited for him to make some explanation, but he was silent.

"What do you want me to do with him?" asked the deputy.

Buckley looked as if he would like to have him shot, but all he said was, "Oh, that's all right. Turn him loose."

The deputy seemed reluctant to do this. "Did he steal the check?"

"I—I don't know," Buckley said.

After a silence, the banker spoke, "Young Carlisle is dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"His widow could cash the check, of course, if she were entitled to it."

Birdsong was moving stealthily away. Guenther suddenly sprang after him. "Did you kill Young Carlisle?"

Birdsong made a dive for the door, but the deputy caught him. "You killed Young Carlisle, didn't you?"

"No! White man killed him!"

"Then where'd you get the check?"

"I took him. No use burn up money!"

Guenther held him by the collar. "No use—what?"

"No use burn up money! I took him."

The deputy shook him. "Who was goin' to burn it up? Where?"

"They burn Young Carlisle. They burn check—if I don't get it."

The deputy turned to Buckley. "I want to know what the hell this is all about," he demanded truculently. "What did you give Young Carlisle a thousand dollars for?"

Clara held her breath, awaiting the answer.

"I didn't give him a thousand dollars!" Buckley said.

"You wrote that check, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

Buckley looked around at the curious faces, at the strained anxious face of his daughter. "I wrote that check after Young Carlisle was dead," he said, with a sigh of resignation. "Every time an Indian dies, I write a check and give it to them to burn along with his body."

There was an astonished silence.

"What's the purpose of that, Buckley?" asked the banker.

"It's good business, that's all. The Indians think I'm givin' that much money. You know, when they bring their baskets and blankets into my store to sell, I give 'm a check. They come across here and get the money. They don't have bank accounts, of course, and they think that a check is real money. I get their friendship by writing these checks and lettin' them burn 'em up."

Clara let out a little cry of relief .

"For God's sake don't 'm!" Buckley pleaded. "If they find out I've been cheatin' them, they'll burn me!"

The banker was shaking his head in a flabbergasted manner. Birdsong had slipped away.

"But you haven't been cheating them!" Clara declared.

"They'll look at it that way. Of course I didn't mean no harm, and it don't hurt anything. Burnin' up checks ain't like burnin' up all the good stuff they destroy when they have these cremations—"

"Another cremation!" The deputy was aroused by the word. "I'll stop that!" And he rushed out of the bank.

CLARA saw him coming back, about a half an hour later. He was riding in a dead run, as if pursued by the Devils and his hordes. She fully expected to see a pack of Indians after him. But all that she and the crowd that gathered on the street could see was the smoke of a fire at the Indian camp.

The deputy stopped at the sheriff's house, and in a little while came riding back. Eckleman hailed him from in front of the bank, and he reined up.

"What's wrong?"

"Everything!"

"Don't look like you got in there in time to stop the cremation."

"No, but I got there in time to see who they was burnin'!"

"Wasn't it Young Carlisle?"

"Yes—and Old Man Thorne at the same time!"

The astonishment which his words caused was enuogh of itself to stop

Clara's heart, and the look which passed across Eckleman's face added to her panic.

The secret was out. She had known that it would come out sooner or later, but she had hoped and prayed for a little time to think and to plan.

Yet what had been the good of all their plans? She had made plans, Andy had made plans, and Andrew Thorne had made the most elaborate, the most fantastic plan of all. He had planned to cheat death, to hold what he had after death. She had planned the capture of Rufe Beaverstock. And she had lost Andy.

She watched Eckleman, wracked with hopelessness and dread. What would he do now? If she was right in her suspicions, if Andrew Thorne had been right, Eckleman's first move would be to contact Beaverstock. If he did that, then she would know her worst fears were true.

Eckleman was moving leisurely away from the crowd, which had gathered around the deputy. He seemed to have nothing definite in mind. He hesitated in front of Sercomb's Saloon, then went in.

Clara realized how impossible it would be for her to follow him, to find out where he was going, or what he was going to do. She had better go at once and tell Andy what had happened!

Before she could act on this impulse, Eckleman came out of the saloon, glanced across the street at the Beaver Hotel, then sauntered toward it.

Clara wondered if Beaverstock might be at the hotel. Beaverstock had shot Andrew Thorne and he had raided the PXB range. Would he dare to come back and show himself in Tulleride?

So far as she knew, he hadn't shown himself; and what better place for him to hide safely and comfortably to await developments than his own hotel room? It would suit him much better than some hideout in the hills.

Tense with excitement, cold with fear, and strong with sudden determination, Clara started for the hotel. There was no need or possibility of snooping. She would simply walk in and ask Two-Bit Hoover if Beaverstock was there. He might lie to her, but she could tell if he was lying.

She stepped into the lobby not more than two minutes after the door had closed behind Eckleman, and she found it empty. She waited at the desk for a minute, then walked back toward the curtained doorway which marked Hoover's living quarters.

Eckleman's voice came from the floor above and that of another man which she would have sworn was Beaverstock. She couldn't hear what they said, and the sound of a closing door cut off their voices.

Impulsively, with the blood pounding in her ears, she turned toward the stairway. It was terrifically important to know if Eckleman was up there talking to Beaverstock—she might even hear what they were saying!

NOW that she was trying not to be seen or heard, she no longer had the self-assurance which had brought her here. The rattling of a paper on the desk, the slight creak of a board under step, sent chills through her as she crept up the stairs.

The hallway above was filled with startling sounds and fearful shadows. She imagined that some of the doors closed softly at her approach, and she listened briefly at each one as she moved toward the front of the building.

At the last door, the one to the room overlooking the street, she heard the voices again. As she moved nearer, they came a little plainer. One was Eckleman's, of that she was sure. And the other—was the other Beaverstock? She was at the door, now, straining to

hear—

"What are you doin' there?" growled a voice behind her.

Her knees collapsed, but somehow the rigidity in the rest of her body held her up. She couldn't speak. She couldn't make a sound.

A hand was on her shoulder, twisting, crushing. "Turn around here, lemme look at you!"

She didn't turn with her own strength —she didn't have that much strength— but now she was facing him. She had seen him on the street a few times, but she didn't know who he was.

He stared at her a moment, then rapped on the closed door, once shaprly, twice lightly. The door opened. Beaverstock stood there.

Well, if it ain't—is it?—yes, it is! Little Miss Buckley! What can I do for you?"

Clara still couldn't speak.

"You can tell her what you was talkin' about," growled the guard. "That's what she was tryin' to hear."

"She was?" Buckley pretended great surprise. "And did she hear anything?"

Clara found her voice. "No! But I know what you were talking about, and what you're planning to do!"

He was smiling and scowling down at her. "You know a lot, don't you? Come in."

She tried to back away, but the guard shoved her into the room.

"You're pretty smart—for a gal," Beaverstock said. "Maybe you better tell us what you know, and then we'll all be smart."

The fear that petrified her was not for herself. She knew they wouldn't hurt her. They wouldn't dare! Would they?

No. It was Andy they were plotting against. Eckleman was behind it all, just as Andrew Thorne had said from the start. She had satisfied herself on that score. But what a bitter "satisfaction" it was!

"Maybe you're fixin' another double-cross!" Beaverstock chuckled. "The other one didn't work out so well, did it? You ain't as good at that as your old man is—Say!"

His sardonic humor vanished "Are you workin' against your old man?"

She was bewildered. "What—do you mean?"

"Don't you know he's in this thing with us?"

"No! He's not!"

Beaverstock began to grin again. "Oh! Ain't he?"

Footsteps pounded down the hallway, there was the gruff challenge of the guard, and then Buckley's voice. The door flew open, and Buckley plunged into the room.

"What are you doin' here?" he shouted at Clara.

THE shock of Beaverstock's words was still on her.

"She just wanted to know what was goin' on," said Beaverstock. "Seems like you haven't been tellin' her much. She didn't know that you and me was partners."

Buckley turned on him furiously. "And you told her! Damn you—!"

He made a wild lunge at the big gunman. Beaverstock seemed to be astonished at the attack. He stumbled backward as Buckley lashed out at him with swinging fists. Then he got his balance. A bull-like bellow filled the room, as Buckley charged; then came Clara's scream, high and piercing.

All this noise was enough to arouse the town. The scream was particularly penetrating, and it reached many ears. It was the one and only sound that had ever aroused Andy to blind and reckless fury.

He had never quite forgotten it, nor had he entirely recovered from the feeling it gave him—it was like a sharp

knife running through him, then splintering into a lot of little jabbing knives all through his body.

A similar feeling came over him when he saw Clara riding away from the ranch that day. It was not so piercing, and it did not arouse him to fury. But it cut him deeply—not that she was going home, but that he had told her to go. What in hell had come over him, anyway?

All of his resentment was now turned upon himself. He was filled with remorse and a smoldering kind of fury. No wonder she had no confidence in him, no wonder she had gone for help when he started after Beaverstock.

Andy had every reason to hate Beaverstock and to suspect Eckleman. And now that his father was dead, he was free to go after them.

And this, of course, he would do. But hatred and suspicion were not a part of it, because they were not a part of him.

"I'll find him," he told himself. I'll kill him." But he didn't hate him.

Why?

It worried him because he didn't hate the man. It proved once more there was something lacking in him—some wheels missing, just like his old man said.

He tried cussing Beaverstock. Methodically he went down the list, calling him everything that he was: A crook, a killer, a thief.

It didn't do any good. There were a lot of crooks and killers and thieves in the world. He didn't approve of them. But still he didn't hate them.

"But," he told himself sternly, "this one killed your old man! Don't that mean anything to you? Don't you hate him for that?"

To be absolutely honest about it, he didn't. And he had to be absolutely honest with himself.

"It was my fault that he killed my old man," he told himself. "I was after him. I messed things up. It's all my fault."

"He was after your cattle," he argued back. "You had a right to go after him. And he trapped you. He would have killed you. Don't that make you hate him?"

AGAIN he had to answer honestly that it didn't. He recognized the fact that it was his life or the other man's. He would fight for his life; the other man would fight for his. You couldn't hate him for that. Killer, crook, thief that he was, you couldn't hate him for trying to get the best of a man who was trying to get him.

"Oh, well," he finally decided. "I don't have to hate him. All I have to do is find him and kill him."

He started for town. No doubt he would find Beaverstock there, strutting the streets, backed by his gang.

Andy knew he was beaten before he started. He realized too keenly his own shortcomings. Before him always was the shining example of his father, who hated his foes so fiercely, who fought them fiercely, and finally triumphed over them. Could any man fight, could any man kill, unless he hated first?

Andy's gloomy reflections were pierced by a scream, and he realized that he had come fifteen miles and was riding down the main street of Tulleride.

Again came the scream, and he could tell it was coming from the Hoover Hotel. This was his last rational deduction. His mind was suddenly blanked out. Knives were piercing him. Fires were sweeping through him. Explosions were going off in his head.

Instead of pulling open the flimsy screen door at the entrance to the hotel, he ran through it. Instead of

climbing or running up the steps, he just took a jump or two and he was on the upper landing.

A guard stepped out in front of him. "Where you goin'—?"

He hit the guard so hard that he smashed in another doorway with his catapulting body. This room was empty. As Andy leaped past the body of the fallen guard, the latter opened fire.

This was not a much louder explosion than the ones Andy had been hearing right along; but there was nothing imaginary about the slug which tore off part of his sleeve and burned a streak across his shoulder blade. Andy whirled, thrust his gun into the other man's face and fired. The man's head seemed to explode, and the noise of it, and the fragments of it filled the little darkened hallway. It was just more noise to Andy. There was no consciousness of having blown a man's head off.

Other doors were flying open now, other guns were thundering. Andy went down that bullet-slashed corridor, the flame of his six-gun stabbing back at each fiery tongue of death that licked out at him. Every open doorway was a door to hell. Andy went in them all. He went over dead men into empty rooms, he kicked guns from the hands of terrified guards, he hammered them down with the barrel of his gun when it was empty.

In all the noise, in the roar of six-guns, the yells of the injured and the terror-stricken, there was one small sound which was louder than all the rest in Andy's ears. The sound of Clara's voice. It told him that she was in danger. That was all he knew. It had come but twice. If it would come again, if it would only tell him where she was—

Her silence was worse than all the guns. There was more to fear in it. And these empty rooms. There seemed to be a hundred of them. All alike. A bed, a chair, a washstand, a window. Had he been running in and out of the same one all the time?

No, for here in the hallway were the doors. Here were the men who occupied those rooms. Occupying the hallway now. Sprawled there like drunks. Except for the blood. Except for their infernal moaning and yelling.

OTHERS were running down the stairs. One man fell backward over the bannister as Andy came his way, and smashed to the floor below. At the end of the hall there was one door closed. Andy started for it, shoving cartridges into his gun.

It opened before he got there, and Guy Eckleman peered cautiously out. He disappeared at once, and when Andy dived through the doorway, Eckleman stood there with a lifted chair. He brought it down on Andy's head, splintering the chair.

Andy had little time to fool with him, for he saw Clara just then. He swung on Eckleman as he passed, slapped him across the room, and went on to see about Clara. She seemed to be all right, and Andy began to come to his sense. Then she screamed again. "Look out! Andy!"

Just what he had to look out for wasn't clear. She was all right, wasn't she? What was she hollering about?

She shoved him as a gun blasted at the back of his head. He saw Beaverstock then, and went after him. Just the way he had gone after the others, except a lot happier about it. This was what Clara had been hollering about. This Beaverstock. And now he would fix him for good.

He poured a stream of lead into him as he ran toward him. But it didn't blast him down. The man was either bullet-proof, or Andy had missed.

Missed, this close? But he had.

But now he was close enough to use his gun as a club, and he couldn't miss. He chopped Beaverstock's gun from his hand, knocked it as it exploded again into the floor. Then he started chopping Beaverstock, himself. He chopped a hole in his head before he let up.

Andy felt very happy now. He turned around to see about Clara again. He didn't see her at once. But he did see Eckleman, who was untwisting himself from the knot into which Andy had tied him with one sweeping blow, and was grabbing at his gun. Andy shot him before he got his gun out. He was in a hurry. He had to see about Clara.

She was lying on the floor, near the body of a man. It was Buckley. Andy couldn't be bothered about him. He lifted Clara, inert, pale as death. He took her up in his arms, cradling her in stricken silence. Then he carried her from the room, through the gruesomely cluttered hallways, down the stairs and into the street. People were all around him, but he scarcely saw them. He was staring at Clara's closed eyes, praying they would open, at her lips, praying they would move.

His prayers were answered. They must have been, for the first thing she said when she opened her eyes was, "Andy! Thank God!"

But immediately she jumped from his arms like a frightened rabbit. "Dad!" she said. "Where's dad?"

The way she ran back in the hotel, Andy knew there could be nothing much the matter with her. He realized that she had only fainted.

Knowing Clara was all right restored Andy to a normal state of mind. If she was all right, everything was all right. He began to notice the other people and to speculate on just what had happened inside the hotel. He knew that he had been in there and that he had done a lot of shooting. He had killed Beaverstock and he had downed Eckleman. That was all right, too.

Clara came out of the hotel with her father. Buckley looked dazed and Clara was holding him, guiding him down the steps. Andy stepped forward.

Buckley stopped, backed off in alarm. "I didn't do it!" he said. "Beaverstock's a liar!"

ANDY glanced inquiringly at Clara. She said, "He's—out of his head, I guess. Beaverstock knocked him unconscious."

"Beaverstock's a liar!" Buckley mumbled. "Don't believe him."

"Of course he is, soothed Clara. "And you don't have to worry about him any more. He's dead."

"Dead?" Buckley rolled his eyes at her. "Beaverstock's dead?"

She nodded.

"How—what happened?"

"Andy got there, just after Beaverstock hit you."

Buckley stared dazedly at Andy. "You killed him?"

Andy nodded. "Reckon I did."

Buckley stiffened. "Where's Eckleman?"

"He's dead too," said Clara.

Buckley's eyes grew wider. "You?" he muttered. "You killed him too?

Andy nodded. He was feeling uncomfortable. People were crowding around, and Two-Bit Hoover piped, "He cleaned out the whole gang! All by himself!"

Andy could see the astonishment in his friends, and he was beginning to be astonished with himself. He began to see that he had accomplished something extraordinary. But he felt no pride in his accomplishment; he felt only vague wonder and gratefulness

that it was all over.

"He killed Rufe Beaverstock . . . He killed Guy Eckleman . . . He killed a dozen gunslingers . . . !"

They were whispering all around him, they were staring at him as at a stranger—all of these people he knew so well. He didn't like it. He was no killer. He was Andy Thorne, their friend. He was everybody's friend. He hated nobody, not even the men he had killed. It had been necessary to fight them and he had recognized that necessity. But if it hadn't been for Clara's cries, he would not have killed these men. He would most likely have been killed himself.

Clara was watching him anxiously, and her eyes began to shine. She seemed to be reading his thoughts. "I know why you did it," she whispered. "I know why!"

He grinned a little. "Then you know you've got to be careful."

"Careful?"

"Sure. Every time you holler, look what it does to me!"

And she could do things to him without hollering. Things were beginning to happen to him now, and she was just looking at him.

UNCLE TY came riding into town, followed by a string of PXB punchers. His head was bandaged and his face completely concealed, except for his eyes, mouth, and the tip of his nose.

He pulled up near the crowd and shouted, "What in hell you gawkin' at?" And he did a first rate job of impersonation.

The deputy stammered. "But—they burned you up! I saw 'em!"

Uncle Ty snorted, "What are you talkin' about? You gone crazy?"

The deputy gave a pretty good imitation of a crazy man. "You're dead!" he cried. "You're a ghost!"

The idea was no more fantastic than the report he had brought about the cremation of Andrew Thorne. The crowd seemed almost willing to accept it. If Andrew Thorne had been cremated, here was his ghost—the cussin', spittin' spirit of the old hellion. You couldn't kill a man like that, you couldn't even burn him up!

Some Indians, headed by Chief Tansak, approached. They paid no attention to the "ghost" they had created—so maybe it didn't actually exist!

They surrounded Buckley.

"You cheat 'em" said Chief Tansak.

Buckley backed off, mumbling, "I didn't cheat nobody!"

"You make 'em think you give money! Check not money, Birdsong say."

Buckley frantically searched his pockets. "It *is* money! All you have to do is take it to the bank and cash it. You know that!"

He produced the thousand-dollar check, scribbled an indorsement on it. "Here! You take it to the bank and get the money. Give it to Yreka."

Chief Tansak studied the check for a long time, evidently trying to fathom the mysteries of banking and finance.

He grunted again, turned and strode toward the bank, while Clara told her father, "That was grand of you, dad!"

Let other people call her father a crook. She knew better!

He looked at her gratefully. "You—you know I didn't really mean to cheat 'em."

"Of course you didn't."

He wiped his brow. "You—you know Beaverstock was lyin', don't you?"

"Of course he was!"

The Indians were coming out of the bank. Chief Tansak had a handful of money. Real money. Chief Tansak looked very happy, but still a bit puzzled about it all.

TOUGH COUNTRY MEANS WINCHESTER WELCOME

By MILES OVERHOLT

Every cowman in that pothook crew looked like a killer, and Joe Harper was bringing in three thousand head of sheep. . . .

"Don't worry about your Mother," Joe said to the kid

JOE HARPER went back to the Lazy H ranch following his father's funeral and took a look at his inheritance—three thousand head of sheep. And in a hostile cow country!

Besides, Joe Harper didn't like sheep.

But Seth Harper, his father, had been having trouble with the big Pothook outfit on the Muddy, and Jim Byfield of the B-in-a-Box over range boundaries and, having been bested in a few minor bouts, Seth, being an obstinate old cowman, had sold his cattle and bought sheep.

And Seth also hated sheep!

But Harper owned eight sections of

land, only two sections of which were under fence, and he'd like to see anyone stop him from grazing his woolies on his own patented land!

Hake Segrum, manager of the Pothook, was the first to hear that Harper had trailed in a herd of sheep through Sawmill Pass; that the sheep had been unloaded at Sawmill Siding, which was only eighteen miles south of Harper's range limits. And the woolies were on the range before anyone, including Slug Ketchum, knew it. . Slug, a Pothook cowhand, hunting strays, spied the sheep just after they had struck Harper's graze, and so raced to tell his beetle-browed boss, Hake Segrum.

A delegation of cowmen called upon Harper within a week and demanded that he get rid of those sheep.

"Shore! Shore!" agreed Seth, heartily. "You boys want to buy 'em, of course!"

"Nada!" barked Hake Segrum. "We want 'em off'n the range pronto! Already they're stinkin' up the whole damn country."

"And they're on my land!" informed Harper.

"But they can easily stray off any minute," reminded Jim Byfield.

"I got expert herders—Mexicans—'tendin' to that chore," Seth said. "They won't let 'em stray off."

"Hell! We ain't here to argy!" blustered Segrum. "You get rid of them woolies, or we will!"

"Would you like for me to tell the sheriff about that threat?" Harper asked quietly.

"He didn't mean it that way," Jim Byfield tried to soothe the sheepman. "Anyway, he didn't include me in that 'we.'"

"I'll remember that, too," Harper said. "But Segrum threatened to do something to my sheep. That calls for protection, one way or another. In my case I guess I'll have to appeal to the law, Segrum having about twenty gunmen on his payroll. So I aim to demand protection from the law—after Segrum's threat which you all heard."

Jim Byfield was far more level-headed than Hake Segrum who, because of the power he wielded as boss of the vast Pothook spread, believed he could say or do anything he pleased and get away with it.

ALL this Seth Harper told him before Byfield managed to induce the big cowman to leave with his gunmen crew.

Two days later Seth Harper was found dead on the South range. He had been shot in the back—twice. And there wasn't a man on the range who didn't believe the slayer was Hake Segrum, or that he had hired the sheepman murdered.

Every member of the Pothook crew of riders looked like a murderer to the average cow-hand, and they were left pretty well alone by everybody.

Segrum was also unpopular everywhere he went because of his arrogance and his insolence.

He was, of course, popular enough on the Pothook. But real cowmen would not have stood for a lot of his doings even there. Particularly the merciless beatings of his young stepson and the mistreatment of his wife.

Bobby Osborn, who refused to accept the name of Segrum after his mother had married the cowman, had no friends on the Pothook. No one dared be friendly with the lonely boy. But he found a firm friend in Joe Harper.

The youngster had first come over the Harpers' Lazy H a year ago, his mind in a daze and his body a mass of bruises and lacerations. The boy had wandered away from the Pothook after a beating at the hands of his stepfather, and had collapsed and fallen from his pony in sight of the Lazy H ranch

house. Joe Harper had seen the boy tumble from his horse onto the shale rock below the Vermillion Cliffs along whose base the horse trail rambled.

He carried the delirious boy to the house and sent one of the riders for Doc Zinke. Joe, himself, rode over to the Pothook and, luckily, found Mrs. Segrum alone at the house. He told her that her boy was in good hands and that he would return as soon as he was able.

"Oh, thank you—and God bless you!" Mrs. Segrum cried, eyes red from weeping. "I—I have been worried about him. Did—did—he tell you—how it—happened?"

"Well, in his delirium, he kinda let it out," Joe replied. "But I won't say anything to anybody."

"Thanks," she breathed.

As Joe rode homeward he pondered over the ways of humankind—on Pride which suffers all kinds of pain and anguish so that it may hold up its head, and for no good reason!

Bobby, only 15, wanted to rush right home as soon as his consciousness had returned, for fear his mother would be worried, but Joe assured him that he had talked to his mother and he was to stay until he was healed.

"Gee!" said Bobby, his eyes misting. "Gee! Are there people like that!"

People like Joe Harper, he meant—people who were kind and helpful.

"What will Segrum say about yore absence?" Joe wondered one day.

"Oh, he won't notice it," Bobby replied. "He'll think Mother is just keeping me out of his sight for a few days. She used to do that."

It was following this visit which lasted nearly two weeks, that Bobby Osborn told the Harpers how Hake Segrum often beat his mother almost into insensibility, too.

"Sometimes she isn't able to get out of bed for over a week," the boy said, "but she won't have a doctor because she doesn't want anybody to know it."

"Segrum prob'ly wouldn't allow her to have one, anyway, for the same reason," Seth Harper opined.

The Harpers promised they would tell no one of the unhappy condition in the Segrum household, knowing it would do no good, and Bobby somehow knew they would keep their word.

"Mr. Segrum—he—he broke my arm once—threw me against the wall," the boy told them one day. He always referred to Segrum as "Mister" Segrum.

"That was three years ago, though," he said. "And—and Mother is blind in one eye—one is glass—because Mr. Segrum knocked her left eye out with a coffee cup. The handle of the cup struck her in the eye."

Joe Harper shuddered and glanced at his father.

"Nice gent, this Segrum," grunted Seth, gripping the arms of his chair.

SEGRUM wouldn't live very long if he chanced to show up on the Lazy H along about that time, Joe thought.

Bobby Osborn was a gun enthusiast. He coudn't keep his hands off the rifles which hung on some deer antlers in the big living-room of the Lazy H. Seth, observing this for the hundredth time, winked at Joe and said:

"Reckon yuh could learn to shoot that rifle yuh got in yore hands?"

"Sure, and I betcha I could hit a bullseye, too," Bobby boasted. "See how steady I can hold 'er!"

"Let's take him up on that, Joe," smiled Seth.

Joe got some cartridges from a closet shelf and they went out and let the wildly excited boy shoot at a mark for nearly an hour.

After he was able to make the trip, he was over to the Lazy H almost every day and whenever they had time, one or

the other of the Harpers would give the boy some lessons in marksmanship.

Bobby learned fast, too. He was, Seth said, "a natural" with a rifle, and soon became so proficient that Seth said to him one day:

"Yuh got any place at home where yuh could keep that rifle hid from yore stepfather?"

The boy gulped, he swallowed briskly three or four times, his eyes filling. Then he shook his head. At last he found his voice.

"I guess maybe you was going to give it to me—only I couldn't take it, Mr. Harper. My—Mr. Segrum would be sure to find it and take it away from me—and maybe beat my mother for letting me bring it to the house."

"Shucks, it's yores, anyway," said Seth. "Only yuh just leave it here. Yore mother doesn't mind how often yuh come over here, does she?"

"Oh, no, sir," Bobby said. "She likes to have me come over here. She says you and Joe are a good—in-in-fluence. And thank you for the rifle. I can't seem to do much to pay you all for being so good to me."

"She's done paid, boy!" Seth Harper said heartily, clapping the boy on the back. "Yuh're a purty good sort of little jigger yoreself."

"So there's nothing to worry about, is there?" Joe chimed in to relieve the pent-up situation. "The gun is yores, feller, an' here is a hundred rounds of cartridges. Now you take the gun an' go huntin' or do as yuh please. Only be shore to obey all the rules we taught yuh and yuh won't shoot yoreself or get into any other trouble."

Bobby didn't shoot the rifle for the next half hour. Tears of joy and gratitude were too close to the surface to permit of expert shooting, and the Harpers, observing that, pretended to be busy at something else.

But from the next day onward the boy's marksmanship improved until within three months, the lad was a better shot than either of his teachers.

To Joe, Seth Harper said:

"With those new telescope sights yuh bought him, the boy can pick off a fly's hind laig at dang nigh a thousand yards. He's just a natural-born marksman. That's why he loves guns so much. It's in his system."

Bobby was at the Lazy H ranch house when Joe returned from attending his father's funeral.

" 'Lo, Joe," he said. "I—I wish I could say somethin' tha'd sound better'n that. But I—I can't think of words good enough to say about how I feel about—about Mr. Harper."

"I know, Bobby," Joe said, patting his arm. "I know how you feel—like a pal, huh?"

BOBBY nodded briskly. He didn't seem to notice that the tears were running down his cheeks and dropping off the end of his chin in a little rivulet.

"Yeah," he said, "that's it—like a—a—pal. You—you goin' to find the feller that did it an'—an'—fix his clock?"

"I think I know who did it, Bobby," Joe said. "Soon's I make shore, I hope to take care of him—yeah."

"An' I'll be right with you," Bobby said seriously.

Joe Harper would like to get rid of those bothersome sheep, but he knew that his father wanted him to hang onto them until the range problems had been settled. Only Joe wasn't at all sure he knew what those problems were. His father, not anticipating death, had not informed him of all the angles.

But range problems have a way of developing on their own account. Joe began to learn that almost immediately when Manuel Gonzales came hobbling into the ranchyard with a bullet in his thigh. A bunch of masked men, he

said, had shot him and chased off the herd. There were only about 500 sheep in the flock he was holding over on Grove creek, because there wasn't much grass in that section.

Manuel was more discerning than most Mex herders. He had observed that several of the horses ridden by the raiders bore a pothook on the right hip.

Strange, thought Joe, that the cowmen had not reasoned that the brands would give them away, but perhaps they believed the herder was dead, since he also suffered a crease which knocked him out for a short time. Or else the men just plainly didn't care. That would be more like Segrum.

The flock was hazed down the creek a short distance where less than a dozen were killed, for the idea, apparently, was to serve as warning and not to destroy the herd.

A week later Pedro Martinez was shot and killed by a gang of raiders, who, Joe estimated from the horse tracks, must have numbered about twelve.

He met Jim Byfield next day and asked him what he knew about it.

"I haven't ridden on any raid whatsoever," Byfield swore. "I heard about the other one in which a Mex herder was shot. I never should have joined up with Segrum in the first place. And don't blame me for anything that happens from here on. I'm through with that wife beater!"

Wife beater! So it had gotten around!

The flock which Martinez had been holding on the East ranch had not been molested to any extent. Perhaps a hundred sheep had been wounded and perhaps a dozen killed outright, but that was only wanton destruction practiced by sadistic men who loved to watch suffering among dumb animals, Joe reasoned.

The sheep were heavy with wool and they should be sheared, but the business was so new to Joe Harper that he didn't know what to do next. And Pedro Martinez, the only sheep expert in the crew that his father had hired, was dead.

Segrum called at the Lazy H a few days after the murder of the second herder with an offer to purchase the west range, adjoining the Pothook range. He was accompanied by two of his gunnies.

"Just to keep peace on th' range, I'm offerin' yuh 50 cents an acre for them five hundred acres," the ranch manager said.

"Yuh don't mean to say yuh'd pay all that money for them measley five hundred acres!" said Joe sarcastically. "Ol' Joe Philanthropy hisself," he jeered.

Then, angrily: "Look, Segrum—or whatever yore name was before yuh come to this white man's country" and Segrum's right hand dropped to his gun butt—"to me that range is worth just fifty dollars an acre, so if you've got that much dinero to plank down in cash mebbe—an' only mebbe—I'll talk business with yuh. Although I'd prefer to talk to any other skunk on the range."

Joe was angry just at the sight of the man who, he was certain, had slain his father—or ordered him murdered; and then, too, here was the man who had beaten little Bobby almost to a pulp and who had blinded his wife with his brutal beatings. So he talked a bit out of turn.

BUT he reasoned that Segrum wouldn't kill him in front of witnesses, even his own men. One or the other might turn out to a blackmailer. Besides, he didn't know but there were witnesses on Joe's side inside the house or one of the outbuildings. So Segrum only said:

"Yuh don't like me much, do yuh?"

"Like yuh—hell! I think yuh're a wife-beatin', child-beatin', back-shoot-

in' murderer! Like yuh! Could anybody like a skunk like that!"

It looked as though fireworks would start then, but one of the gunnies laid a soothing hand on Segrum's arm.

There would be plenty of time to get this young upstart when there were no possible witnesses present. There was no sense in flying off at the handle.

Segrum started to turn away.

"I'm rememberin' all this," he said out of a corner of his mouth. "An' yuh better take my offer. I ain't gonna make no more. An' I generally make my offers stick."

"Try goin' to hell, will yuh!" Joe snarled, almost beside himself with rage.

He was angry at himself, too, for mentioning wifebeating and child-beating to Segrum. Now the cowman might suspect that Bobby had told on his step-father and would get more beatings as a result. But it was too late now to recall his words.

Joe Harper had only three herders left—three green Mexicans who could barely understand a word of English. He knew nothing about sheep. And now he began to suspect that his stubborn father had imported that herd just for the purpose of irritating Hake Segrum. Or perhaps force him to buy the Harper outfit.

Which, indeed, was the case.

But fifty cents an ace was a ridiculous offer for the Lazy H west range. All of the land was capable of irrigation, and there were at least 500 acres that could be planted to alfalfa and watered. It would be worth, under those conditions, at least $100 an acre.

A week after Segrum's visit, Bobby Osborn, in a near-fainting condition, dropped from an old horse at the doorway of the Lazy H. Joe rushed out and picked him up. The boy's face was white and strained and tear-stained, and he was incapable of speech, though conscious.

"What's wrong?" Joe demanded, as he placed the boy on the bed in the spare room. "You look as though something terrible has happened."

"Mr. Segrum—he—he ki-ki-killed—Mother," the boy gasped, finally.

"Killed her?"

"He—he beat her—because of me," Bobby said faintly. He was no longer able to sob.

"Beat her to death?"

"Yes. I—she was—defending me. He—he gets into terrible rages. So he—he struck her—knocking her down. I tried to—to stop him, but he hit me on the head with something—and I—don't know what happened then. I guess—I guess it—was after that—that he killed—Mother—beat her and kicked her to death. I—I—when I woke up—I cr-cr-crawled over to her lying on the floor—and she was c-c-cold. Her heart wasn't beating. She was terribly bruised and torn—and smiling!"

"Smiling?"

"Yes. I—I guess she was—happy—to be—dead!"

Joe held the boy more tightly in his arms.

Smiling! Glad to be out of the clutches of that beast at last!

Finally, under Joe's ministrations and with the aid of a strong sedative, Bobby went to sleep.

"Now I HAVE got to kill that wife-murdering hombre," Joe Harper told himself over and over, as he sat and watched Bobby Osborn twist and turn and moan in his enforced slumber.

BOBBY awoke at twilight, fresh tears in his eyes, a fresh wound in his young heart—his mother murdered—horribly—by the man she married so that her son would have a home and an opportunity for a start in life!

"There—there's something else—I ought to tell you," Bobby said to Joe hours later. "Mr. Segrum—was starting to beat me because—because I overheard him and Somb Mannigan talkin'—an' they—they figger to run your sheep over the Vermillion Cliffs in broad daylight tomorrow afternoon—so the whole valley can see. All of them are going to wear masks, Mr. Segrum, too."

"But most of the sheep are on the flats below the cliffs," Joe said.

"Yeh, but they bribed the Mexicans to drive them up over the two wide trails tonight. Gave them fifty dollars apiece. Soon as the sheep are all over the cliff, Segrum and Somb Mannigan are coming down here to kill you," Bobby said. "I was makin' a toy wagon in Mr. Segrum's office while they were talkin' and they heard me. Then Mr. Segrum beat me."

"Do yuh think Segrum will miss yuh an' figger yuh come over here to tell me this?" Joe wondered. Bobby shook his head.

"He locked the door with Mother and I inside. He prob'ly won't look in till sometime tomorrow. I got a secrut way of gettin' out. That's how come I got away. He'll think I'm still in there."

"Who killed my father—did they mention it?" Joe asked then quietly, acting on a hunch.

"Somb Mannigan killed him," Bobby answered promptly. "He mentioned it while they were talking about your sheep. Mr. Segrum said he would give him another hundred dollars after you had been killed."

"What about you—what did Segrum plan to do with you?" Joe asked, then.

"I dunno; he didn't say," the boy answered listlessly.

Joe pondered. Soon he said:

"Stick right there, kid. I'm going out scouting a bit. Gradually I'm getting hold of an idea. Maybe it'll work. We'll see. Hold yoreself up by yore chin till I get back. Then we'll talk some more about things."

He went down to the barn then and saddled a horse and rode down to the lower range and kept himself hidden in the shrubbery that lined Cottonwood coulee. From that vantage point he saw the herder down there start the sheep heading toward the trail that led to the top of the mesa.

"Well, Segrum bribed that one, all right," Joe grunted.

It was dark when he reached the South range, but he could hear the sheep moving up the trail. Another section of the herd was heading for its ultimate destruction.

Joe had an idea which required a lot of fast work—an all-night job, probably. He remembered that there was a corral almost in the pathway of the slow-moving flock. So he rode forward and dropped a gun on Escarnacion Trujillo.

In a few minutes he had bound the Mexican and had taken his place behind the herd.

He made three trips to the ranch house and worked hard and feverishly—and oh, so carefully! And he worked all night.

The herds eventually reached the top of the hill, though the stragglers were several hours late. So that the cowman got his bribe money's worth. He did not know that he owed much of the success of the drive to the man he had sworn to kill.

Joe Harper got no sleep that night, but he was plenty wide awake, when he greeted Bobby at sun-up.

At breakfast, Joe asked the boy:

"How's yore shootin' eye? Think yuh can do a little fancy marksmanship today—the kind yuh been doin' all summer?"

"I—I guess so—if you want me to,"

the boy replied.

"Well, I shore want yuh to," Joe responded. "I want yuh to do the best job of shootin' yuh ever done in yore life today."

"I'll do it," Bobby said. "You been the only person that—that ever was sorry for her—Mo—Mother—and me. I want to do whatever you want me to do."

"Well, then, for a while today, I want yuh to put everything else out of yore mind but the job I'm givin' yuh. Will yuh do it?"

"Ye—yes, sir," Bobby faltered.

"Yuh owe it to yore mother, too, to do some extra fine shootin' today," Joe went on. "Don't ask me why—just do it. Savvy?"

"Ye—yes, sir, Bobby said.

WHEN Hake Segrum and his murderous crew rounded up the sheep herd they intended to send hurtling over the Vermillion Cliffs to make a sort of a Roman holiday, the work of slaughter could be seen by anyone in the entire valley who wanted to look in that direction. It was going to be a spectacular orgy of sheep murder—to serve as a lesson to any and all potential sheepmen, Segrum had told his gunnies.

"Whatsa idear of them big black spots on so many of the damn things?" wondered Somb Mannigan, as the cowhands rode among the baa-ing flock.

"Hell? Yuh never kin tell about sheep," Hake Segrum replied. "Sheep git the damnest lot of diseases, an' yuh got to keep dopin' 'em with axlegrease and suchlike alla time."

He was referring to the big round black spots on thirty or forty of the larger sheep. Then they let the matter drop.

But Joe Harper took it up from there.

Hidden behind a pile of bowlders less than five hundred yards from the spot the cowmen had chosen for the slaughter, Joe Harper and Bobby Osborn lay and watched the cowhands round up the sheep.

The Mexicans had been paid off and were not supposed to be there, anyway. They had ostensibly left the country. So the cowmen had to do their work.

Joe was giving Bobby his final instructions.

"Look, now, yuh're a crack shot. We know that. Now I don't want any missing. We can't afford it. For certain reasons I don't want some of them pore sheep sent over that cliff. I'd rather have 'em shot—savvy?"

Bobby nodded, levelling his beloved rifle.

"So I want yuh to shoot at them black spots on the sheep. Close to fifty of 'em, but yuh won't git to see many in all that herd. Keep shootin' at them spots whenever one shows. An' don't miss, feller—don't yuh dare miss!"

"I won't miss," Bobby promised.

There were about twenty masked riders mingling with the herd, although, so far as they knew, nobody could tell whether they were masked or not. The sheep were stubborn. They seemed to sense the danger of getting too close to the edge of that cliff.

Joe, closely watching the proceedings, waited until the men were pretty well bunched in the middle of the flock, then he said:

"Take that sheep there at the edge. See can you hit that black mark. Hit it, feller!"

"That'll be easy," said Bobby.

"O. K. Then, no matter what happens, keep shootin' whenever yuh see a black spot until there ain't no more," Joe ordered.

Bobby's lips compressed and his eye travelled along the barrel of the rifle.

"O. K.," he said.

Then he squeezed trigger. And nothing happened.

But apparently the shot was not heard by the cowmen, which Joe regarded as lucky. He and Bobby would last about six minutes once those gunnies knew they were shooting at them.

"That's all right," Joe encouraged the boy. "There's another mark. Smack it center!"

Again Bobby pressed the trigger.

This time there was a terrific explosion atop the cliff. Nobody seemed to know what had happened. But three or four men went hurtling out of their saddles and four or more horses went plummeting over the cliff.

BUT apparently Bobby had not seen all this, either. For again he was taking careful aim—

"That's the one," Joe said. "Lotta dust, but yuh can see it, can't yuh? sock it, boy—and don't miss!"

This time there was a blast that rocked the entire countryside. Men, horses and sheep were simply erased from the landscape as a pencil mark is erased from a sheet of white paper.

Joe Harper's smile was grim.

"What happened?" Bobby wanted to know. "Was that an explosion?"

"I guess somebody tossed a stick of dynamite over the cliff, mebbe," Joe answered.

A blast greater, even, than the previous one, jarred some pebbles loose from their hiding place, and the dust was now so thick where the sheep had been that Joe could not make out any moving object in that vicinity.

There was none , anyway. What sheep were left had disappeared over the hill.

Joe Harper got to his feet.

"Come on; we'll go down to the ranch now," he told the boy.

"Did I do all right?" he asked eagerly.

"I'll say yuh done all right," Joe answered, trying to suppress his trembling. "Yuh took care of yore chore like a man. I'm satisfied."

Sheriff Watkins made an investigation a couple of days later.

"Damn if I know how many men were killed up there," he told Joe Harper. "But it was a hell of a good job of wipin' out a bunch of gunslicks. Segrum would have had to stand trial for murdering his wife, but we might've had a tough time proving it."

"Wouldn't hardly have been fair to Bobby, anyway," Joe Harper said.

"Huh—yuh mean that boy—his mother—oh!"

"Yeh," said Joe.

"Kinda young, though. Did he know—um—ah—"

"Nope. Only that I wanted him to hit them spots on the sheep."

"He didn't know, then, that you worked all night fastening sticks of dynamite, or T.N.T., or whatever in hell it was, under the wool of them sheep with wire, and painting black spots on their sides to hide the explosive and to make a good target. You damn fool! You might have been killed, handling that stuff so careless," the sheriff scolded.

"Bobby doesn't know his shots wiped out that gang, including his murdering stepfather," Joe said. "But that's the main reason I rigged up the sheep thataway. I figured Bobby was entitled to take care of things hisself, considering everything."

After a brief pause, the understanding old lawman went on:

"I figured you'd want the man that ordered your dad killed your own self."

"I'm satisfied," Joe replied. "He was got, all right. I helped. And Bobby got the murderer of his mother. I'm satisfied there, too. Why, look! The kid slept all night last night without wakin' up to cry once!"

FILED TRIGGERS

By ROD PATTERSON

The flash and roar of six-guns on a dusty street, a solemn vow to follow the killers down every last dark trail—out of these had Fred Corrigan's range destiny been born!

He had a deep hunger to kill

FRED CORRIGAN looked down, from the height that the *loma* upon which it was built gave the dobe-walled house, and gazed out across the box-elders and the sprawling pleasant ranch buildings, to see Hank Breen, who had been out at the rim of the Paint Hills with the herd, riding in behind the basswood pole corral. The elderly foreman spurred up in front of the long-sided barn and as he was sliding off his dust-caked, sweating pony, John Tammany, the horse-wrangler, rolled out to meet him. The two men stood a moment, talking in low and guarded tones, and Breen pushed his hat back far enough for the morning sunlight to show the expression of worry on his

thin-boned, heat-toughened face. John Tammany, bald, chunky, with faded jeans tucked into the tops of cowhide boots, gave a broad shrug, a gesture he invariably saved for calamities.

"Looks like some trouble," Corrigan murmured, turning a little away from the window to let his flat-lidded hazel eyes swing around the comfortably furnished room in which he stood. He drew a sigh of contentment, savoring the sight of the big soot-blackened fireplace, the dobe walls, pale and cool above the brilliant reds and greens of the Indian rugs Amy Breen had chosen herself. Amy was a wonderful hand at making a room look home-like and warm, Corrigan reflected. She was only twenty-three, but had the talents and capabilities of an older woman. What a wife she'd make! She was Hank Breen's daughter, and Corrigan liked to tease her about her coming with the ranch when he had bought it. Tall, willowy, gentle-voiced, she had even taken over the job mothering young Jimmy, Corrigan's fatherless nephew, whom he was bringing up.

NOW Corrigan's heart skipped a beat as he heard the laughing voices of Amy and the boy, gently lifted above the clatter and bang of breakfast pots and pans in the kitchen. He, Corrigan, was a lucky man, now that everything had turned out all right—now that Jimmy was forgetting his grief, and the future was bright. Corrigan reluctantly allowed his mind to travel back to that day, six months ago, when his brother Waite had gone out to face the guns of Doane Durstine and his men in the thick dust of Geronino.

A concept, rather than a mental picture, of that dark day took form in Fred Corrigan's brain. Waite, who lived alone with his twelve-year-old son at his bosky ranch in Smoky Valley, had been raided and nearly ruined by Durstine and his hard-riding, fast-shooting crew. Filled with a vengeful fury, Waite had brought Jimmy to town so that he would be free to trail the rustlers into the hills before they could get out of the country with the stolen herd.

Fred Corrigan was running the local hay, grain and feed store and, at the time, was well on the way to becoming a successful cow-town business man. But fate was to change everything; with the flash and roar of six-guns on a dusty street under a glaring desert sun one man was to die and another was to reshape the pattern of his life to fit the needs of an orphaned boy. They had been talking in Fred's little cubbyhole office at Geronimo—Fred, Waite and the kid—and Fred had been pleading with his brother to leave well enough alone and not go skallyhooting off on the trail of a bunch of blacklegs and killers. Suddenly the door banged open and Fred's handyman burst in off the gallery to gasp out: "Doane Durstine jest hit town! And he's gunnin' fer you, Waite! Says yuh been spreadin' it round he's a rustler!"

Waite, tall, bone-lean, turned his head to stare out toward the sloping sunlight on the street. There was at that moment no expression on his face, but Fred saw the muscles knot and relax at the hinge of his gaunt jaw, and realized there'll be no stopping his brother now. Still, he went on pleading: "Lay low, Waite! Gunplay won't settle it unless you kill 'em all! I'll—"

But that was when young Jimmy, his freckled, tanned face drawn with fear, rushed to the door and then whirled, eyes as big as dinner plates. "Here they come, Dad—three of 'em! Don't go out there—*please, Dad!*"

Waite's face was as hard and masked as an Indian's. He did not speak, but slowly, deliberately pulled his gunbelt

around so the black bone handle of his Colt jutted straight out in front. One moment, he was standing there, ramrod-stiff; the next he had tramped out to the gallery and had let himself down to the flat board walk where he stood with his hands held tight against his thighs.

Fred, his mind in turmoil, pulled the boy back out of range, and then, with his senses straining and alert, stepped through the screen door onto the gallery. Unarmed, helpless, unable to stop the inevitable thing that was about to happen before his eyss, he nevertheless called out, "Waite—don't start it! Take it slow!"

Three men were walking down the middle of the flat, sandy street toward the store, and there was something queer, yet familiar, in the way they walked. It was the way, Fred realized with a shock of fear, wolves stalked their prey. Two of them hung back a little, one on each side of the leader, a big raw-boned, dark-faced man in the middle. The tall one was Doane Durstine, and he was dressed in shabby, grease-stained range clothes and carried a heavy Colt revolver strapped down low on his hip.

THE street was nearly empty as the men drew near, and there was hardly a sound in the town. Then all that silence was filled with Doane Durstine's booming voice. "You Waite Corrigan?" were his words, but the way he spoke them sounded like obscenity.

Waite never answered him.

"I'm Durstine," the big man cried brashly as he halted with his men ten feet away. "I got a bone to pick with you, Corrigan!"

Waite spoke then, and his voice came hard and bland on the silence. "There'll be buzzards pickin' yours tonight," he said. "But first I'm goin' to take my pay for that beef you stole—and it's comin' outa your blasted hide!"

Durstine's dark face turned black with rage and seemed to fold in upon itself. On the gallery, Fred felt panic clutch icily at his heart as, in back of him, he heard the soft, shaken sobs of a boy who knew, too, that his father would never have a chance now that he had recklessly made his challenge and his play.

The street, the town, was empty, the hot still air filled with a tense and waiting silence. What had been the eyes of a mild-mannered cowman weren't even human any more. Waite's face was like a wooden mask—his eyes two pinpricks of white-hot light.

Then Drustine took one swift backward step, made a quick down-cutting signal with his left hand. The man on his left moved effortlessly, his hand flowing down to the butt of his gun. It barely cleared the holster. Waite's bullet smashed into him and knocked him off his feet, and he was a dead man before he hit the dust. Then Durstine's piece flashed in the sun, roaring out its metal cry. The flame of the revolver seemed to spring across the gap that separated him from his target, a long, red rapier of flame. Waite Corrigan never fired another shot. He took the outlaw's soft-nosed bullet in his heart—it flayed the life out of him in a short hard grunt. He fell slowly, ridiculously, breaking first at the hips and then the knees. Crumpled on the walk, he never stirred again.

On the gallery of his store, Fred Corrigan stood rigid, frozen, powerless to speak or act. He had no gun, neither on his hip nor in the store. He had only a deep, terrible, merciless hunger to kill and kill again—and yet he dared not move. He saw Doane Durstine shove a boot-toe under his dead comrade, saw him lift the corpse and turn it on its side. After that Durstine beckoned to the third man and calmly,

slowly, walked away. Corrigan gripped the corner post of the gallery, turned cold and sick, and weak now with a nameless fear. Behind him, in the darkened store, Jimmy was moaning out his heart: *"Dad—Dad—"*

Standing now at the living room window, Corrigan thought his somber thoughts, then drew a deep breath—more of relief than of contentment or gratitude, both of which he felt from time to time. Although the memory of his brother's death which had tortured him had returned like an evil dream every night for months, he had gradually managed to force it farther and farther from his mind; and now it had lost its power, and soon he would be finished with it for all time. Formerly, the vividness of it, the horrible clarity of the sudden roaring guns would hold him like paralysis, tense and sweating, and would drag at him all the following day like a physical illness. At first he had thought, after he had bought the ranch out here a hundred miles from Geronimo, that it was an indication of cowardice. But now he had come to deny that creeping conviction, doggedly, almost resentfully. And yet he evaded any situation which required his wearing a gun; he left his old double-action six-gun hanging in its belt of snub-nosed cartridges from the steer horns on the living room wall. And throughout the long days and nights a worry nagged at him—a fear that perhaps he had been a fool to sell the store and sink every dollar he owned in this spread on the Mariposa Plains.

NOW, suddenly, Corrigan shrugged the stiffness out of his tall frame and moved out through the front door, dropping quickly down the slope of the knoll and around the barn. He saw that Hank Breen and John Tammany were still in low-voiced conversation. Both men, however, stopped talking and looked toward him: Breen, lean and competent and tight-lipped; Tammany, detached suddenly, like a man caught stealing. There was an expression of grim concern on both their wind-bitten faces that quickened the steady beat of Corrigan's heart.

"Anything wrong, boys?" he wanted to know.

"'Mornin', Fred," the old foreman greeted him, and Tammany nodded his balding head.

"What's happened?" Corrigan asked with a casualness he didn't feel.

"I was jestthinkin' o' ridin' back with Hank," Tammany said.

"What for?"

"Well, nuthin much," the wrangler murmured.

There was a brief silence in which Corrigan studied the two old men carefully. Breen looked quickly away. Tammany was covering something up. "Spill it," Corrigan said tersely, irritably.

"Well," Tammany said, "Doane Durstine's ridin' again."

It was a simple announcement delivered in a noncommittal tone, but the effect on Fred Corrigan was like the shock of icy water in the face. He tightened up inside, and a kind of tremor traveled along his nerves and shook him from head to foot. He recovered his composure with an effort that made his voice waver when he said, "Guess we'd better move the heard in closer to the ranch."

For the first time since Corrigan had known Hank Breen, the foreman seemed at a loss for words. An embarrasssment crawled over his rugged features; a slightly incredulous expression flickered in his faded eyes. "Mean we're gonna run from Durstine?" he asked in his slow, dry voice. When Corrigan didn't answer, he said, "They been tryin' to git Durstine and his man Ormsbee for five years now, Fred.

Reckon yuh savvy what it may mean if them boys stay in these parts for a week."

"I've heard of Durstine," Corrigan said flatly.

"He's killed a dozen men that tried to git him, and run off thousands of steers. Work from the Paint Hills to the Sheephorns and up as far as Geronimo."

Corrigan nodded, numbly silent. Tammany broke in: "Hank says Durstine and Ormsbee hit the herd last night and run off a hundred of our cows whilst him and Ike Linden was sleepin'."

"A hundred!" Corrigan exclaimed, staring at Breen. "Good gosh!"

"He ain't through yet—Durstine ain't," Breen nodded glumly. "Now he's here, we'll lose plenty. Folks go broke when Durstine sets his sights."

For a moment Corrigan was speechless before the implication of Breen's grim statement. His life—the life of young Jimmy—was tied up in his herd of white-faced steers, fine stock, better than anything else on these plains. He looked at each of the men in turn.

"Should've tol' yuh 'fore you bought the place," Tammany said dourly. Then: "Me an' Hank figured mebbe we c'd spot them fellers tonight and git at least one of 'em this time."

"This time?" Corrigan asked. "Then they've—"

"Yeah," Breen said from the depths of his gloom. "This ranch has lost on the average of three hundred cows a year since I come here to work in '83. I've had three owners go busted on me on account of Doane Durstine and his bunch. Doane allus hits here 'bout this time o' the season—jest 'fore fall roundup. And he don't leave till he's cut out all he wants. His hide-out's somewheres down in Lava Sink. We ain't never dared go in there to smoke him out. Tough country—damn' tough!"

CORRIGAN didn't speak for a long moment; his mind was a welter of conflicting thoughts. "Well," he said finally, "let's have some breakfast. Amy's had it ready for half an hour. We can decide what to do later on."

John Tammany's seamed face was screwed up as though he was tasting something bad. "I've et," he said, and moved abruptly away on his short, saddlebowed legs, without another word.

Corrigan glanced guiltily at the foreman, feeling the hot blood climb up around his ears. It was pretty plain what Tammany had been thinking, and Corrigan mentally put it into words which seemed to sear his mind with letters of fire: *Nothin's worse to a cowboy than working for a man who is paper-backed!*

Corrigan and Breen walked into the kitchen a moment later where Amy had set the table for five. Tammany's place remained empty throughout the meal. Jimmy was already seated, a black-haired, black-eyed boy with a thin, freckle-dusted face which only recently was beginning to show a smile again. Now he grinned at Corrigan and said, "Amy jest swore she'd throw your breakfast on the ground, yuh didn't come and get it, Uncle Fred." He gave a boyish laugh. "Amy's funny, she is."

"Corrigan and Breen sat down, and Corrigan said, "She sure is, son. But we can put up with it as long's she keeps on feedin' us. And—"

He didn't finish, for at that moment the girl was coming in from the living room, softly humming a tune in a way that did something to Corrigan way down deep. Amy Breen made a pretty picture: dark, slightly slanting eyes, chestnut hair done up high with a pale blue ribbon, a firm, full-lipped mouth, cheeks tinted the color of moss roses. Corrigan's breath caught in his throat

just looking at her. " 'Morning, Amy," he said.

"Good morning, boys," she greeted them in her slightly husky voice, coming around to take her place beside her father. Hank Breen was staring at her queerly. She smiled at him, then looked at Corrigan, and the color in her cheeks heightened visibly, and she dropped her eyes. "The cakes are getting cold," she cried. "The coffee, too!"

They ate in silence, except for an occasional murmured comment from the boy. When they had finished, and Hank had thoughtfully mopped his plate and lit a cigarette, Corrigan lit one, too, and pushed his plate away.

"Tammany and Linden," the foreman declared, "are all fer makin' it a finish fight this time. And if we don't, they'll bust yuh in time, Fred—that's sure as shootin'."

Amy glanced quickly at her father. "You mean—"

Breen nodded. "He's back again."

The girl went white, put her dark gaze quickly on Corrigan's grave face. "Fred," she breathed, "didn't you know —didn't any one tell you—"

Corrigan didn't look at her. "No," he said. "But that isn't goin' to help us now."

Jimmy spoke, puzzlement ridging his freckled face. "What're you folks talkin' about?"

Corrigan smiled, said gently, "Nothin' to worry about, son. Just some rustlers run off a few of our cows last night, is all."

Breen said, "It's up to you, Fred. Say the word and we'll go to hell fer yuh."

CORRIGAN sat motionless, forgetting his cigarette, watching the foreman's aquiline face; and as he stared, a picture took slow shape in his mind—the picture of a swarthy, high-cheekboned face, a pair of slitted icy eyes which held no color at all, the face of the killer, Doane Durstine. An involuntary shiver traveled over Corrigan's big frame. Amy, watching him carefully, saw that tremor shake him. She said, calmly ,very calmly: "You could always sell the ranch and get out what you put in it, Fred. Or you could—"

"Uncle Fred!" Jimmy had both hands out flat on the table and he was leaning forward, distress, wonderment on his thin face. "What's this talk about sellin'—"

"We ain't goin' to sell it!" Corrigan said harshly. Hot blood stormed into his flat cheeks as he crushed his cigarette out in his saucer. He felt baffled by his own reactions, by the thought of Doane Durstine. It was as though the outlaw was some malignant, elusive beast instead of just a man. And Corrigan was smelling gunsmoke again, hearing the crash of guns, the brutal "thunk" of lead striking human flesh. "Well," he said as coolly as he could, "we've got to do something besides just sit here talkin'. I—we've got to stop him. I won't be run off this place by a damned—"

"Durstine's a cold-blooded killer," Hank Breen said quietly. "And he won't never—"

"Durstine!" The name seemed wrung from the boy, torn out of him by force. They all looked at Jimmy now, in consternation, seeing the eyes round and wide with fright. The boy's mouth was open, and he was staring at Corrigan in horrified disbelief.

Corrigan looked at Hank, then at Amy, helplessness on his thin-boned face. "I never told you," he said in a dead tone. "Doane Durstine killed Jimmy's father six months ago in Geronimo. Waite was my brother."

Silence came down, dragged out interminably, unbearably. And then Amy had jumped up from the table with a cry of compassion, had pulled

the white-faced boy to her breast. She looked back at Corrigan, reproach contorting her face. "Oh, Fred, you should have told us!" she cried brokenly.

Corrigan pulled up his shoulders, let them fall. He said to Breen: "Better find John and saddle up the horses. We'll ride out to the herd." Then, for a long moment, he sat silently at the table, staring cold eyes at nothing. *I can't do anything,* he thought grimly. *I can't help much. But I'll back the boys whatever happens.*

They reached the herd at three that afternoon, having covered the forty miles without stopping to eat or rest. The herd was strung out along the rim of the malpais. Far out on the plain whose flats and draws and gullies were knee-deep in grass, the steers looked like a solid black slowly-moving mass in the flashing steely light.

They found Ike Linden, red-haired, grim-jawed, squatting on his hunkers at the camp at a greasewood seep. Linden was a good man, the youngest of Corrigan's four men. Another, Hap Dillsworth, was out watching the herd. Corrigan swung down, and Linden's grim face took on a spark of animation. "Howdy, boss. Was wonderin' why yuh didn't come."

Corrigan murmured, "Seen anything of Durstine and Ormsbee since last night?"

"Nope." Linden's lustreless eyes grew hard. "Doane's a damned owl—work at night. Can't see in the daytime."

"Light down," Corrigan said to Breen and Tammany who sat saddle, waiting for their orders. "We'll grab off a little shut-eye now. We'll ride tonight—all night."

AND THAT night, as they slowly circled around the steers under a frosty glitter of stars, Breen dropped his ominous remark: "Durstine may skip a night to throw us off. But when he hits you'll know it, Fred."

At three in the morning, a queer relief enveloped Corrigan. Maybe the outlaws had struck out for the hideout in the Lava Sink and now were miles away with last night's haul. With this vague hope in his mind, Corrigan took John Tammany and Hank Breen back to camp to snatch a nap before dawn came. Later, in his soogans, looking up at the cloudy glitter of stars, Corrigan thought about Jimmy—and Amy. The boy, he realized, was beginning to regard him as a hero on a marble slab. That was not good—for Corrigan, anyway. But nothing must happen to spoil the kid's illusion. He, Corrigan, had come this far in a mad plan to trap a murderer, and now he could not retreat. Not ever. And Amy—he had seen something in her dark eyes for him, something that was beautiful and breath-taking in its possibilities. One slip, though, Corrigan knew, and that look of tenderness and warm regard could change to one of scorn—even of hate. A woman wanted a man for a mate—not a coward. *But,* he reasoned stubbornly, *I'm not yellow. It's only—*

His train of thought snapped like a wire drawn too tight with the sound of a distant shot. He was on his feet, hurling his soogans off, drawing and lifting his revolver automatically against the night. A quick burst of firing rolled across the deep stillness; the ground began to drum hard under flying hoofs. Racing to his still-saddled horse, he yelled, "Hank—John!" and caught their answering halloo in the shadows behind him.

He hit the saddle running, rammed his pony head-long toward the herd. Through a fresh volley of firing, he heard voices howling, saw the long, high shadows that were mounted men streaking along the earth. The racket had spooked the herd and the steers, red-

eyed and bellowing, were on the verge of running. Pale shafts of flame stabbed the black shadows, flashing and fading and flashing again, and these, Corrigan knew, as fear knifed through him, were the guns of Doane Durstine and his man Ormsbee, and now the outlaws were pounding through the ruck of horn and hoof straight toward him.

Simultaneously, Hank Breen and John Tammany were riding up behind him, and he could not swerve his horse without letting them know that he letting them know that he couldn't meet the rustlers' charge. Lead screamed around Corrigan, and he flinched and crouched instinctively over the saddle horn. Durstine and Ormsbee came on and rushed by, firing as they rode, then wheeled and began to turn the far edge of the beef. Corrigan dimly saw John Tammany cut his pony toward the outlaws, and he yelled, "Stay back, John!" Stay back!" But the little wrangler paid no heed to the warning, and kept on, whipping around the edge of the milling herd.

Then the firing stopped, and only the raucous, panicked bellowing of the steers was beating against Corrigan's ears; that and the thunder of a thousand punching hoofs. And he knew something else: Durstine, for the first time in his bloody career, had given ground.

Corrigan found Hank Breen bending over an inert form back in the shadows. He reined up and swung down, saying, "What's the matter, Hank?"

"It's John," Breen said grimly, turning a twisted face. "He's dead."

They buried the wrangler where he had fallen in the darkness, silently piling a little mound of stones to make a cairn above his shallow grave. Afterward they worked the herd with Dillsworth and Linden, finally getting the nervous animals in some semblance of order. Dawn stained the earth with drab gray light when at last Corrigan and Breen returned to the camp by the greasewood seep.

NOTHING had been accomplished by this night's fight. And now John Tammany lay dead, loyal to the end. Now, even more than before, it had to be settled. Corrigan had a bad moment when Hank Breen said coldly, "Yuh had a chance to git Durstine and yuh muffed it, Fred. He rode right under your nose that time."

The sun was a glaring red ball above the plains when Hank caught the fresh hobbled horses and brought them into camp. They made a quick breakfast of canned cold beans and bread. Linden and Dillsworth were still circle-herding the steers, and would remain on guard until relieved, though they had accepted Corrigan's terse orders with sullen scowls. For now, they too, were beginning to have their doubts of the man who was their boss.

"Durstine's trail's still warm," Breen said. "They've hit for Lava Sink, all right. You ready, Fred?"

Corrigan nodded, not caring to meet the foreman's tight-eyed stare just yet. They mounted and left the camp and cut over a grassy ridge and headed into the southwest, their ponies fresh and pulling a little in the cool, clear air. Breen rode with his rifle in its saddle boot, ready for instant action, while Corrigan carried his own revolver in its unaccustomed place against his thigh; it gently slapped his leg as the pony loped along.

The sun climbed swiftly and the freshness evaporated from the day; Corrigan, tired already, with his thoughts turned glumly inward, fell to watching the monotonous sagebrush land roll by. Twice during the afternoon, Breen cut for sign, the second time, riding back to report, "They've swung off a little to the west. It's the Sink they're slopin' fer, all right."

It was long past two o'clock. The two men were now travelling more slowly, picking a careful way around a giant upthrust of rock. They came to a grassy divide, rimmed by greasewood and pine. The trees ribboned away to the west in a mile-wide belt with scarred red land spreading out to north and south on either side and rising to higher ground. Hank Breen pointed toward the timber. "They rode straight through. Reckon we better do the same."

Ahead now, in the lumpy red earth were clean, round hoof-prints. Corrigan sensed a kind of vicarious thrill, quickly followed by the numbing drag of depression. Somewhere, out beyond, Doane Durstine and Ormsbee were pushing for Lava Sink, over the hills to the west. The sun dropped lower over the snow-capped mass of mountains far ahead. Finally the light grew dimmer, and as though the failing visibility released the tension in him, Corrigan was very tired. The land blurred a little on his sight and cleared again. He rode closer to Breen.

A mile farther on, as they plodded forward, ran the clay-colored edge of an arroyo, its rim ragged and sheer, dropping to a boulder-strewn bottom dotted with rust-tinted pools of stagnant water. They reached the arroyo and rode along the rim of it, finding a break, and putting their horses down. The weary animals braced their front feet, shot their hind legs forward, sat down and slid.

In the comparative shelter of a steep undercut bank they called a halt. They took the horses over and watered them one at a time, then retreated to the cutbank where they hunkered down and gnawed on cold biscuits and drank the last of the water from their canteens. Breen said, "They been here about three hours ago. Got to kind of watch where we're goin' from now on."

Corrigan said, "There's a scad of blood dried on them rocks over there. Notice it?"

BREEN nodded. "Must of hit either one or t'other durin' the ruckus last night."

As darkness settled down, Corrigan began to feel drowsy. He fought sleep off doggedly, smoking a chain of cigarettes. Breen went off to scout the surrounding country. He was gone about an hour, and when he returned, Corrigan sensed a change in him. He caught a glimpse of the grim satisfaction on the foreman's stubble-bearded face. Breen hobbled his pony, then came over and squatted down under the bank, saying, "Jest found Ormsbee over there a ways—plumb dead. One of us winged him last night—in the chest. Durstine's alone now."

It was full dark. A thin, searching wind came up with the moon. They hugged the lee of the bank, smoking in silence until the coyotes began their yapping serenade. "Purty, ain't it?" was the foreman's dry observation. "Death and coyotes go together fine."

Corrigan shivered, and hoped the foreman hadn't noticed it. "Yeah." After a while, he said softly, "Hank, I want Amy. Any objections to me as a son-in-law?"

There was a strained silence, broken only by the rising chorus of coyote song. Finally Breen flipped his cigarette away. "I'll tell you tomorrow," he said. "That time enough?"

"Sure," said Corrigan, and he knew what the foreman meant.

They rolled up in their soogans. Corrigan thought about Amy and the boy, and slept. Breen awakened him with a quick jerk on the arm. "Take it easy," the foreman said, as Corrigan whipped himself upright. "When yuh git the fog outa your eyes, see if yuh notice anything."

That brought Corrigan sharply awake. "What time is it, Hank?"

"Be light in a couple of hours."

Corrigan stood up and stretched. He paused with his arms aloft. "I smell smoke."

"Thought yuh might git it," Breen murmured. "Couldn't be sure myself."

Then the foreman thought out loud. If they could smell smoke down here in the arroyo, which was winding, wide and deep, the fire it came from could not be up on the flat country to the south. Smoke from there would drift east toward the low red hills. It wouldn't seek a lower level, especially with a stiff following breeze blowing.

"Durstine's somewheres ahead on a level with this arroyo," Breen said positively. "That's luck for you."

Corrigan wasn't so sure. A coldness settled in the region of his heart and took away the hunger which had been nagging him. He said, "Let's go," and hoped his voice didn't sound to Breen the way it did to him. They saddled up, mounted, and headed at once up the arroyo in the darkness.

After a while, they climbed stiffly to the arroyo's rim and threaded their cautious way over precarious footing for a mile or two. Then, suddenly, ahead in the gray gloom of the false dawn, the land seemed to draw together as the arroyo spread out to shelving, jagged slopes. It was like the jaws of a gaping trap, teeth bared, opening menacingly before them. Huge boulders made a ghostly bulk to right and left.

Hank Breen reined up abruptly, twisted in the saddle to look at Corrigan. His voice had a queer, discouraged sound. "Fred, it's no damned use! We can't go in there! He'd pick us off like settin' ducks!"

Corrigan's mouth was so dry and parched that no words would come. He nodded, feeling, strangely, no relief at all in the foreman's reluctant admission. For the past half-hour he had felt the strength, the courage, drain out of him, leaving him weak and sick. But now, suddenly, astonishingly, that all-gone feeling had disappeared.

He found his voice. "I'm goin' in," he said harshly, quickly. "Wait here, if you want to."

BREEN stared, and now daylight was coming, staining the ochre rocks with an eerie, incandescent light. "It's suicide, Fred," he blurted. "I wouldn't ask no man to ride blind-folded into that!"

Corrigan felt sweat come out on his hands. *Nobody would blame me,* he thought. *Nobody would blame me, now, because none of them, not even Hank, would go in there!*

"Light down," Breen said in a lower tone. "Light down and we'll stick around here in case he comes out this way."

But Corrigan paid no heed to the invitation. He had deliberately pulled his pony around and was easing it down the slope of the shelf, weaving in and out between towering, granite rocks. "Wait here," he called back in a voice he didn't even recognize as his own. "I'll be back."

"Fred!" Breen was calling softly, hoarsely. "Fred, you ain't—for God's sake don't go in there!"

Corrigan dug in his spurs, and the wrenching gait of the pony against his aching bones made him catch his breath. In ten minutes the horse's lope became a sort of shambling stumble. He slowed it to a walk. Ahead and above, the ridges which quickly had grown high and steep, were crowned on their summits by battlements of black, eroded rock. Against the glowing eastern sky the ridge gathered shadows, and the rocks on the crest assumed strange shapes, like huge, evil, twisted faces

of iron.

Unable to stand the uncertainty any longer, Corrigan slid from the saddle, seized the reins and moved forward on foot, drawing the horse behind him.

Halting at last in a jagged wash, he paused, staring with aching, red-rimmed eyes into the pale dawn. And then he smelled smoke again—strong and acrid this time.

Almost directly below him, a hundred feet away, the thick shape of Doane Durstine sat huddled over a tiny fire. The outlaw had a rifle across his knees. The dead-black butt of his revolver jutted up stiffly under his left elbow. On his right stood his roan horse, and another—Ormsbee's sorrel—the first thin rays of the sun glinting on polished saddle leather.

Corrigan's boot dislodged a miniature avalanche which went whispering downward, sifting, spreading, vanishing in the talus slide. Durstine heard that riffling sound, whipped his gaze over his shoulder, looking in back of him. Then, stealthily, the outlaw reached out for a skillet on the ground, scooped up some sand to put the fire out.

Corrigan spoke, and his voice went booming like thunder down the gulch. *"All right, Durstine;"* He straightened up, stepped a pace forward, knowing yet not caring that he made a perfect target blocked out against the eastern sky. There wasn't any feeling in him at all except the feeling that time was standing still as he reached down for his gun. His open hand hit the cold grip and he pulled. The weapon arced up, glittering in the sunlight.

BEYOND the fire, Doane Durstine stiffened as if an electric charge had jolted through his burly frame. One moment he was as still as a statue—the next he had twisted sidewise, his slitted eyes seeing and recognizing his stalker; then he took a quick step backward, hitched his body forward at the waist and drew his gun. The slap of his palm against the butt of the Colt made a flat, dead echo in the silence. His elbow broke hip-high, and his pistol put a long, sullen red flash across the cup. The outlaw fell slowly, ponderously, like a great tree toppling. He hit the ground hard and rolled over on his back and lay still, one arm thrown up as though to shield his face from the second shot which never came.

Corrigan and Breen let themselves into the kitchen at the ranch some time after ten that night. There was a lamp burning on the table which was set for two. Coffee spread its keen aroma through the room.

Footsteps scurried in the living room suddenly, and then Amy Breen and Jimmy broke through the curtained door and stopped, clutching at each other in their worry and their haste. Pale, wide-eyed, the girl came forward slowly. Almost hestitantly, she reached Corrigan, placed her hands on his shoulders and looked steadily into his unsmiling face. "You're home." She breathed it like a prayer. "You're safe."

Corrigan grinned down at her then, drew her hard against him. He put his tired gaze on Hank Breen who, at that moment, blinked and coughed, and awkwardly moved his feet. In answer to Corrigan's unspoken question, he nodded his iron-gray head. "Sure thing, Fred," he said. "She's your'n, son, if she wants you, too." He smiled at his daughter. "We found the stolen cows—over near the Devil's Notch, and"—he ducked his head toward Corrigan—"Doane Durstine ain't ever gonna ride no more."

"They ain't no harm in you knowin' it," her father went on dryly, "but Fred didn't care much fer the job."

"Yes," the girl murmured. "I—knew that, Dad."

GUN TROUBLE? SEND FOR A TEXAN!

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

He was Texas-born, raised in the teeth of the Lonestar's war for freedom. They never should have figured Dave Mason to be a man who'd run away from gun trouble.

It was a swift explosion of a strong man's full anger

CHAPTER ONE

THUNDERHEADS

DENVER CITY was hardly well established on the junction of the Platte and Cherry Creek when a man named Gregory found gold near the head of Clear Creek Canyon. In the course of a few weeks, even before the first wave of the swift tide pouring westward from St. Joe and Kansas City had reached the mountains, other discoveries were made at the base of the Divide. Mushroom jack and canvas camps blossomed on the slopes of the deep ridges. Empire and Georgetown and Silverplume; a

dozen within a month. Dave Mason came to one of these, Quartz Hill, sixty days after Gregory's find.

Mason was not a miner. He was a tall man with broad features and long hands. He was Texas-born, raised in the teeth of the Lonestar's war for freedom, and a Texan's steadiness was deeply grained into his nature. He had drifted into the hills with no conscious intention. Quartz Hill was a new gathering-place of men and new places fed the restlessness in him.

From his first day in the camp, his nature set him apart. And because he understood new towns and was not jarred by the rawness and violence which ran their streets, it was natural that the small, solid heart of the camp should turn to a man like Mason when the wolves came among them. He had ridden Tom Beresford's freight wagon from Denver City into Quartz Hill on the third of June. On the ninth of June, the steady men of the camp had met to organize the Quartz Hill Mining District under the laws of Kansas Territory. When the meeting had broken up, and without his knowledge, Dave Mason had been made marshal of the camp.

ON THE twelfth of June, Tom Beresford came in again from Denver with a bloody freight. He stood in the center of the main room of the Twenty Ounce saloon, his freighter's hat pushed back defiantly.

"Coming in by way of White Creek," he said tightly, "I found a man beside the trail on the far side of the last ford. His horse had throwed him and dragged him to death. It was—Mark Defever!"

Mason had just come in the back way from the alley. Braced against the foot of the bar, he felt the impact of Beresford's news as every man in the room did. Defever was the voice of the camp, fearless, vindicative and believing strongly in the future. With his daughter and the aid of a battered press, he had put the first issue of the Quartzlight on the streets of the camp five days after his own arrival.

Mason's gaze swung across the faces of the men in the Twenty Ounce. Old Anse Collins, owner of the first frame store on the straggling street, knocked a glass unheeded to the floor as he surged to his feet. Feldmeyer, who ran the hotel, poured himself a stiff drink and slid quietly for the door. Four others at a table in the corner turned in their chairs; John Farrington and Paul Stone, partnership owners of claims in the upper gulch, and Right and Lefty Symes, two of their crew. After a moment these four also rose, crossing to spread out on either side of Beresford at the bar. Anse Collins flung a quick, stricken look at Mason and licked his lips, nervously. Dave swung his attention back to the defiant freighter and started up along the mahogany toward the man. Paul Stone signalled the barkeep, lifted a filled glass, but neglected to make it a toast.

"We'll miss Defever," he said tonelessly. Mason spoke as he moved.

"You're sure how Mark was killed, Tom?" he asked softly. Beresford shot him a hot, angry stare and his face flushed.

"I ought to, Mason!" he snapped. "I rolled him up and hauled him in, didn't I?" Dave shrugged at the man's anger.

"Nothing personal, Tom," he answered. "Just something I wanted to be sure about, that's all. Somebody has to tell Marcia about her dad and I wanted her to get it straight."

Anse Collins moved around to Mason's elbow. His lined face was still tight with the hurt of news of his friend's death. Open distrust of the big freighter was in his eyes. To Beresford's right, Lefty Symes smacked an

empty glass down noisily onto the bar and dragged a dirty sleeve across his lips.

"Nasty work, Beresford," he said with a queer, hidden meaning which puzzled Mason, "mighty nasty. A man that's been drug to death by a horse is apt to be a bit messy! A pity it couldn't have waited to happen till Mark had changed his mind about lettin' his gal marry up with you. She's not so apt to go against his wanting so soon after he's dead!"

Tom Beresford's face slowly turned white.

"You through, Lefty?" he asked dangerously. Symes let a smile touch his thin lips.

He shook his head.

"Why, no, Tom, I ain't," he said. "I was just thinkin', too, that Defever droppin' off is hard on you another way, him being such a good customer for payin' freight—what with paper and the like to be brought up from Denver for him!"

Mason was watching the scene closely, alert for the tell-tale little sparks which fly from men under punishment and stress.

But even then, he didn't see Beresford move. It was a swift explosion of a strong man's full anger. The freighter's fist centered Lefty's face, dumping him limp and bleeding across the sawdust to the tables. Farrington and Paul Stone stepped swiftly backward. Farrington swept the tail of his coat free of his gun butt. Lefty's hang-browed brother knifed in toward Beresford in a loose-jointed, confident slouch. His gun leaped mercilessly to his practiced hand as he moved. Beresford seemed to have expected this. He seemed fully aware he was beaten flatfooted. He made no answering move. Into this queer, half-blurred, half frozen scene, Mason flung the steel of his quiet voice.

"Hold it!"

THE two words were as brittle as shattered glass. Farrington turned half about. Right Symes stopped in his tracks, sagged a little as the purpose went out of him, and he eased his gun back into leather. Beresford made no acknowledgment or thanks to Dave. Like a wooden man who fought for control of warring forces within himself, he stepped across to Lefty Symes' prone figure. Contemptuously, he nudged the fallen man with his toe. Then he raised his eyes which blazed defiance in a steady level against Farrington.

"Next time you send a dog to bark at me, John, he spat, "send one with teeth or they'll carry him back to you, dead!"

He wheeled abruptly and batted his way through the latticed doors. John Farrington stared after him a long time. Finally he turned to Dave.

"They've made you the law of this camp, Mason," he said pointedly. "You'll earn your salt from here on in or there'll be changes. You saw that, you heard what Beresford said. He's gone wild and got a turn against me for some reason. He aims to see me done!"

Dave smiled thinly. "I don't think so, John," he said mildly. "Else he'd have done his killing already. But you might be right. We'll see!"

Farrington swore under his breath and moved across the room. Stone and Right Symes followed him. They got Lefty groggily to his feet and moved out the door.

Anse Collins ordered a drink and scowled into the tiny mirror of the glass.

"I've got to get Doc Talbot over to Tom's wagon to do what he can for Mark," he said wearily. "It ain't a job Doc'll like, this time, either. And I'm worried. We got us a peace-officer in the nick of time, it looks like, Dave.

Now, to hell with Farrington and that digging crew of his, son. You'll earn your salt, all right, if the camp'll back you. But John's right about the trouble. I feel it coming. Like feeling rain, it's in my bones!"

Dave nodded. The feeling was strong on him, too.

"That's bad blood there, between Farrington and big Tom." Collins went on worriedly. "John's been making pretty wide tracks since he got Stone to join up with him and they brought their crew in. And he and Tom rub shoulders ever time they meet up down to Marcia Defever's. With Mark not there to hold 'em off, I'm afraid of what'll happen!"

"Send the girl down to Denver," Dave suggested. Collins raised his brows.

"Her? Hell, boy, you don't know that girl—and that's a pity, too. She wouldn't budge out'n that newspaper office now, come the devil with dynamite to make her go! I might say a word to Farrington if the chance comes. Don't know as I'd tackle big Tom when he has his fires up, big crew or little one behind me!"

Mason nodded again, a little smile on his lips. "Me neither," he agreed. "Not unless I had to!"

Collins looked up curiously, seemed to think better of the thought which had struck him, and shrugged. He took another drink and pulled at his hat.

"I've got the nastiest job a human can have," he sighed. "I've got to break a fightin'-gal's heart. Marcia is going to take this accident of her dad's mighty hard!'

"Not accident, Anse," Dave corrected the storeman quietly. "Tell the girl the truth. A little more than an hour before Tom showed up here, I saw Mark Defever afoot on the White Creek Trail about three miles out of town. And when I got back to the livery a little while ago from my own ride, his horse was still in its stall—hadn't been out today! Mark wasn't thrown and dragged. He was killed!"

ANSE COLLINS paled until his lips were as white as the unruly thatch of his hair. His fingers groped fiercely into Dave's arm.

"My God, boy!" he exploded. "My God, you sure?"

Dave nodded. Collins straightened vengefully. "Its checked to you, Dave. You're the law in the district, now. What you aim to do?"

Mason looked out over the little storeman's head. "I reckon I'll find Tom Beresford," he said thoughtfully. "I want to talk to him a little more . . . ."

CHAPTER II

FREIGHTER, CHOOSE YOUR SIDE!

BUT Beresford had disappeared. Somebody said that he'd taken a horse and turned tail down the White Creek Road to Denver. Facts indicated, however, that he'd gone up the gulch toward the high claims, and Mason had to wait. Bearded, spectacled Doc Talbot came in from one of the lower camps and examined Defever's body. He confirmed Dave's statement as to how the newspaperman had died. There were marks on the ankles of the dead man where a rope had been tied to drag him through the rocks and brush beside the White Creek trail. But he had been first killed by a blow of some kind on the back of his head—quite possibly the stroke of a gun butt.

Doc showed these things to Dave. When he was finished, he took off his

glasses and put a stubby finger against Dave's chest.

"We took you on face value, son, partly for your size and partly for the way you talked. It was our gamble. We didn't aim to drag you right into a killing. Yon can see well as me that this is the beginning of something. Only reason a printer ever gets killed is to keep him from putting down something in type that he knows. And if Mark Defever knew something worth killing him to keep it quiet, there's a slice of hell, proper, headed for this camp! I figure you've got a chance coming to back out before your ears ain't showing for the gunsmoke drifting around 'em!"

Dave grinned. Doc Talbot was a square-built man, and square all the way through. He shook his head.

"A man can't run away from trouble, Doc," he said. "Not when he's been raised to it. I've seen enough of it to know. I'll stay!"

Doc Talbot put his glasses back across the bridge of his nose.

"All right, son," he agreed. "That was your chance to clear. You passed it. The whole camp's apt to line up against you. Friends are liable to be scarce. They'll howl you done wrong here and wrong there. But by the devil, if you back an inch from 'em, me and Anse Collins and one or two more'll have your scalp for it! Mark Defever was our friend. Me and the rest of us think the same's he did—that Quartz Hill will make a good town one day. And its mostly up to you!"

Dave shook Talbot's hand and went out onto the street. Beresford had not returned. In the Twenty Ounce he found Hendricks, weighing out a lot of dust on the saloon scales, the usual idle crowd watching him interestedly. Among hand-claim owners, Hendricks was a legend. He could work dust out of dish-water, they swore. And the yarn seemed likely. Sam always had dust, was always weighing it out, was continually buying another poor or barren claim, only to make it pay well later. Dave watched him disinterestedly for a while, loading pocket after pocket in a huge cash-belt around his waist. Then, remembering the miner had been working lately at the top of the gulch, he moved across and asked about Beresford.

"I just come down from above, Dave," Hendricks agreed. "But I didn't see Tom. And drat him, I want to! Got some hard rock on Number Thirty-five and I need some drilling tools on his next trip up. Tell you, I'm on the prowl for a spell tonight, seein' as I'm down. I'll send him over to the hotel for you when I see him."

Dave spoke his thanks and started for the door. Right Symes pulled out from the bar and stopped him with a careless touch on his arm.

"Never seen a man with a badge that didn't stall when time was pressing!" he said loudly. Attention swung toward him. He grinned and went on in a brassy voice. "If I was the law, if I knew who a killer was like you know about Tom Beresford, I'd go get him instead of hanging an elbow on a bar and asking gents did they see him! I've said before a miners' marshal had ought to be a miner and not a damn horse-riding grass-country man!"

SAM HENDRICKS, beyond Symes, stopped buttoning his shirt over his money-belt, rank amazement running across his face. Others in the room watched the new marshal with measuring curiosity. Expectancy brightened Hendricks' eyes. Dave stood woodenly for a moment, eyeing the man before him. He was being baited and baited dangerously. Just a little of this kind of talk in a new camp where nothing

was settled and established, could shake the flimsy authority of his badge completely away from a man. Right Symes knew all about this, or he was talking for somebody who knew all about it. Symes was hitting below the belt and as hard as he could swing. There was only one way to answer.

Dave's gun came out of leather like a travelling shadow and settled in his hand. The barrel dipped sharply down across Right Symes' wrist as the man tried a matching draw. His arm crippled by that sharp blow, Symes roared an oath and swung a booted foot up in a vicious kick. Dave swayed easily clear of the blow and swung his gun lightly, setting its barrel against the side of the man's head above one ear. Symes staggered back. Dave followed him, wiping the weapon against the other side of his head and dropping him to his knees. Holstering the weapon, then, he put the flat of his hand against Symes' face, shoved sharply, and tumbled him full length into the sawdust. Grinning widely, Sam Hendricks fell in beside Dave as he moved toward the door.

"Don't take much of a man to talk loud, does it, boy?" the miner chuckled happily.

"Seems as though," Dave agreed. "If you see Tom, now—"

Hendricks put out his hand. "Certain! And good luck, Marshal."

At supper, Anse Collins came into Feldmeyer's dining-room, holding a limp fold of paper. He spread it out on a table in front of Mason.

"And you were going to send that gal back to Denver!" he said. "See—remember what I told you?"

The paper was a fresh issue of the Quartzlight. Mark Defever's familiar boxed editorial was missing from the front page. In its place was a bitterly phrased challenge to the law of the Quartz Hill Mining District. Dave looked up curiously. Collins leaned forward on his elbows.

"That girl's a soldier! She never blinked when I told her about Mark. The paper was already half set up. She went out and hired a Swede off the street to crank the press, and there's the sheet. You ought to go by to see her, Dave. She's fighting shy of you and she might make trouble with that press, riled up like she's bound to be!"

Dave nodded thoughtfully. Several times, passing the girl on the street, he had thought of going by to see her. But Farrington and big Tom Beresford were there ahead of him and a girl took too much of a man's attention. Collins waited for an answer, got none, and stood up.

"You got hold of Tom yet?" Dave put down a tip and stood up, also.

"No," he said. Collins eyed him sharply.

"I don't figure you, Mason," he protested. "I took you to be a gent that hit fast and didn't think twice about the same thing! And maybe, like you, I always figured Tom belonged to our side of the fence up here. I won't tell you your business. But I warn you, there'll be thick trouble in this camp unless you turn up the man that killed Mark Defever!"

"I aim to take him, if he'll stand iron to his wrists—when I find him!"

Collins snorted and waved his hand at the dining-room behind them.

"Damn funny place to look for a killer!" he growled. And he stamped angrily out of the hotel.

Dave watched him go with a furrow of concern between his brows.

"Maybe," he said softly.

AT TEN o'clock Mason made his rounds of the camp. He saw Hendricks at a game with Paul Stone and the Symes boys in a back room of the Twenty Ounce, but didn't go in. Beres-

ford was still missing along the street. Otherwise, Quartz Hill was settling quietly for the night, and he returned to his room at the hotel.

He had been in bed an hour when a racket somewhere jerked him upright. Before he had his boots set on solid, a man ran heavily up the back stairs outside his window. He touched his lamp alight and jerked his door open just as Tom Beresford reached it. The man staggered into the room, a wild, desperate light in his eyes and his face grimed with blood which yet welled slowly from an ugly split in his calp.

"What the hell, Tom?" Dave stabbed at him. Beresford shook his head dully.

"I don't know. Hendricks seen me when I come down from the hills. He told me you were looking for me, and he wants to give me an order for my next trip. So he'll walk along this way and tell me about it. We cut across from the livery, and out in the thick grass back of here, something clipped me on the head. When I come around, Hendricks was lyin' there with his shirt torn off and my belt-knife stickin' in his ribs. Paul Stone and one of the Symes come around a corner while I'm standing there. They give out a holler for help and threw a shot at me. I ducked them, made the alley, and came up here—"

Dave moved swiftly. News of Hendricks' death came hard. But he had, in a vague way, expected it. That heavily-laden belt of dust was tempting bait. And he knew enough of violence to know that in a camp like this, all trouble came from one beginning. He didn't know whether Beresford had a part in the whole thing or not. He didn't have time to check the freighter's story of Hendrick's death. But one thing he did know, now, pieced together from the card game he had seen in the back room of the Twenty Ounce and the fact that Stone and one of the Symes boys were the first to discover Tom with Hendricks' body. The Farrington-Stone partnership had more than a citizen's interest in these swiftly-pacing events.

He sat his gun about his hip and barked an order at Beresford.

"You've got a habit of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Tom! Here, get your hands out and get these on!"

Mechanically, the still dazed freighter extended his huge arms. Dave shot his hands out, snapped the ratchets of a pair of handcuffs over the man's wrists. Beresford stared stupidly at the bright steel of the bracelets for a long moment. Then he lashed out a raging oath and jerked his fettered hands away so savagely that Dave staggered against a table.

"Mason, you're a lunk-headed coyote!" the freighter snarled. "This'll get you nowhere. You weren't born tough enough to make me talk, this way! You're playing into Farrington's hands—dealing me under after I came staggering up here, cold-cocked, because I heard you wanted me and because I needed help!"

"Shut up!" Dave snapped. "The whole camp's sure you killed Defever. They'll add Hendricks to it, now. Get over to that basin and clean yourself up. We're going to have company!"

Beresford's protesting head was still sousing in Dave's wash-basin when the beat of heavy boots pounded down the hallway from the front of the hotel. Dave bent swiftly, hearing the ominous weight of that sound, and pawed another gun from the bag under his bed. He thrust it into Beresford's dripping, manacled hands.

"Im not a magician, Tom," he said. "I'm hoping those cuffs on your wrists and a good bluff can stop them. If they get by me, you've got a chance

coming. You trusted me. If you hadn't, you wouldn't have come up here. I'll do the same by you. But when this thing is unravelled, you better not be in it!"

BERESFORD'S lips pulled back from his teeth, but he made no answer. The hallway rocked with the impact of men crowding it. Dave reached out and jerked the door open. John Farrington was in the lead of the pack. Behind him were Paul Stone and the Symes. There were a few others, unknown to Dave—hard-bellied, bold men with narrowed eyes. A breed which travelled only with the wolves. The rest were miners, troubled men following a strong lead. Dave eyed them scornfully.

"Well, gents?"

Farrington shrugged. "This camp is going to hell, Mason! And one man can't stop it. He's got to have help. We've just formed. We're the Vigilantes of this place!"

Dave stood in the center of the room, staring steadily into Farrington's face. Farrington colored a little. His lips thinned down.

"You've got cuffs on our man, Mason," he said tightly. "He's killed two men. That's enough for us. We're not waiting for any more. Hand him across. We'll have order on our street by sunup!"

Dave Mason shook his head. "This isn't a green camp, Farrington," he said slowly. "This isn't its first week or its first month. It's a district under the laws of the Territory. Beresford's my prisoner. I'll keep him!"

One of the strangers behind Farrington moved a little to one side and forward.

"Don't keep us waiting, Tinstar!" he said ominously.

Mason swung his balance toward the man, but he spoke to them all.

"Get out!"

Motion hung arrested for a moment. Then the stranger who had spoken, without a flicker on his features, without one man's warning to another in his eyes, reached coolly for his gun. Farrington, beside the man, obviously had known what was coming, but he made no move to stop the practiced sweep of an able gunman. Dave was within an ace of being caught off guard. There was none of the other's smoothness in his own lightning reach, but he was first by an edge and got off a shot, low down.

The stranger dropped his unfired piece, swore thickly, and fell against Farrington. Someone behind caught him and held him half upright. Dave's thumb over-reached the hammer of his weapon and set it back against the spring with a sharp sound in the silence.

"Get out!" he said again.

John Farrington eased, then. But his voice was taut.

"We'd have worked with you, Mason," he grated. "You've cut the trail the other way. Keep clear of us from here on. That's fair warning!"

Dave made no answer. Some of the pressure in the hallway slackened. Farrington backed into it. Dave reached out a toe and kicked the door closed. Behind him, a movement rasped his attention. He wheeled toward the sound, was met, half turned, by a swiftly-descending gun barrel, and the room turned over with him.

CHAPTER III

MINERS' LAW

ANSE COLLINS looked old in the smoky light of the lamp. Dave shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. His hand went to the short hair above his ears and the swell-

ing raised there. Collins looked questioningly at him.

"All right, Mason?"

Dave nodded.

"Beresford?" Collins asked.

Dave sat up. "Yes!" Something of his anger raised to his lips. Collins stopped him with a look and tilted his head toward the doorway. Dave turned. Marcia Defever stood there. He put his feet down to the floor and swung up off the bed where he had fallen.

"We're wrong about Tom," Collins said. "Marcia swears to it. She won't say why. But he didn't have anything to do with Mark's death. Nor Hendricks. She made me bring her down here to you."

"Where is Tom?" Dave asked.

"Gone!" the girl answered for Collins. "And he won't be back until you see the truth he can't tell you!"

"I'll say he's gone!" Anne Collins agreed. "He ran up through the town like a wild man. He made for the corral. One of Farrington's rocker-men was there and tried to stop him. Tom shot the man and got a horse. Nobody knows where he's bound."

"Did he kill the man at the corral?" Dave almost added the word "too," but left it out when he thought of the girl in the doorway. Collins shook his head.

"No. Close enough, though. Took half his ear off!"

"That's it!" Marcia Defever said. "That proves what I've been telling you! Tom did it that way on purpose. You both know what kind of a shot he is. He wouldn't miss—if he wanted to kill a man!"

Dave smiled. "I wish I could be as sure of Tom as that. I had him here, aimed to talk to him. But he clipped me from behind, unlocked the cuffs I had on him, and beat it. If you know something that makes you so sure, you better tell us, too, Miss Defever!"

"No," the girl answered. "Tom made me promise. And I believe he's right. If what I know spreads, if certain parties even find out that I know, I'm apt to die next. Death follows that knowledge fast in Quartz Hill."

Dave Mason spread his hands. "I won't make you any promises. But I won't leave the gulch, now. If Tom isn't here, I can't hound him. If that's enough for you, good. But if he comes back, and I think he will, he'll have to answer to me. He'll have to tell me how it is that he is always on hand when men die. I can't do anything else!"

The girl moved back across to the door. "You're right about Tom coming back. He didn't run out except to catch his breath. You don't understand what's facing him or what he's fighting. If you won't believe me, you'll have to fight me, too. I won't let you get to Tom until he's done what he has to do!"

She pulled the door after her and her heels made sharp little sounds down the hall. Anse Collins shook his head wearily.

"I don't understand all this, Mason," he said. "I don't understand you, catching a man you wanted, them letting him slide out of your hands. I don't understand that gal backing a man that like as not had a hand in her dad's death. I don't understand John Farrington working the whole camp into a Vigilante organization which swears it'll override you every time you buck it. I'll play with you a little ways longer, son. But only because you're the law we made when we organized our district. If the air don't clear quick, me and Doc Talbot aim to do something else!"

THE camp changed overnight. It was plain to Dave as he began his rounds the next day. Men gave him wider clearance than usual on the walks. Their faces lacked friendliness. It was obvious Farrington and his Vigilantes, coupled with news he had let Beresford

escape him, had discredited him as a lawman.

Moving from building to building, Dave tried to piece it together. It was growing plainer that Farrington and Paul Stone had an active part in the violence. And they must have a reason for that part. Since there was only the gold flowing in an increasing stream into the camp that was worth a wide gamble, they must be working up a claim-jumping, dust-stealing crew. Mark Defever might have tumbled to it and threatened to expose them. Hendricks' belt of dust was reason enough, alone, for his death. But none of it explained Tom Beresford.

Thinking about Hendricks and the dust taken from him, Beresford's place fell suddenly into the pattern. Stolen gold was of little value in the camp itself. It had to be taken outside and Beresford was the camp's one freighter. Dave's face was clearer than it had been for a pair of days when he walked into the Twenty-Ounce. Anse Collins and Feldmeyer were huddled at a table. They beckoned earnestly to him as he swung through the door.

"You heard the news?" Feldmeyer wanted to know. Dave shook his head. Anse Collins laughed shortly.

"Who'd tell him?" he barked. "Every man in camp's fighting shy of our law, right now! This is it. The reason that Farrington's posse didn't follow Tom Beresford out of camp last night is that just as they were pulling out, a man came in from the upper diggings with news a freshet had uncovered a couple of dead men on an abandoned claim up there—and both of them had been shot through the back!"

"When?"

"Three-four weeks ago. And what's more, the claim ain't a dead one, but live as hell with yellow dirt and somebody has been workin' heavily on it since them two was killed and plowed under!"

Dave nodded. Now, this was the pattern! This was the way the thing would work out. This was getting close to something a man could get his hands to.

"Now word comes down this morning," Collins went on rapidly, "that Farrington is putting his Vigilantes into the saddle this morning. Remember Poughkeepsie Ford—the gent that does the carpentering around, sluice-box repairing and the like? Well, Poughkeepsie met Farrington in the gulch late last night and told him he knew who buried those dead men on that high claim."

"Who?" Dave barked eagerly. Collins jerked his head.

"He didn't say. But I hear Farrington knew who he meant! John came back to camp and called his Vigilante court this morning. They found Poughkeepsie guilty of double-murder and of operating the dead men's claim. They're going up to hang him sometime before noon!"

Dave climbed out of his chair.

"Poughkeepsie Ford is going to have a lot of company by noon!" he said softly. He turned toward the door. Feldmeyer stayed at the table, a sharp, self-accusing frown of worry across his face. But Anse Collins followed Dave with a wide grin on his lips.

"I counted twenty-six of them riding up the gulch a few minutes ago, Dave," the storeman said as they went out the door. "It's a bad crowd for a little army to face. It's worse than crazy for less than an army!"

"Then you aren't coming, Anse?" Dave asked. Collins scowled and spat, carefully.

"Why, yes, Marshal, I am," he said. "I knowed you wouldn't listen to anything that sounded like sense!"

CIRCLING, Dave and Collins came out on the slope above the little sidecut where Poughkeepsie Ford had built his shack. Dropping down a channel cut in the slope, they came to a little shoulder from which they could look down into the dooryard of the shack. There was a crowd gathered there. Farrington was conspicuous among them. So were Paul Stone and the Symes brothers and one or two others who had been at the hotel the night before. But dominating the whole pack of them was the old carpenter they had tried and sentenced to die.

Ford wasn't a big man as his kind went in the hard-rock country, but he had the pride of a man who had a skill and used it. His hands were roped behind him and his face bore the marks of hard usage at the hands of his captors. But his voice was steady.

"You aren't God, John Farrington!" he said coldly. "Everything comes to an end. Even you!"

"I'm not on trial, Poughkeepsie," Farrington answered him softly. There's not much you can say!"

Ford nodded grimly. "That's right," he agreed. "There isn't much I can say now that will count. But some soon day somebody right here will remember that I told you I earned the poke of dust you found in my sack, working with my hands at fifteen dollars a day, cutting planks and driving nails! Somebody will remember I seen lights lots of nights at the claim up on top where them men died, that I seen a man or two beside you now, coming down from that claim. Somebody will figure how you're shipping the dust you're squeezing up here and there out to Denver. Then the whole thing will fall together. You should get out, John. You should start running like hell, now!"

Farrington straightened. His voice remained soft, but a deadly malevolence put a saw's edge to it.

"That's enough! Bring up the rope —"

But before a man below could move, Dave Mason spoke from above them.

"Easy, gents," he cautioned. "I'll have a word in this. I want to hear what Ford has to say, all over again. And I want you boys to be careful while he's talking!"

Poughkeepsie half turned, a flood of gratitude across his face. He opened his mouth, but said nothing. Lefty Symes must have had his gun in his fist the whole time. Its flat report chopped the life from Ford as the carpenter's lips formed the first word. Dave hadn't drawn his gun, wanting to make no more open a thing of this than necessary. He rolled back, now, drawing and firing with bitter speed. His slug took Symes in the thigh. The man cried out fearfully and caught at the lapels of Farrington's coat for support. Farrington stood motionless for a moment, his restless eyes fastened down on Dave. Then he struck the wounded man away with an oath.

"You damned fool!" he grated. "Get on your horse and get back to the claim. I'll deal with you, later!"

Mason drew the hammer of his gun back again. "No, John," he said thinly, "not later! You all came up here to hang a man that had killed another one. You aimed to hang him cold to a tree. Vigilantes have got to do their duty! Your customer is dead, but there's another murderer, right there! Suppose you hold your court and call your vote on Symes, right now!"

Farrington stood immobile for a moment. Mason registered every thought, every measurement which went through the man's head. Once he thought Farrington would chance it with his crew behind him. Then Farrington's eyes raised to Anse Collins, staring down over the double-bored shot-gun which always rode in a saddle-scabbard with

him. Farrington's anger cooled swiftly. It was a strange moment. Farrington's personal crew watched him for a sign. But there were several honest miners in the crowd whose blood had thinned and whose anger had risen at the manner of Ford's death.

"All right, boys," Farrington said reluctantly. "You've heard the charge. How do you vote?"

MANY men were silent. But some of the miners answered strongly. Dave thought this might break Farrington's grip on himself. But it didn't. The man was as fast on his feet as a cat. He delivered the sentence in measured tones and ordered Paul Stone to double a knot and fasten the noose on Symes' neck.

Symes died in terror and without fight. When Stone moved out from under his body, signifying he was dead, his brother rushed in and cut him down. He lifted the corpse onto a saddle, lashed it there, and paused a moment before Farrington.

"He was my own blood, John, and he was working for you!" A turmoil of emotion roughened his voice. "You should have remembered—"

Farrington shrugged with plain uneasiness. "Mason's doings, not mine. Right. You know that. The law. . . ."

"Miner's law!" Dave clipped in. "This is a miner's camp and it's the only law that fits. Pass the word—all of you. There'll be more like it till we have peace!"

Right Symes swung up on another horse. "See you in hell, Mason!" he said with unmasked meaning, and he turned the two animals down the trail. The rest of the Vigilantes rose to leather, also, and filed down the cut.

When they were gone, Collins came down from his perch above, dragging his big old gun.

"That was rough medicine, Mason," he said shakenly. "Never seen anything like it before. I hope it works!"

CHAPTER IV

A Woman Fights Fair

LEAVING Collins behind to take care of Ford's body and effects, Dave mounted and swung off down the gulch on a vague hunch. Half a dozen miles from Ford's shack, the trail skirted a steep side-hill a hundred feet above the floor of the gulch. There had been some sort of a scuffle here among the Vigilantes on their way down to the town. Dave dismounted and slid to the bottom. Right Symes lay there, broken under a still faintly struggling horse, the body of his brother beside him. Symes was breathing horribly, but he tried to talk.

"John . . . afraid of me, now! John done it . . . Get him, for the love of God, Marshal . . .!"

Dave bent, his arm under the man's shoulders. But death came before Symes could say anything more. An hour and a half after the Vigilantes returned to Quartz Hill, Dave Mason came in with the double burden he had lifted from the floor of the gulch. Doc Talbot scratched the great bald dome of his head thoughtfully when Dave pulled up in front of him.

Dave grinned drily. "Seen anything of Beresford?"

Doc shook his head.

"No. But plenty of Farrington and his boys! They've about got the camp persuaded their Vigilantes are the McCoy. To hear Farrington talk, a man'd think sure that Dave Mason aimed to make this a one-man camp before he was through. I don't like it, Dave!"

Mason shrugged and moved afoot up the street. The whole camp seemed to

know the course of its existence hung in a delicate balance. Dave could feel the grimness of that knowledge in every man he met. Most of them kept to themselves. He couldn't blame them. It was better to keep clear until this thing had come to a head.

The afternoon wore slowly through. Some doors among the business houses were closed and the blinds drawn. There were other signs. Dave watched them with growing uneasiness. He knew whom he would fight in the end. He knew why he would fight them. But he didn't know when it would start.

Tom Beresford likely knew. But Tom was hiding. Dave kept an anxious eye pealed for the big freighter clear through sunset. At dinner, Farrington came into Feldmeyer's place, four of his flat-bellied gunmen with him. They stared across at Dave, giving no sign of hostility or recognition. He finished his meal and went again onto the street.

Half way through the town, he paused in front of the Quartzlight office. There was something he had forgotten about Marcia Defever. At the hotel, short minutes after Beresford had escaped him, she had hinted she knew why the freighter was running. Dave stopped at the door, feeling a queer eagerness to see Mark Defever's daughter which was quite apart from the troubles of the camp. But he didn't knock. He could hear voices inside, one of them belonging to a man he had been hunting for a day and a night.

He tried the knob softly, found the door locked, and swung the bulk of his body against the catch. It splintered and gave sharply, tumbling him into the room.

Tom Beresford crouched in the corner behind a gun. Beresford's eyes were wide with alarm and his knuckles white on the grip of his weapon. But Dave was less troubled by these things than by the look of scorning hatred on the face of the girl.

"I want to talk to you, Tom," he said steadily across the room.

Beresford shook his head. Marcia Defever slid between them, blanketing the freighter with her lithe body.

"Get out!" she raged quietly. "Get out of here!"

DAVE put his arm out and shoved her aside. She whirled, snatched a rifle from horns over the door, and levered a shell into its chamber. He spoke through the snapping of its breech.

"I don't blame you for keeping low, Tom. But you're in the clear with me if you'll talk. If the talk is right, we can forget—"

Marcia Defever shoved forward again. Dave wanted to watch Beresford. But he couldn't. The girl with the white, intense face drew his attention and held it.

"You're a fool!" she told him. "You're a bad joke! Hound the wrong man and eat your meals every night in the same room with the right one! You wear big guns. Why don't you use them, if that's what you want? Go find Farrington. Go find Paul Stone. Or get out of this camp and let the Vigilantes make their own law. But leave Tom Beresford be!"

She jerked the muzzle of her rifle up, shoving it against the ridges of muscle above Dave's belt. The steel felt cold. The coldness spread when he saw the piece was at full cock. Beresford broke the moment with a weary word.

"Marcia!"

The freighter came out of the corner, holstering his weapon. "I can't hide forever, Dave. I'm not made for it. What you want?"

"An answer, Tom. Farrington's crew aim to clean this camp out, but they wanted a way to get their hauls out of

the hills without drawing attention, so they picked your freight-wagon to do the job. You turned them down?"

Beresford nodded, kicked a chair out from the table, and straddled it.

"I figured you'd unreel it sooner or later, Mason," he agreed slowly. "But your knowing won't change anything. They've got us across the short end of a dirty barrel. They knew I told Mark Defever what the game was, so they finished him before he could pass it on. I seen them pulling out as I came up, the day I found him on the trail—"

"Tom, you lied to me!" she charged. "You *do* know who killed dad!"

Beresford ignored her protest. "They let me be because they figured that sooner or later I'd carry their stuff for them. Afterwards, they figured I'd make a good bull to load up with blame for Mark's and Sam Hendricks' killings."

The girl cut in again. "You didn't tell me the whole thing, Tom!"

Beresford went on steadily.

Farrington got a man out to where I was hiding today. He's ready to take the whole pot, now. Either I come in and give myself up to his Vigilantes or Marcia was going to disappear. Maybe I would have come first to you, Dave. But you was new to your job. And when you snapped those cuffs on me at the hotel, I was afraid you was looking for a goat, too, and wouldn't give me the right chance!"

Beresford knotted his hands through the rungs of the chair back. A strong current of sympathy for the big, slow-thinking freighter ran through Dave. Marcia crossed to the window, trailing the rifle again, and peered out through a corner of the blind onto the street. Dave's eyes clung to her, thinking of the Vigilante chief's latest threat to Beresford.

"If Farrington can keep throwing meat to his Vigilantes, making the honest ones think they are really cleaning up the camp, he'll have us in a tight corner," he said. "You'd best stay out of sight, Tom. You're next on their schedule. "I'll keep an eye on Marcia for you. If they could hang you for the two killings they'd mark up against you, it'd work two ways for them. I'd quiet talk about Defever and Sam Hendricks, and it'd get you out of the way!"

Beresford spread his hands dumbly and turned as though to get the girl's approval. But she was no longer by the window. The front door was open. She was on the walk in front of the building, the rifle across her arm, watching a body of men headed by John Farrington, ride down the street.

"Good God!" Dave rapped out, and he dived through the doorway after her.

But he was too late. She had hailed the riders. Farrington sat his saddle easily, letting his glance play lingeringly over the taut figure of the girl before it passed on to the two men boiling out of the building behind her.

"You're in bad company, girl!" he said evilly.

Marcia Defever swung her rifle swiftly upward. When she spoke again, her voice rang through the whole camp.

"You killed my father. I want the fair fight he never had!"

The gun slammed back against her shoulder. Farrington yelped and tumbled backward out of his saddle as her lead touched him.

CHAPTER V

Death's Kangaroo Court

FARRINGTON lay outspread in the dust for a moment, then scurried to his feet and doubled for shelter. The whole thing happened like a stroke of lightning. Both

the freighter and the marshal were in full-flung forward motion, but yards too late to stop the girl. Dave reached her first, seizing her arm and pulling her savagely around as the first of the Vigilantes' returning fire cut around them.

"You crazy little fool," he bit out, and passed her back to Beresford. Giving them a moment to reach the door, he fired once at the press of men before him, then wheeled back, himself.

Inside the office of the Quartzlight, he tossed his hat impatiently aside, his mind running swiftly ahead. Tom Beresford laughed, a deep, exultant sound. The gun in the freighter's hand spun eagerly on one finger.

"Now we can fight!" he said.

Marcia Defever shook her head and turned away from the freighter. Dave saw this and wondered. Beresford was right. This was the pay-off. The girl crossed to him.

"Well, Marshal Mason," she asked. "What next."

Dave made no answer, his ears keening uneasily for sound from the street. He was conscious the girl's shot had broken the ice freezing in so mercilessly around them. Any time, now, the flood would come. Marcia pressed closer to him, her eyes watching his face anxiously. He realized she had to have her answer.

"A man has so many winning hands in his string of luck," he said slowly. "If he plays a good game, he spreads them out so he has his best left for the last, when he needs it. I don't know, girl!"

She backed away from him. Dave crossed the room, tilted a blind. Farrington and his men had cleared, filing into the Twenty Ounce. Unconsciously his gaze swept across the barred front of Anse Collins' store. But no light showed behind the blinds. He shrugged. Anse had done enough, already. He turned back to the room.

"They'll come after us!" he told Beresford.

Beresford grinned. "We'll pick 'em off between us. Tomorrow this camp'll be on the flat of its feet again!"

"You believe that?" Marcia asked Dave sharply. He shrugged his shoulders with impatience.

"I believe nothing or disbelieve it until I've seen. Luck can run wide or narrow and there's no way to tell, ahead of time!"

The girl shoved a fresh shell into the magazine of her rifle and laid the weapon across a table at Dave's elbow.

"I made a mistake about you, Dave Mason," she said. "I heard how you'd half-accused Tom of Dad's death. I heard how you handcuffed him at your hotel. I heard the rest of the story Farrington tells about the men you killed. It didn't make pretty listening. I thought you were the same kind as John Farrington — just as hard and ruthless—but on the other side of the fence by accident. I thought you were making this a little personal war between yourself and the Vigilantes for control of the town. I shot at John Farrington in the hope you'd jump out there after me and the Vigilantes would get you, too. I wanted you both dead, you and Farrington. Now . . . . . ."

"Now, I don't want that!"

DAVE could feel the strong lash of her gaze—he could sense the fire and strength and the gentleness of her womanhood, and he was ungrateful. These things were for her man. He shook his gun free in his belt and spoke gruffly to Beresford.

"They're coming, Tom."

Beresford killed the lamp and crouched with Dave at a window. A company of men were rolling down the roadway outside, John Farrington in their lead. He had a bandana tied

loosely around his upper arm where Marcia's lead had tagged him. Beside him, Paul Stone carried a rolled paper. Tom Beresford snorted.

"They've held court in the Twenty-Ounce and sentenced us!"

Dave nodded. The pack came on until it was a loose semi-circle before the darkened newspaper office. Paul Stone raised his scroll and read out a bloody indictment of the two embattled men. Mason swore savagely.

"We've waited long enough, Tom," he said. "It's time we went!"

He brushed by Marcia Defever, remembered how the girl had leaped out onto the street once before, and carefully laid the barrel of his gun against the thick halo of her hair. She dropped without a sound. Beresford's quick anger at the blow fled as he realized this was the only way the girl could be kept clear of death.

A quick man among the Vigilantes caught his balance and flung a hasty shot as the two of them piled out of the Quartzlight office. It went wild, but it was signal to the others. Dave held his own gun low, spacing his shots to the count of his strides. In full focus before his eyes were two figures, Farrington and Paul Stone.

Somewhere along where Collins' store-front was, a heavy, blasting sound went up and Dave was aware of a slackening in the press in that direction. Beresford had been hit in the first stride and had lagged. Now Dave heard the frighter howl joyously. The thin, pinch-faced figure of Paul Stone doubled slowly in the middle.

A man opened up with a fresh gun, firing with incredible rapidity. Dave felt two of the slugs skewer into him at an angle and almost together. They broke him, stopped his striding, dropped him to one knee. He rocked his own gun and answered once. He couldn't see through the crowd, but the swift, deadly firing stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Dragging a twisted leg, big Tom Beresford went past him. A yard away, Tom ran into a solid, invisible wall. He sagged, caught himself, and levelled his gun once more. The weapon spoke. With a wide gesture which didn't quite carry through, Beresford fell headlong.

Dave caught a glimpse of Farrington, raised his own gun, and emptied its last chamber. In that instant thunder came again from the direction of Anse Collins' porch. Dave heard the flat, murderous whirring of buckshot and Farrington vanished from among the upright men still on the street.

Dave raised himself and rocked painfully on his knees. His great, bald head shining like a beacon above lesser men, Doc Talbot came striding through the collapsing ranks of the miners.

"You fools!" he bellowed. "You damned, blood-gutted sheep! Get out of my way!"

The crowd broke even more.

TOM BERESFORD died just short of morning. Dave thought of this new blow to Marcia Defever—her father and her man in the short span of days. She was sitting between the beds of the two of them when Tom opened his eyes and told them he'd come to the beginning of a strange trail. Marcia kissed him with tears in her eyes, but she'd been holding Dave's hand through the long hours before when Doc Talbot was fighting grimly for the lives of both of them.

Tom, himself, finally made it plain.

"So long, Marshal," he said with a pale grin. "I was looking for gold—" he nodded at the girl between them. "You found it! I'm getting along out of here now. There'll be rails in pretty soon and freighting'll be shot as clean to hell as I am, anyway. Good luck . . . . . both of you . . . . . ."

SATAN IS A SODBUSTER

By

ED EARL REPP

It was Steele Carnaval talking, not old Pitt now—it was young Steele Carnaval telling his father that only a gent with a yellow streak down his back would let nesters ride onto Rolling C cattle range!

Gun fire illuminated the black sky

CLOUDS of stifling dust lifted like smoke above the tossing backs of the longhorn herd. High-pitched yells from the punchers sheared the thunder of hooves and the clacking horns of a thousand head of beeves. The pungent smell of burning hair and branding fires hung on the air. The Rolling C outfit was ready to roll west.

A rider splashed across the shallow ford of the Concho, coming from the Texas town of Coyote beyond the river. From the edge of the herd, old Pitt Carnaval watched him through faded eyes. The folded leather of his jowls

quivered. It was his only show of emotion as he watched the rider draw up.

Then his range boss was facing him morosely. "Steel won't come, Pitt," he said simply, and silence gushed in between them.

The two old cowmen sat their mounts stonily. Each could read the other's thoughts after a comradeship of thirty years. Together they had seen the buffalo vanish from the plains. The Comanche, the Kiowas, the Crows and the Crees had followed the vanishing herds, leaving the vast Staked Plains of Texas to the white man.

Those plains stretched westward from here, a waterless strip of hell one hundred miles wide. Pitt Carnaval stared into that westward distance and knew that he had failed. Steel was his son—a laughing boy with a gun on his hip that he wanted to use.

Pitt crossed his arms on the saddle-horn, clutching the crook of each elbow with a long-boned hand. He was a big, flat-muscled man, hard despite his years. An edging of silver showed beneath the surling brim of his low-crowned hat. His darkly-burned cheeks were still flat across the high bones of his face. Only the folded leather of his jowls betrayed age, for his gray eyes still were young.

ABSENTLY he watched the vivid life that moved in the foreground before him. Lank brown youths were on the swing after bolting dogies. The red-hot iron was marking a maverick with the Rolling C. There was dust and heat down there, tired muscles and honest sweat. It was where Steel Carnaval belonged, but he was sitting cool and easy in Coyote across the river, playing poker with the Yeager boys in the Bull's-head saloon.

Carnaval turned to his range-boss. "Was that all Steel had to say?"

A drooping white mustache crossed the thin spread of the foreman's lips. Dixie Bone's eyes were the same blue as the sky, narrowed in a nest of wrinkles.

"He said if you were soft enough to let a bunch of damned nesters drive you off your range that he was done with you. He said you wouldn't have a cow-critter left by the time you made the Pecos."

"Steel's never seen that range," Pitt Carnaval remarked softly. "Mebbe if he had, his answer would have been different."

"Listen, if you want that cussed yearling so much, I'll take some of the boys and go snake him outa town!"

Pitt Carnaval laughed. The sound of it was like branding irons grating together. The deep hurt that was in him found no other outlet. "Steel's got to come of his own free will, Dixie."

The range-boss snorted. "Mebbe he'd do that if he was put straight about a few things. Them damned Yeager boys have been stealing you blind. I know it but I can't prove it. Tain't the sod-busters that's makin' you head west. You're trailing to new range before them Yeagers ready Steel's neck for a noose that ought to be around their own. If that whelp was mine, Pitt, I'd quirt some sense into his head!"

"After that speech," murmured Carnaval, "your throat must be dry. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"Listen, Pitt," Dixie Bone said urgently, "what are you going to do about it?"

Pitt Carnaval had no reply.

They rode through the shimmering dust of the branding pits and grinning youths saluted them.

Dixie Bone twisted in his saddle to glance at the ragged clouds hanging blood-red on the rim of the western prairie.

"We're going to run into trouble out there," he prophesied as their mounts splashed through the ford of the Concho.

They rode down the velvet dust of Cherokee Street. A couple of nesters' wagons were parked before Smith's General Store. A brood of curly-headed kids eyed them from the wagon-box of one. A tall hoe-man and his sun-bonneted wife were climbing into the other wagon.

The man studied the two cowmen half-furtively, then muttered: "We ain't leavin' yet, Molly. Not till I see Carnaval."

"Damned land-grabbers," Dixie Bone was growling. "Won't be room left to spit if they keep coming. I'm glad we're heading for the Pecos!"

Pitt Carnaval had nothing to say to that. He was thinking back to a day when he and his young wife had come to the Concho. She had died giving him Steel.

NOW he saw that he had done a poor job of raising the boy. Steel had some of his mother's restlessness in him, a deep-springing energy that could be turned for good or bad. He had paid it little attention and now it was too late. He had spent too much of his life building for a future. Now he had neither the future nor his son. This trail that led west might put him on his feet again, if he got through. But it wasn't going to mean much without Steel to share it.

Dixie Bone, watching with deep speculation in his eyes, read the signs. He saw Carnaval's straight mouth tip down in a tight smile, saw his deep-pocketed eyes narrow and glitter. He saw the sudden swing of the big man's shoulders as he reined the clay-bank left across Cherokee Street, heading for the Bull's-head saloon.

A man in the shadow cast by the wooden awning over the boardwalk regarded them with a close attention, then settled the gun on his hip into a handier position.

"There's better places for you to buy your drinks, Pitt," Bone murmured. His eye ranged along the horses tethered in front of them. "All the Yeagers are here."

Carnaval shrugged. "I'm going to try once more."

Dixie Bone shook his head. "You're wasting time. Steel's too stiff-necked to back down from a stand. Just like you."

Carnaval's craggy features grayed, showing his range-boss the raw hurt within him. He murmured, "I have little pride left."

They dismounted and racked their mounts.

The hum of voices inside faded as the two cowmen entered the saloon. Faces turned to watch them take their places at the corner of the bar.

The owner, garbed meticulously in gambler's black, came to stand at Carnaval's shoulder. "Jim," he said to the bartender, "this will be on the house. These gentlemen are leaving us soon." He turned a strictly noncommittal face to Carnaval. "I hear you're trailing your spread to the Pecos."

"You heard right," Pitt answered.

"It's going to be kind of tough, driving a hundred miles without water, isn't it?"

"It's been done before," said Carnaval briefly, and pouring himself a drink from the bottle set at his elbow.

He nodded and touched the liquor to his lips. But he left most of it in the glass, and impatience moving him, he struck across the floor toward the ring of men that hid view of the poker table in the corner.

All of them were armed. Carnaval carried no weapon.

The ring about the table began to close a little, but he opened it with a

sudden brutal twist of his shoulders. A little of the whiskey in his glass sloshed down on Clant Yeager's cards.

Clant was the oldest of the four brothers, the leader of the pack. His slant-jaw was covered with a roan stubble. His eyes, as he raised them to stare at the old cowman, were the same tawny hue. He opened his trap-like mouth, but there was something in Carnaval's face that held him quiet.

Carnaval looked across the table at his son with the sense of shock he had felt often lately. It was like staring into a mirror that remembered how you looked thirty years ago.

HIS son was twenty, black of hair and with laughing deep-set eyes like his father's. The skin was flat and taut over the good bones of his face. He had the same wide, straight mouth of his parent, and the broad shoulders and tapering waist. Range garb sat well on his lean frame.

This was Pitt Carnaval thirty years ago. But he saw something in his son that had never been in him, a brooding restlessness hiding in the eyes and in the turn of Steel's lips. That restlessness was his mother's heritage, Carnaval realized. Always they had wanted something, but neither had confided in him. Neither of them ever would, for his wife was dead and he had lost his son.

Pitt was certain of that now, but stubbornly he went through with the set speech he had planned. "We're pulling out for the Pecos, come dawn."

Steel's mouth twisted in a smile that lost all humor. "I never thought a Carnaval would run from trouble," he said flatly. "Here's one who won't. The sod-busters ain't chasing Clant off the Concho. I'm sticking with him. The Pecos is going to have to get along without me."

The Yeagers, Pitt saw now, had baited their trap with the lure of war. War that would let Steel vent the volcanic energy within him. War, he thought bitterly, that would satisfy the trigger-itch in his son's finger—and in the end fit a noose around his neck.

He knew Steel wouldn't see it, no matter what he said. It was something the boy had to learn for himself.

Pitt left it like that and turned from the table, missing the expression that crossed Steel's face. Clant Yeager, however, did not miss it. He called for more drinks as the two cowmen stumped toward the swing doors.

A nester and his wife were standing on the boardwalk at the corner of the Bull's-head when Pitt Carnaval and Dixie Bone emerged. Carnaval's eyes brushed over them but that was the limit of his attention. The folded flesh of his jowls bunched and made his face look old as he bowed his head in deep thought. He was thankful for the friendly presence of his range-boss, who knew when to keep still.

A boot scraped along the boardwalk behind them. A voice said, "Hold up a minute, Pitt."

Carnaval faced Shotgun Mather. A six-pointed star was pinned to the tall man's vest. His face was clean-shaven, deeply scored by the years.

"Pitt," the sheriff said quietly, "I hate to see you leave the Concho. You've been a rock for the wild ones to wash against. You've held this country down when it was ready to blow away in gunsmoke."

Sardonic bitterness tinged Carnaval's voice. "And let 'em rustle me blind! It hasn't been the nesters who've stolen my cattle, Mather. You've done little to stem the tide. Maybeso you'll go to work after we're gone."

Sheriff Mather flushed. "Pitt, I hear you're leaving Steel behind with the Yeagers. You know what's going to happen to those boys one of these days."

"Yes," Carnaval said flatly, "I know."

He moved away from the sheriff then, walking through the dusk that shadowed Cherokee Street. It pooled in the velvet dust, hummed in the drowsy air. Dixie Bone, drifting along beside him, could find no answer, either, for the refusal Steel had voiced. Yet somehow they had to get the boy out of town, and of his own free will.

THE nester who had been standing by the saloon loomed suddenly in the shadows before them. The man stepped out, holding his narrow-brimmed hat in his hands. He was a big-boned, awkward shape in plowman's boots. His clothes were soiled with earth.

"Mister Carnaval," he said quickly, as though afraid they would shut him up, "I hear you're a-headin' west to new country that ain't settled up yet. My wife egged me on to ask could we go with you. 'Tain't as foolish as it sounds. We can work for you, and raise things you'll need. You see, we got to get out of here. Clant Yeager's got his eye on my daughter. It's either give in or—"

Pitt looked at the work-hardened face. "Mister, go hitch up your wagon. We pull out at sun-up."

The nester whirled away, running awkwardly toward the indistinct shape of his wife farther up the block. "Molly!" he cried, "Molly——"

Pitt was smiling for the first time in many days as he faced his range-boss, whose face reflected many emotions, chief among them scorn.

"Why'd you do it?" Dixie exploded. "God, ain't we got enough on our hands now without sod-busters and women?" He stopped, for Pitt Carnaval was still faintly smiling. "Well, what's in your head?"

"Let's ride," Pitt answered. "I'll tell you as we go."

The last banners of sunlight broke through the low-lying clouds and golden light held the Staked Plains for the time it took Pitt Carnaval to explain his plan. "Send a couple of boys to town tonight, after the nester is safe with us. Let them mention in the Bull's-head that Clant Yeager's girl is heading west with the Rolling C. I think that ought to be enough." His straight mouth turned wry. "It's funny, Dixie, how things work out. What Clant wants goes with us. The thing I want stays with him"

"Mebbe," said Dixie Bone, "you'll end up with both."

"That's my hope," Pitt Carnaval said gravely.

The sun was riding high when the Rolling C moved away from the Concho.

Pitt Carnaval, stationed beside the pole corral, watched his vaqueros point the herd and stretch it out into a loose, arrow-head formation. He watched the moss-head longhorns that were the self-appointed leaders press to the fore. Riders at point girded the advance. Other riders but vaguely seen through the swirling dust rode at swing. More were on the drag. He had an even dozen hands, and they were good men with guns.

Carnaval watched the white-tilted chuck-wagon rattle past, followed by the nester's wagon. Gallantly Pitt doffed his hat to the trim girl in gingham who handled the reins. He caught a glimpse of her oval face beneath its sunbonnet, then that, too, was lost in the dust of the drag.

PITT waited in plain sight of Coyote, and watched Cherokee Street, but no rider broke the drowse of early morning. He had been told the poker game

was still going strong, and that drunk or sober, Steel Carnaval was winning all the money. His son, Pitt thought ironically, also was a gambler, only he was winning.

The Rolling C rolled all that day with every man in the crew hard-working. Toward them, darkening the sky, came the ominous wall of clouds, rising out of the endless waste of the Staked Plains.

Dixie Bone met Carnaval at the tail-gate of the chuck-wagon where the cook served coffee. Carnaval saw worry tighten the corners of his friend's eyes as he looked at those heavy clouds. Before he could speak, however, the nester girl, Julie Prentiss, came up from their wagon with a pan of hot doughnuts. She was a tall, lithe girl who wore faded gingham as though it were silk. Her eyes were shining with the excitement of this trek, but she knew enough of the plains to be afraid of those clouds.

"Mister Carnaval," she asked, "what will happen if the storm breaks?" Will the cattle stampede?"

"Why ma'am," Pitt told her gently, "you needn't worry. There's no use crossing bridges till we come to them. I've seen worse looking clouds than those fade out before the sun."

After she was gone Dixie Bone said, "You're lyin' between your teeth, Pitt. You know damned well it'll hit tonight. I only hope that's all that hits! Clant Yeager won't take this lying down."

"The hands know?"

"I've told 'em," Bone nodded, "and they're primed for bear."

"They're good boys,'' Carnaval said, and that old hurt was like a lash striking him in the face.

The muddy clouds brought on a swift night. The herd was restless There was the smell of rain in the air.

The plains suddenly were still. Carnaval, riding at swing, tensed as that intangible feel of quietness clamped down on the prairie. It was not really quiet, for the herd was moaning nervously. The clatter of their horns was a steady undercurrent, like sound of wind blowing dry brush.

The vaqueros on point and swing and drag lifted their voices in the night, singing a variety of tunes, from the Cowgirl's Lament to Gospel hymns. It was helping to quiet the herd, Pitt Carnaval felt. They might see the night through unless something other than thunder broke the hair-trigger peace. Yet he knew that anything could start a stampede, the snapping of a twig, or the lighting of a cigarette.

The apparition that came suddenly out of the night as the first thunder rolled in the sky was enough to startle peaceful cattle, not to mention a herd already on the verge of a panicky run.

"God-a-mighty!" wrenched from Carnaval's lips.

That rider had come from a blind draw up ahead. His intent was obvious. He rode at the herd, his mount belly-flat to the ground, the darting flashes of the six-gun in his hand more insistent than the sullen drums in the sky.

Blue lightning parted the clouds, and wind came out of nowhere to add to the wildness of the night.

OTHER revolvers began to talk now, as some of Carnaval's riders converged on the night-raider. Pitt saw the man's horse go down, but he had done his work. The whole herd seemed to rise and fling itself forward, presenting a face of danger that the big claybank under Pitt combatted instinctively. The horse hurled itself along the flank of the wall-eyed herd.

The guns in the sky were cannonading again and now rain came sluicing down to add another hazard. The thunder of cloven hooves on the sound-

ing board of the prairie matched the thunder in the sky.

By lightning flash Pitt saw the speedier moss-horns surging ahead, his riders cutting between them and the body of the herd, forcing the point to break and circle.

There was nothing his men couldn't handle up ahead, Carnaval reasoned. His jaw squared at another thought, and he reined away from the herd. That nester wagon was back in the drag. The vanguard he had casually placed about it would be gone. No cowman born could refuse the urge to try and turn the stampede.

Violence rode the night in several forms. Ball lightning rolled along the ground, and the air smelled of burnt sulphur. A gun winked from the dark hulk of the Prentiss wagon, but the artillery in the sky drowned the sound.

There was trouble up ahead, or that gun would never have spoken. Pitt strained his eyes against the black, but he could not see what Prentiss was shooting at. Cursing, he roweled the claybank from withers to flank.

The pinprick of other gun-flashes broke the dark. The claybank, as though it sensed its master's need, flattened like a greyhound to the track, knifing the black scud.

Lightning paled the earth, and Pitt got a view of riders moiling about the Prentiss wagon. All the guns were silent as the night closed in again.

When a second flash came Pitt could see the horsemen streaming off across the prairie. In the hush that followed the lightning he heard a woman's shrill scream. Thunder came on the instant to blot the knifing cry, but before its roll had faded, Pitt Carnaval was at the Prentiss wagon, bounding from his mount.

He made out the bulk of Molly Prentiss huddled close to the high rear wheel

of the wagon. She held her husband's head in her lap.

She was crying, but she brought words through her sobs as Pitt knelt down beside her. "Yeager's shot Pete! He took Julie! Oh, God!"

Her words were like a poinaird driving its point into Carnaval's heart. Deftly he ran his fingers along the bullet gouge above Prentiss' ear, then pulled his blood-stained hand away.

"Your husband's only creased, ma'am. It takes more than that to kill a sod-buster!"

He rose and stepped lithely to horse. From the saddle he glanced down. "Send the boys after me. I'm going to get your daughter!"

The woman laughed hysterically. "You Carnaval's are all alike! You make your brags, but——"

A FLASH of lightning showed Pitt four black dots on the boundless plains. He slapped spurs to the claybank and stretched after them, but the mother's words rode with him. What had she meant? *You* Carnavals? There were only the two of them. And Steel had thrown in with the wild bunch. Bitter gall was in that thought as he raced down the aisles of night. He had failed, and failed again. If he didn't return that girl to her mother—

Gradually the floating power of the tall claybank narrowed the gap between him and the four riders ahead. He marked their changing positions by the spasmodic flashes of lightning. It made old Carnaval fiercely glad. He had no thought of odds in mind.

Again flame jagged the sky, and Pitt peering ahead, blinked. The four riders had disappeared. Nothing but leagues of emptiness confronted him.

Clant Yeager had a night-camp in some wash that gashed the plains, Pitt reasoned swiftly, and it must be fairly close.

He rode more carefully, the thunderclaps abetting his stealth as he slid from the saddle finally, and ground-anchored the claybank by dropping the reins.

As Carnaval crawled forward he caught the pungent scent of burning cow-chips and mesquite. The hot blood of younger days was leaping in his veins as he reached the lip of the barranca in front of him. He twitched his old Colt from its sheath and rubbed the cool barrel.

About a small blaze on the barranca floor hunched the four Yeager boys. Bearded Clant, with firelight touching his eyes, and making them yellow as a cat's; pink-cheeked Harry Yeager, still in his 'teens and as ugly as a baby diamond-back; Harvey and Sid Yeager made up the quartette. They squatted like a circle of buzzards about a feast, with Julie Prentiss propped against a boulder across from them.

Pitt Carnaval's fingers tightened on his gun-butt. One thought slashed cruelly across his consciousness in that instant before he made his play. If only Steel were here beside him, backing up his Dad—

The round cold muzzle of a gun pressed suddenly against the nape of his neck. "Take it easy," a voice whispered. "I've sure got trigger-itch!"

Pitt Carnaval froze like a man long dead. It was Steel!

He heard the boy say, "I never did like you, Barret. So now you're turning wolf on your own pack, eh?"

In the dark Steel hadn't recognized him. The kid thought he was one of Clant Yeager's hands.

Pitt reversed his gun with a slow gesture, turning it so the handle showed bone white.

An exclamation jerked from Steel and a hand gripped Pitt's shoulder. He turned to see the glitter of Steel's teeth between his grinning lips.

It was nothing but a dream, Pitt told

himself. It couldn't be real! But he felt the hard vibrancy of his own son beside him. And suddenly, in the night, there was glory for Pitt Carnaval. Not his to reason why. It didn't matter. Here was the kid, flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood, ready to back up his Dad!

SIDE by side, without words, they edged over the cut-bank, gravel spitting from beneath their boots.

Clant Yeager made his feet in a single move. There was some good in the man, for he whirled and thrust the girl behind the jutting boulder.

His brothers were on their feet and Harry was stamping at the fire when Steel Carnaval's voice rang out, "Hold it! I'm on the war-path, Clant!"

Guns flamed. Pitt Carnaval and Steel, crouched against the cut-bank, returned the fire.

Bullets slapped into the clay. A slug furrowed its way along Pitt Carnaval's thigh, but he only propped himself upon his other leg and laughed, for with death clawing at him, Pitt was happier than he had ever been. Steel was at his side. Their guns were pointing the same way.

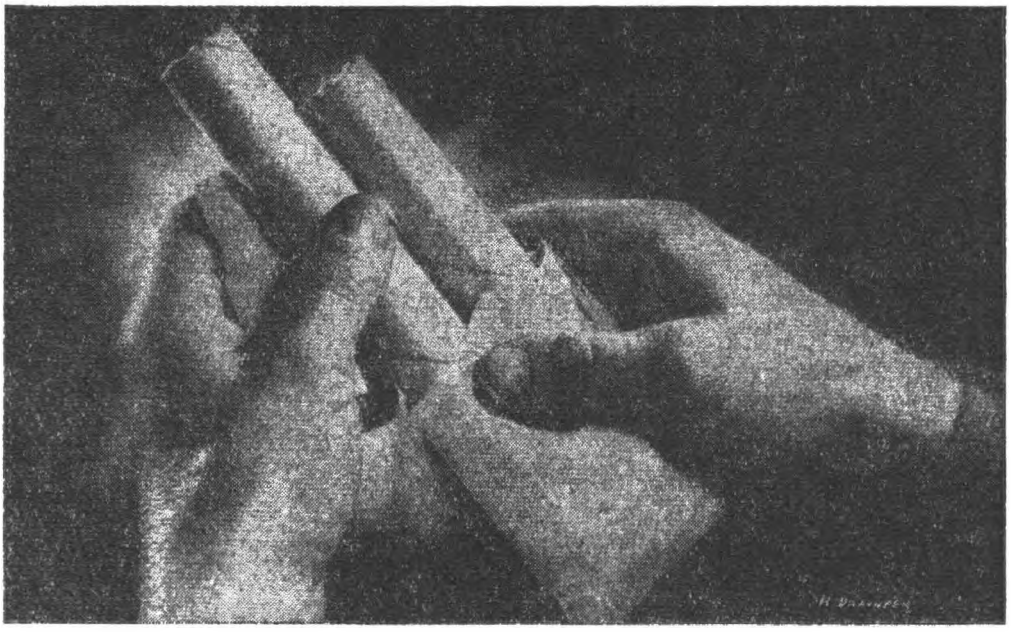
The spat of bullets into the clay-bank diminished, then ceased entirely. The Yeager boys were done. There was no stir of motion, there were no more pin-points of flame from the four shadows sprawled about the embers of the little campfire.

It was hard for Pitt Carnaval to realize the battle had been fought and won so soon.

Hoofs jarred the prairie overhead. Dixie Bone's voice floated down to Pitt and Steel. "What the hell! Is the shootin' all over?"

"Yeah," Pitt drawled, "Yeah, Dixie. Come on down. I got something!"

"And I've got something to show *you*, Pitt Carnaval!" blared another voice.



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That's the dynamite!

The RIGHT way to handle it . . . and why

Our Government is doing a lot of things to keep the cost of living from snowballing.

But the real control is in *our* hands. Yours. Mine.

It won't be fun. It will mean sacrifice and penny-pinching. But after all, the sacrifice of tightening our belts and doing without is a small sacrifice compared with giving your life or your blood in battle!

Here's what YOU must do

Buy only what you absolutely need.

Don't ASK higher prices—for your own labor, your own services, or goods you sell.

Buy rationed goods only by exchanging stamps.

Don't pay a cent above ceiling prices.

Take a grin-and-bear-it attitude on taxes. They must get heavier.

Pay off your debts. Don't make new ones.

Start a savings account. Buy and keep up adequate life insurance.

Buy more War Bonds.

If we do these things, we and our Government won't have to fight a postwar battle against collapsing prices and paralyzed business.

Use it up
Wear it out
Make it do
Or do without

KEEP PRICES DOWN!

This advertisement, prepared by the War Advertising Council, is contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

"Where's my gal?"

"Keep 'em busy, Dad, till I get her," whispered Steel.

Pitt crawled up the bank to where Bone and Prentiss stood with their mounts. Prentiss had strips of flour-sacking bound about his head, but looked more angry than hurt.

"Carnaval," he growled, "I'm generally a God-fearin' man. My wife swears I got drilled and lost Julie because I warn't honest with ye. I'm here to tell ye, Carnaval, that son of yours is a good boy! He hitched up with Yeager to get the goods on him. You deciding to high-tail it was the break he'd been waiting for. Steel put me up to asking could we come along. He figgered you'd say yes."

Pitt grunted with surprise. "Meanin' Steel outfoxed me?"

Prentiss chuckled. "He sure did. He figgered he could smoke the Yeagers into the open with a fat trail-herd, and my gal. But somethin' musta gone haywire—"

Steel, supporting Julie Prentiss, bridged the gulch-rim in time to catch the nester's last remark.

"Yeager stuck a pinch of *peyote* powder in my whiskey, just to play safe, I reckon," he sang out. "That's why I was slow in getting here." He turned glowing eyes on his father. "I hated like hell to turn you down, Dad, but it looked like the only way."

There was wonder and a singing in old Carnaval's heart as he hauled Steel close. For the first time, in those lean, bronzed features so very much like his own, he read absolute serenity and peace. It was a man's face, mature and dignified and calm.

ATTENTION: SKIERS!

The Army needs experienced skiers and mountaineers for service with mountain troops! Qualified skiers may volunteer for direct induction for this service.

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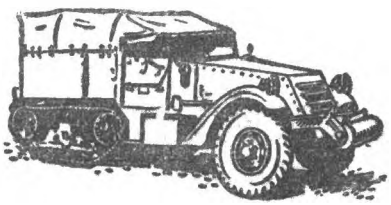

Officially the half track is known as the "T-14." It has a maximum speed of 50 miles per hour. It can climb a slope of 60 degrees with 13 men or a ton of supplies. It is armored and ignores shell holes.

Its chief use is to rush men or material to points where needed. It is used also as a scout car. Its armor plate protection and its .30 or .50 caliber machine guns make it ideal for searching out traps, ambushes, or machine gun nests. Each one requires five tons of steel.

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