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EXCITING WESTERN

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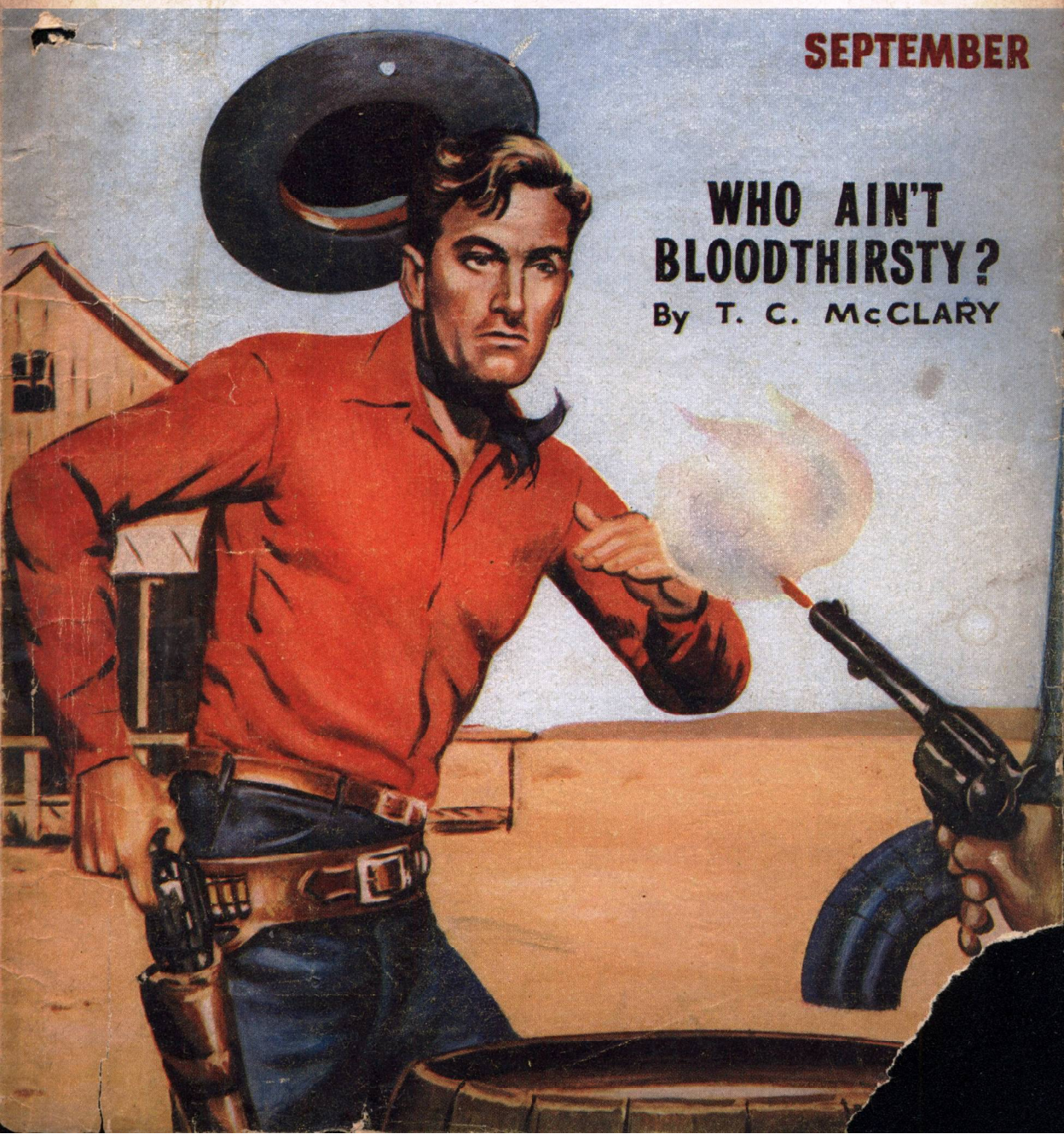

SEPTEMBER

WHO AIN'T BLOODTHIRSTY?

By T. C. McCLARY

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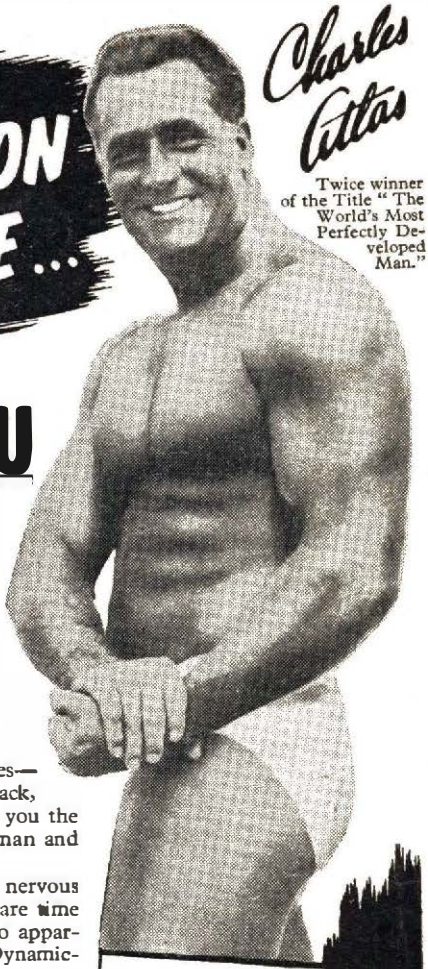

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EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. II, No. 8. (British Edition) September 1953

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YOUR NEXT ISSUE WILL BE ON SALE
~~ SATURDAY, SEPT. 19th ~~

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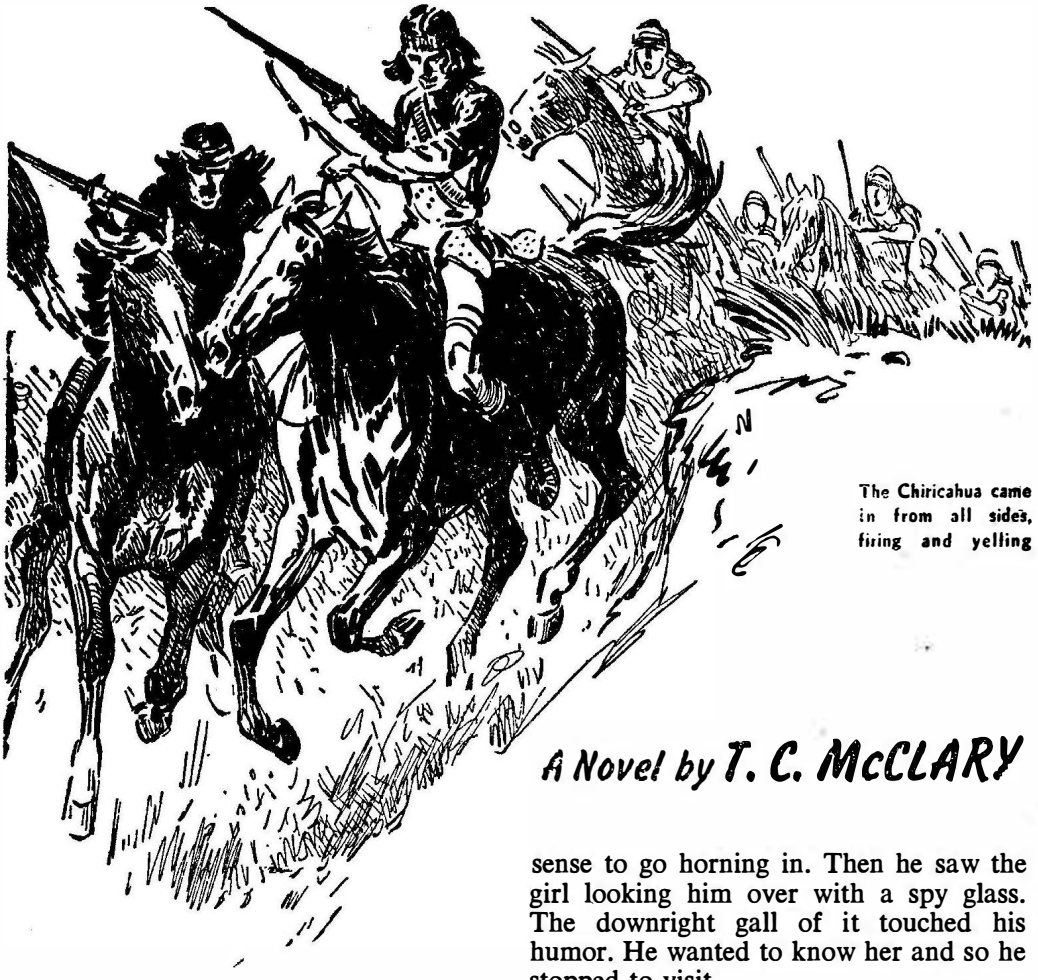
WHO ain't

The half-pint had to prove, come hell or Chiricahua, that he could swing a jug, a gun—or a girl—with any man!

bloodthirsty?



The Chiricahua came in from all sides, firing and yelling

A Novel by T. C. McCLARY

CHAPTER I.

The Clansmen

HE came on the mule train at the foot of the Divide, just west of the Pyramids, toward Stein's Mountain. A gnarled giant of a man with a bush of a white beard hailed him from the camp.

Grant Grahame was driving a remuda of twenty blooded brood mares. It was a mighty lonely spot and it was not good sense to go horning in. Then he saw the girl looking him over with a spy glass. The downright gall of it touched his humor. He wanted to know her and so he stopped to visit.

The patriarch strode out alone to greet him. He was tough and powerful now. What a man he must have been! The giant was bluff and hearty, but his five sons stood back in a knot without a smile on any face. Dark, lean, wary-looking Tennessee hill dogs, just watching and waiting for their master's bidding.

The giant boomed, "The Heflins, stranger . . . the whole clan of us!"

Grant Grahame nodded and gave his name but did not step out of his saddle.

The girl came into view, walking into open space and looking him over again with forthright curiosity. She wore a brown, homespun dress with a deep cut neck, and that was all. It clung to her long, lean, loose-jointed body. There was a filly!

She was barefoot and wore no bonnet. Her quizzical, gray-green eyes were framed by a mass of thick, jet hair. Her throat was long and smooth and full. She bent over to scratch a fly bite on her naked leg. In that brief whisk of her dress, Grant caught a flash of thin ankles and a fine shaped lower limb.

"Why, yes," he nodded at the Heflin chief, "I'd be obliged to light awhile."

Knowing lights touched the girl's eyes. She considered him more personally. He was no prize package and he knew it. He had chill blue eyes and a slashing mouth and a hatchet nose that looked like a broken wedge of rock. To top things, he was small of stature. But his chest filled his shirt, he had straight legs and he was clean. He gave the impression of a man who would let the others do the boasting, and of one who would be gentle with horseflesh and with women.

He yipped his remuda alert and drove it out to where three men with long rifles were guarding a herd of mixed stock.

"You Heflins too?" he asked.

"Well, Heflin first, middle or last handle," one answered.

He nodded. "Grahame. The old man said to run these critters in while I stop to chaw."

"He said so, that's enough," the man answered.

He smelled them out for trickery or hostility and found none, but they were ready enough for it. A closeknit, dark and secret mountain clan, they'd all fight like one if trouble started.

He swung down at camp, leaving his cinches tight, and ground-hitched his pony. The Heflins noted his caution. A sixth man, big as the chief and like a bull in build and nature, spit with contempt. He was close in with the main family, but was probably a cousin.

The white-bearded giant was called "Elder." He brought out a keg for the visitor and those others who wanted, but he sat with it in his lap and he poured the drinks. He never let them forget who was boss.

It was damned good bourbon, cured to a fine mellow flavor by the motion of the wagon crossing the continent. Grant Grahame started to toss his drink off, caught the rare flavor and stopped short. "That's just about the finest whisky I've ever drunk!"

The old man chuckled. Marsh, the eldest son, dug another with his elbow and said, "It took near two thousand miles to do it, but looks like you finally found yourself a friend, Roy!"

Roy darkened and growled to hide his pleasure. It appeared he'd made the whisky himself.

The ice was broken. Grant could feel it crackle and melt around him. Marsh hunkered and began whittling. Roy looked friendly. The other three dropped their deadpan watchfulness.

But Bull, the sixth one, demanded aggressively, "What ails you cowboys? Ain't any of you got enough savvy to fire a still?"

The thrust was jabbed straight at Grant, but it slapped Roy first. He wheeled in anger to face Bull. "What ails you, Bull?" he demanded. "You getting so stuck on yourself it kills you to hear another man get a word of respect from a stranger?"

Bull backtracked with a flaming face. "I didn't say your damn liquor was no good!"

"You damn well better not! You damn well better not say more about it!" Roy breathed hoarsely.

Marsh growled, "You both shut up so we can drink some of it! There are things I want to ask Grahame—if he knows the trail ahead."

"I travel it some," Grant acknowledged.

"Alone like this?" the old man asked.

"Well, yes," Grant admitted reluctantly.

What we don't know about," Marsh said, "is Injuns and water."

Grant nodded at the trough between the two lines of low-strung hills. "Take this valley and cut through below and you're on the proper Butterfield. It's low, level country with no dry stretch more than six hours mule pace. Allowing for

grazing time, you can start with water and camp at your second water hole straight through."

"Ain't it the longer way?" Elder asked.

"And hotter," Grant nodded. "But you won't be like to meet Apache, and you won't run short of water."

"How about this other trail?" Marsh asked.

"Two-thirds shorter but rough as hell, and you've got Chiricahua drifting all along it. They're not nice customers."

Marsh mulled the matter over and asked, "Which trail you taking?"

Grant pointed at the latter.

Bull gave a blasting snort of breath. "Hell, if *he's* going through, we can take it sleeping!"

Grant looked at him with bleak speculation. "You know anything about Chiricahua?"

Bull darkened. "There ain't a helluva difference in any Injuns I know of!"

Grant said with hard-bitten irony, "You got a swell chance of learning something then!"

Bull looked hostile, but found no encouragement in Elder, who covered the awkwardness by refilling Grant's cup. Bull growled to himself and went off.

Grant considered this was not the outfit for a lone man with twenty head of horseflesh to get roiled with and he'd better drift real soon. Just then the girl beat a tattoo on an iron skillet.

"Come and get it, Pa," she called, "and bring that stranger with you!"

Marsh looked faintly surprised and grinned. Roy looked mischievously downline toward Bull.

Bull scowled back in their direction and stepped into a bucket doing it. He kicked it off his foot so savagely it smashed against a wagon wheel like eggshell. The boys chuckled and Elder pulled to his enormous height and led Grant down to supper.

"This is my daughter, Carrie," he said. And that was all.

Grant took off his hat and moved awkwardly in his boots. The girl's eyes laughed at him. She let him steam as long as she could. Then she said, "That's our family for you, but I heard you give your name. Set in my place. I'm too busy to eat now."

Grant said, "I'm right sorry to hear that, ma'am. I figured you might save me talking more trail talk."

"I aim to," she said straight out. "I'm claiming you now for washing dishes."

Marsh looked Grant over again carefully, could see nothing handsome that he hadn't noted, and shook his head with puzzlement. Bull glowered their way from another fire, then buried his bullet head between bulging shoulders and stuck his face almost into his pan.

For the trail, it was a damn good meal, lacking few things that would have been served at a ranch. Fresh bread, fresh pie —and preserves such as Grant had never had.

Roy blurted, "How come you finally broke out the sweet pears?"

"We have 'em all the time!" the girl snapped across her shoulder.

"Haw!" Roy challenged. "You danged near took my head off with a skillet for trying to take some two weeks back!"

She swung on him with a flushing face. "Big mouth! Next time, it'll be a hot skillet and I won't miss!"

Elder's eyes twinkled and he belched appreciatively and thunderously as he pushed back his plate. "Roy, mebbe Grahame would like his pony put out to graze," he said.

"Well, I had kind of figured to push along," Grant told him.

Elder and Marsh exchanged a glance. Marsh got to his feet picking a tooth with a match. "Shucks, time Carrie lets you get through with mopping dishes, it'll be sunup!" he grinned.

Carrie sat down with her own plate. "One of these days," she challenged Marsh, "I'll keep a man helping till sunup and it'll be you!"

"Well, your man for now, Carrie," Elder said as he got up, "but we want him back. Grahame, you might as well camp with us tonight."

"Right friendly of you," Grant said, and wondered if it was a mistake. These Tennessee clansmen were hard to figure. Good friends, but damned sparky and cunning foes if you stepped on the wrong toe.

The Heflins moved off to take care of their delayed chores. A sliver of blood-red sun still hung above the purpling hills. Dusk flowed over them and with it came a gentle tide of cool.

"Out where I live," Grant told the girl, "dusk is about an hour longer coming."

She asked about his home. It was wild horse country and he told her about the mustangs. Talking of the thing he liked and loved, he told her a good deal about himself.

A keen-scented breeze drifted down from the Divide and put a fresh tang into the stagnant air. The stars came down from the blue sea above them and filled this dark-shadowed world with an enchanted blue light.

Maybe she had delayed the dishes to this time, or maybe supper was just late tonight; he couldn't tell. Twice her hand touched his and he felt the tingling warmth of her. Once her hips brushed against him for a moment and he almost dropped the plate he was drying.

All hell's fire was buried in this girl. She knew it, and she knew just how to use it. Yet there was nothing loose or easy about her. She was simply a girl who decided what she wanted and went after it. Grant would pity the man who tried to make up her mind for her.

He had to wonder about the big cousin, Bull, and thought maybe there was some vague understanding, or maybe she was even promised, but it was not a deal particularly to her liking.

She put the supper dishes away, left things ready for breakfast, and taking a deep breath, asked, "Would a walk be safe? I haven't been out of this train since we started."

He considered the mood and season and movements of local tribes and said finally, "I reckon if we stay close. But what will you pa say to that?"

She gave a low laugh. "Pa would say any woman who couldn't judge a man or who made a fool of herself, wasn't fit to be a Heflin!"

"Pretty good rule," Grant approved. "But you'd best wear boots."

She bit at her lower lip and looked embarrassed. "I plumb forgot my visitor manners just like I'd known you a long time!"

He grinned. "With those handsome feet, you keep right on forgetting. I'm just thinking of burrs and snakes."

She vanished into the wagon and came back and they moved out beyond the dim glow of the camp. One of the herd riders was singing a hill song with a heart-tearing twang in his voice, and somebody in camp picked it up on a banjo. Up on the slopes, two coyotes joined the chorus of night noises.

She asked him more about his home mesa and its furious sundowns, and what living there was like, and what he wanted out of life.

That last one kind of stumped him and she asked, "Don't you ever think of a home and wife sometime?"

Well, sure, who didn't? But now that she mentioned it, he wondered just what kind of woman would fit into his lonesome country picture. The image of such a woman formed upon the front of his mind and it was like the girl who stood beside him. He liked her frankness, he liked her vigor, and she made him feel like a stoked-up boiler.

Out of his churning thoughts and feelings, he muttered unthinking. "How would you like to be my wife, Carrie?"

She stood very still as if listening back into memory and recalling something he'd asked long, long ago. That was foolish, of course, seeing that she hadn't known him, but that was the way she felt.

He was silent, wondering how in hell that blunder had ever slipped out. She'd probably laugh or be insulted.

But there was no laughter and no insult on her face when she turned and looked straight up at him and murmured, "I don't know, Grant, but if I found I loved you, I'd like it."

His hands came to her elbows and hesitated, but her body came toward him like a drifting breeze. Then her arms were around his neck and her lips were hot and full and savage upon his. They strained to each other like quivering aspens, while the orange-red moon rose out of that vital, primitive land beyond the soot black line of the hills.

He released her and she stood back,

shaking as he was shaken. "You'll probably think I'm bad," she said.

"I've been kissed before, Grant, but I never kissed a man like that."

"I know," he said gently.

Then he spun to some sound she did not hear and his gun glinted against the darkness. Pushing her behind a rock, he dropped to a crouch and cracked out, "Who is it?"

There was a moment's dead silence and then a big figure loomed out from behind some brush rasping, "I'll damn quick show you who I am!"

"It's Bull!" the girl muttered and came from behind the rock.

Bull formed out of the darkness carrying a rifle at his side. But it would not be guns Bull wanted to use. It would be fists.

Grant still crouched, judging the costs and values. It was true that Bull had stuck his nose in, but if Grant gunned him down, the clan would still remember that Bull was one of them. On the other hand, Grant didn't stand a chance against him, man to man with fists.

He was still trying to figure a way out of his dilemma when the girl flashed past him, demanding with fiery anger, "Bull, what gives you leave to spy on me like this?"

Bull gave an angry, brutal laugh. "No kiss like you just gave, I'll admit! But no damn yellow hossthief is coming into my camp to steal my girl like that!"

She said through tight teeth, "Stop where you are and take that back! I'm not promised to you. I never was."

He gave an ugly laugh. "You ought to be damn glad I'd bother with you after this! But I'll tell you just what I aim to do to settle it. I aim to beat this measly, sneaky little worm so bad he won't crawl, and then I aim to show you the meaning of a real man's kiss!"

"So help me, I'll tell Marsh and Pa!" she flared.

"Yeah?" Bull jeered. "And what will I tell 'em? You hold my guns while I'm busy, here."

He pushed the rifle at her and she snatched it. "I'll hold it all right!" she declared, and her arms rose against the moonlight and came down fast.

There was the sharp crack of the rifle butt on Bull's head. His breath exploded in a grunt. He staggered one step forward, wavered, and then crashed.

Grant rose from his crouch. He flushed with embarrassment, "I shouldn't have let you horn into this, Carrie."

"What could *you* do about it? That big ox has been asking for it!"

Grant looked wryly at his gun, booted it, and scuffed ashamedly at the dirt. "I should have fought him, I guess, even if I'd have had hell knocked out of me."

She gave an angry snort of breath. She warned him, "Don't you dast say a word about this!"

Carrie adjusted her clothes and hair and took his arm. There was no pressure, no warmth in her hand now, and she gave no solitary sign of intimacy on the way back.

He thought grimly, What else can she think but that I'm yellow! I need a woman to protect me!

She brought him up to the low glow of their fire just as if nothing had happened. Elder and Marsh glanced at her in the way of men with perfect confidence in their women.

Marsh grinned, "Was it a nice sundown?"

"It was a nice moonrise," she told him. "You should get a girl and go see one sometime."

Her father grunted, "I'm glad it didn't rise any later! We been sitting up to see you, Grant. You know this country and you're taking the same trail. We want to make you a little proposition."

"That means java," the girl said and went to fill the pot.

Grant hunkered by the fire, still churning with anger and shame, and thinking he ought to get out of here for the girl's sake, but wanting to stick along for his own. Nothing was said during this interval, but he knew what the proposition would be.

He said, "I'll tell you, Elder, I'm right late getting back already."

He saw a flash of light and shadow across the fire and a pair of handsome bare feet. He followed the girl's line up and met her gaze. She knew he was headed for a checkout but she misunder-

stood it. He knew she thought it was out of fear of Bull.

That was something more than his pride could take. If the rest wanted to think that, he could have cussed them off and forgotten it, but he couldn't have Carrie figuring that way.

"But if you're figuring to roll out right away and move fast, I'd be obliged to ride with you," he added.

The girl closed her eyes with relief. Then she was busy with the fire and java and cutting another pie.

They sat for an hour or so discussing details, then rolled into their blankets. Grant lay awake a long time thinking of the girl. He was smarting from the evening's occurrence. He thought ruefully that it was hell to be a little man; there wasn't any way out of a tight place but to eat humble pie or to kill.

He saw Bull sneak into camp and fetch a jug and sneak back out. It made him feel a little better. At least there was somebody else as ashamed as he was. But it was going to be tough keeping things in line.

CHAPTER II.

WAGONS, ROLL!

THE mule train rolled out at sunup leaving two of the Heflins to locate Bull. They found him over the Pyramids, ugly with drink and smoldering anger, claiming the egg on his head was a result of a fall while he was trying to cave a catamount.

Midway of morning, the girl settled her mixed feelings about Grant, and switching with one of her brothers, rode his pony up on point. It wasn't possible to talk much with Elder and Marsh nearby, but she reached over secretly once and squeezed Grant's hand. There was a look of apology in her eyes for last night's doubt of him.

They had just about smoothed out their ruffled feelings when the bang of an angle iron halted the train. A wagon with a hot-box needed a change of wheel. They were in an area without a tree in sight to cut for leverage to get the axle jacked. The alternative was risking a couple of maintrees to lift the wagon. At best, the process would cause a delay meaning dry camp on the flats.

Grant looked bothered and said, "There's not a place to camp that isn't open and where we wouldn't be spotted by any Chiricahua moving through the hills."

Nobody underrated the savages, but the comment seemed rather on the cautious side. None of the Heflins said anything. The girl looked at her brothers and then looked quickly at a blank space on the horizon, and Grant could see her fierce coloring.

Bull shot Grant a look of challenging contempt. He spit and got out of his saddle. Hitching his belts, he looked the clan over. "Being as how our big scout is so almighty afeard of these *waw-waws*," he said sarcastically, "I reckon I'll have to show how a real he-man handles things!"

He moved to the wagon wheel, spat on his big hands, cupped them under the hub and ordered, "Get that jacklog ready to slip under, boys. You've got the pride of the Heflins working now!"

The women shrilly warned Bull he'd bust a gut or break his back. The men made wagers among themselves. Elder sat by silently, shrewdly judging the signs of Bull's popularity and the clan's confidence in him.

Bull grinned boastfully to right and left across his shoulders, sucked three deep breaths and set his jaws and strained. His shoulders bulged, his shirt split down the back, but the lift just brought the wheel above its tracks.

He let it down and cursed. He made fresh boasts, spat, and tried again. The veins on his forehead stood out like throbbing ropes. His belt burst its buckle, his breathing sounded like grit over hardpan. But the wheel only lifted four inches and it was not enough to slip the jacklog under.

He stood off breathing hard and barked hoarsely for water. He tore his shirt off, dusted his hands with sand. He bore in on the wheel like it was an enemy he was fighting. Grabbing two spokes, his legs spraddled sidewise while his breath

sucked like a cyclone through his teeth. Sweat broke out of him in solid streams and strain tore strange brute sounds from his barrel lungs.

There was the hollow chock of wood on wood. The two Heflin boys knocked in the jack and yelled, and scrabbling out from under the wagon, whooped their admiration for the strong man of the clan.

The clan cheered and the losers paid with grins. Even the married women rushed up to kiss him while the boys whacked his back and pumped his hand. Elder ordered out the ceremonial keg. Bull arched his chest and strutted back and forth making muscles and grinning broadly with pride.

Stopping in front of Grant, he demanded with contempt, "Well, have I saved us from the *waw-waws* enough to suit your cautious fancy, minnow-man?"

Grant colored but found no ready answer but to say, "It was a good lift. We'll make water camp."

"You're damn right!" Bull chortled. "And you know damn well when to say it, half-pint!"

Grant's mouth compressed. Under the circumstances, there wasn't much answer to Bull's insolence. He saw the girl bite her lower lip with shame for him. The Heflin boys carefully looked away, sharing the girl's embarrassment.

The wheel was replaced, the leaders rode back on point and the train once more raised its banner of chrome yellow dust. Carrie had dropped off to drive her wagon again. The turbulent dark beauty of her face had been disturbed, her eyes torn with the last thing he ever wanted to see there—sympathy. He cursed to himself, but he was jammed.

Toward evening, Grant broke trail down through a twisting maze of washes on the river's clay floodbanks and brought them to campsite below the ford of the San Simeon. While they made camp, he rode out on scout, seething with anger. He had never asked for trouble in his life and so he had been content to give anybody who crowded him their full share of hell. But here was a case where he couldn't give it, and the more he took, the smaller he must look in the girl's eyes.

Something in the hills broke his thoughts off. He sat there staring up, eyes narrowed to slits against the burning sky. It was pure instinct that drew his attention, for he couldn't see a thing up there but haze and glare. Not even a wind put the brush in movement.

Then his vision focussed against the glare and he saw the smoke rising like sheerest gossamer against the sky—Chiricahua, signalling ahead that a small and valuable wagon train was coming—smoke that would be repeated across the whole Apache Nation.

He rode back, somber with news he could not tell. They were woodsmen but they still had dude's eastern eyes. What good would it do to tell of smoke they could not see and would doubt?

Day's chores were over and the train was readying a barbecue in honor of its Strong Boy. The keys were out, the womenfolk prettied up, and Bull was soaking in the homage. He looked Grant over with high-humored contempt and

began a string of vindictive, rawhiding comments.

Marsh frowned, beginning to read in this something beyond the simple arrogance of Bull's nature. He got Grant aside to cover his kinsman's rudeness with other talk. He wanted to know about this country's hunting. Hills ought to be alive with catamounts, he thought.

Grant answered thoughtlessly, preoccupied with his own problems. "You'd have to go further north," he said. "These are all dry hills in here."

He didn't note the pupils of Marsh's eyes widen.

Marsh grunted, "Even the Pyramids?"

"Hell, they're dryer than a bone! Not even the coyotes go high in there," Grant said.

Marsh's eyes narrowed with a mixture of humor and speculation. Shortly, he went to corral his brothers to figure out what Bull was covering with that tall story about the way he got the egg on his head.

Heflin Moffett and his particular family had gotten out their fiddles, bones and blow jugs, and cousin Abe was making music on his sweet potato. The kids had built a big bonfire, and the young folk had cleared a space to dance. From the heights of his importance, Bull could be magnanimous. After taunting Carrie in front of her pa with veiled remarks that turned her breathless, he put her recent actions down to love of him and her wanting to make him jealous. He swept her off into the dance.

She was excited, of course. He was the hero of the hour, and the other girls were green with envy. Her feet were light, there was a sparkle in her eye. At the end of the dance, he swung her up like a doll and kissed her. She took it laughing. When he set her down after a mock battle, she jumped up and kissed him of her own accord before she sped to her father's protection.

Sundown flared and dusk thickened quickly in their hollow. Thinking of the smoke signal he had not mentioned, Grant grew nervous at the size of their fire. "Shows a heap of what's in camp to any Chiricahua who can count," he mentioned to Elder.

Bull wheeled out of another talk and glared at Grant. "Why, damn!" he rasped. "If our minney-minnow ain't finally studied out a way to cut down my shadow!"

"I don't reckon Grant means anything personal," Elder rumbled. "He's just thinking of our safety."

"He thinks all the damn time of safety!" Bull snorted. "I ain't denying you, Elder, but we ain't seen any amount of Injun sign since the other side of the Divide, and I don't figure these half-baked Injuns over here are any tougher than the redskins on the prairies."

The whole camp had gone silent to hear the argument and Grant could feel the clan's respect for Bull's strength extending to his judgment. Carrie came in and took Bull's arm and broke the situation up. Elder and Marsh exchanged glances.

"I can't figure why he's so almighty roiled at you, Grant," Marsh speculated.

Grant lifted his shoulders and let them fall. He said, "There isn't much I can do about it, is there? I was asked into this train. I didn't horn in."

"Now simmer down, friend," Marsh grinned. "Nobody's bit you."

Grant looked dubious and simmered in silence and watched the crowd. His thoughts were shuffling around like an Indian medicine ball. The dance came to a riproaring end, and Bull stood in the center of the space and held the girl's hand.

"Folks," he called out, "I dunno how Elder Heflin is going to take this, but I

figure I might as well tell one and all right now, him included, I aim to tie into his family just as soon as I can make his daughter see some sense!"

The crowd looked at Elder, waiting to whoop it up. The girl flushed, then went white, and her eyes flashed. She snatched away her hand and snapped, "Well, there's no harm in you aiming, but don't you go giving any other beaux the idea we've reached any understanding!"

Bull darkened and demanded of the girl, "You turning me down in front of all these folks?"

She saw her chance and used her head. She laughed and challenged, "Why, you big galoot, you haven't even given me the chance to turn you down yet! You proposing to me or them?"

Rich laughter ran through the crowd. The calls and jokes were good-humored, and one of the grinning Heflin boys brought Bull a drink. He lost no face, and the humor kind of thickened their friendship for him, so he joined in the laughter himself and for the moment the matter was settled.

The cooks struck the angle iron and the laughing crowd rushed him off to carve. But the Heflins grabbed their sister over into a clique, their humor gone, Marsh demanded flatly, "Carrie, what's going on here we don't know? What happened to put that egg on Bull's noggin?"

Grant coughed and said, "I'd best leave you folks."

"You stay right here!" Marsh commanded. "You're tied into this some place."

The girl asked, "What's the egg got to do with it? I turned him down for my own reasons."

"Why, Daughter?" Elder asked. "He's a good man and this is a big day for him."

"Well," she answered, "he's not the only one who's asked for me." She crimsoned but looked defiant. Just for instance, Grant has, too."

The boys stared from their sister to Grant and back again. Elder cleared his throat and drummed his powerful fingers on the jug. He said, "Grant, I reckon that makes your intentions clear, whatever happened, but we'd best get to the bottom of this among ourselves now."

Grant nodded. "Sure. If you want me to answer up to anything, just call."

He moved away with his heart chugging. That was a damn loyal and honest little girl!

He moved down moodily into the creek bed and walked along beneath the bank. He heard the Heflins before he realized where he had drifted. He'd come around right behind and under them.

They'd cracked the story of Bull's spying on the girl, and some more of how she felt about Grant. He heard Marsh snap, "I didn't say he was no good! He's all right, but gawdamighty, sis, he's no man for you! How's a meek little guy like him going to take proper care of you out in a wilderness like this?"

She began to cry. Grant couldn't tell what she answered. He didn't want to hear it anyway. He was sick with shame and bitterness inside. So damn sick he didn't blame Marsh a bit for his opinion.

CHAPTER III.

THE CUT-OFF.

HE led the party three miles past Bowie the next day. Bull stopped off to throw his weight around. He caught up later with the important news that he'd learned of a thirty-mile cut-off out of Wilcox.

Throwing Grant a contemptuous look, he said, "We'll go that way, 'less our big scout is afeard that cut-off's full of waiting *waw-waws*!" he jeered.

Grant's mouth compressed. He said, "That cut-off's through Chiricahua hunting country."

Bull snorted and held forth with rough humor at Grant's expense. Elder silenced him finally and asked, "What's to prevent them from attacking us right on this trail?"

"Nothing," Grant admitted. "It has happened. But there is some traffic on this trail and always the chance of a cavalry patrol. The Chiricahua are cautious."

Bull threw back his head and filled the air with his bellowing laugh. "Now I'm beginning to see it!" he guffawed.

"Grahame, you been keeping the wrong company!"

Elder's eyes twinkled and the Heflin boys tried civilly to hide their grins. Bull won out when they got local opinion at Wilcox that the cut-off was perfectly safe, at least as far as the San Pedro.

Even dudes should have made out the smoke signals that evening. Grant stood reading them grimly, but they told nothing that would give him weight in council. Simply the usual scout information about a train's progress. The chief who'd decide what the Chiricahua would do was somewhere in the far saguaro lands ahead.

At dawn they rolled out into the Bonita Mountains, Bull declaring loudly that they'd make the thirty-two miles to the San Pedro by nightfall.

Four days later they reached the river, two axles broken, three men hurt, six teams foundered, their water gone. And there wasn't even water under the San Pedro's drybed.

Elder looked to Grant for advice for the first time since the San Simeon. "What do you do in a case like this, Grant? I don't figure we could get back even astride."

Grant was sore enough not to say anything, but he saw the sudden spark of hope in the girl's eyes. He said, "Well, I dunno if it'll work, but I know something we can try."

He cut out a fresh pony from his remuda and forking it, whacked his regular pony out to drift. The animal circled out uncertainly and kept looking back to see what it was he wanted. Finally, it settled down to somberly smelling at brush and cactus.

Heavy clouds drifted out of the sundown, but they never held a drop of rain. Dusk came early and the clouds played fireworks around the horizon, but there was no moisture in the air, and day's heat lay over the valley like a blanket. Temper hung through the camp like an ugly smell, and harsh words barked. Tension was at an explosive point.

Grant stayed in the saddle, keeping an eye on his pony, Sally. Nothing at all happened until midnight. Then there was the barest breath of breeze. He saw Sally pitch her ears forward and stretch her neck out, her nostrils flaring into the breeze.

She started forward in a little trot, swerved, and the breeze died. She smelled at the ground but held her position. The breeze came up again and she went off on a different trail.

Back of them, the mules stood with their heads lifted, sniffing thirstily, but they were green-country bred and could not quite trace the smell of this vague dampness. Then Sally caught the scent she wanted and set off at a lope, straight up along the drybed.

Behind Grant there was a blasting mule squeal, a roared curse from Bull, and the sudden pound of the herd coming in a stampede.

Grant raced after Sally, more worried about her than of being overtaken. After about a mile, she wheeled directly down into a big, deep hole. Grant came in hard beside her, jumped down to fill his canteen, jumped back into leather and had to beat his thirsted pony away from its drink.

He cleared the far rim as the stampede broke over the opposite side. Sally was smart. She'd worked around to the far side where there'd be least crowding. Watered up for now, she climbed out of the hole and came over to chew his shoulder a little.

He roughed her chin and took a drink from his canteen. "What say we take a drink back to Miss Carrie while that roughstock's guzzling?" he asked.

Sally nickered and he started his pony back, Sally trotting beside him. Riders loomed out of the darkness and pulled up hard. Bull roared with violence, "That critter of yours started the stampede! What in hell you turned back for when you shoulda followed 'em?"

"You running the train now?" Grant demanded.

"I'm sure running this part of it!" Bull rasped. "And I'll damn well leave my mark on that chuckleheaded hoss of yours!"

His arm lifted to quirt the pony.

Grant's arm blurred and there was a soft click as it came up, holding the solid bulk of his Colt. He said nothing. He just sat there still and bleak as rock, with his gun beaded on Bull's middle.

Bull's breath dumped out with a dry sound. His arm froze, and then came down slowly. Even against the clouded darkness, his eyes were red. "You'd dast put a throwdown on me?" he breathed hoarsely.

"I've done it!" Grant answered.

Others crowded in and he could feel their disapproval and hostility rising. When Marsh came up at a gallop and drew rein, Grant let his hammer down and jerked his head backward. "Your herd," he told Marsh, "is over in a hole, drinking."

There was a mixed-toned muttering from the gathering horsemen. Water was more important than spleen or feuds right now. Marsh caught the tension and saw Grant's gun but broke things up. "Let's go. Bull, you come whip them fool ponies out of there before they bloat!"

Grant moved on back to the wagon train and gave his canteen to Carrie. She called to Elder who came over and by Grant's tense expression, detected the trouble right off. He took the canteen from his daughter and had his drink, then stood a moment holding the canteen in front of him with his empty hand lifted palm up, as if balancing a little quiet man's patience and savvy against a big man's ready pride and violence. Elder ended his private thoughts with a grunt and handed the canteen on.

The camp was dog-tired, but its strain had vanished and there was a sudden surge of activity and joking as water began to arrive with riders. Women set about making fires and getting supper. It was dawn when the camp turned in for sleep.

It took three days of sweating work to put the train back into order. The camp was in two minds about both Bull and Grant, but easier tempered than it had been with the finding of water. The Heflins gave Grant credit for his caution, but unbalanced by rough-shod manhood, it was something that went against the grain with them. They tolerated it, but they could not fully accept it.

Bull strode around camp, surly, dark browed, simmering under the taunts about his choice of trail, roiled that Grant had found water. And he still burned over what he called, "the sneaky, yellow throwdown."

The story of the throwdown had surprised the girl even though she stood up for Grant. The night of Bull's spying had been different. Grant had not known the intruder was Bull at first, and Bull had come forward with a gun in hand. But this last was a thing she could not set her judgment on. Either it was the act of a very tough-fibered hombre, or else the act of a coward, and she'd not seen much sign of toughness in Grant. As a matter of fact, it had been his quiet modesty and gentle thoughtfulness that drew her to him. But as her father and brothers had said, what could a man like that do against a world of men like Bull?

That was the state of things when Elder boomed out the call, "Wagons, roll!"

The trail turned northward on the east side of the San Pedro, and they had to break their own trail beyond it. Spud Rock and Rincon Peak reared up eight thousand feet ahead of them and stretched a jagged spine southward to form a forbidding, sterile barrier.

They twined through the tortuous passage wagon by wagon, with as many as thirty-two mules to a wagon. Going out of the hills was worse; they had to chock the wheels, with teams fore and aft, and skid the wagons down.

Finally, they dropped into the blasting, breathless heat and glare of the saguaro plains in bad need of rest and repair. Grant thought they ought to stop there, but their water was low, and the clan finally had begun to fret about the smoke signals. Not fully decided himself, Elder gave way to the clan's demand to push on.

Bull was rating high again, his great muscles and violent energy having saved difficulties time and again coming through the frozen dunes that reared behind them. Now he was in his element as ramrod, driving, cursing, frightening and shaming

the lesser men into doing work their tired bodies rebelled at.

They made dry camp on the desert, and Grant looked around the horizon grimly as the fiery haze drew back. The thin pencil strokes of smoke were thick and converging up ahead, but there was not a quarter of the horizon that did not hold its signal. They were surrounded, dry-gulched, sitting ducks, and the Chiricahua had decided to ambush, unless he missed his guess.

CHAPTER IV.

ATTACK!

THEY rolled out at first light, the mules ornery with thirst, and gaunted, bad-tempered men were causing havoc. At high sun, the worst of the desert began to peter out, but there was no relaxing of the relentless, blazing heat. Two hours later, they reached a brake of cottonwoods and brush lying heavy in a sump through which trickled a sulphurous, yellow creek.

The banks were steep and heavily brushed on both sides. Grant looked down into the drop and felt chills prick along his neck.

Riding up on point, Bull allowed, as if this were a result of his own judgment, "Well, we made it. It's a place to camp, at least."

"It's a fine place for an ambush," Grant stated.

Bull started to curse and bellow, but Elder cut him off sternly. "What's your idea?" he asked Grant.

Grant said, "Water up two or three wagons at a time and hold 'em. When we're ready, load the front and back wagons with the extra men and make a closed up break for that other crest yonder as fast as the mules can pull."

Bull looked to the other side, turned back to Grant and roared, "Why, you'd think you'd seen warbonnets over there!"

"Have you?" Elder asked Grant gravely.

"No," Grant admitted. "But that is a steep, boxed-in climb and a likely place for ambush." He looked bleakly at Bull. You don't like this caution. Why don't you ride over to that crest and take a look?"

"I'll go!" Bull bellowed, and swung his pony down into the creek, but there the distance from the fortress of the train struck him and he slowed.

He looked up and down the creek, and they could see the side of his face. He looked a little sick. But vanity was a deep power in a man like Bull and the train was watching. Holding his rifle on his saddlebow, he pushed up the other side gingerly.

There was a hump near the top of the grade and then another short rise. He reined up on the hump, looked all around, then put his pony back toward them a heap faster than he'd gone. He rode up scoffing with arrogance to cover his tenseness.

"Ain't a sign over there. Not even a hoofprint!" he told them.

Elder looked at Grant. "You wanted a rest back yonder. This would make the best camp we're like to find today."

Marsh had ridden to this side of the creek and now said, "This is one time I'm with you, Grant. There ain't even a fresh snake track down by that creek. Something's scared off the animals all day."

Elder took vote and the vote swung heavily to Grant. There was something just too quiet about the spot.

Two of the Heflin boys climbed aboard the lead wagon with their sister; two drove the wagons following. The herd was forted up in the middle of the train, and the tailing wagons were heavily armed by men with rifles. Grant and Marsh moved along the line making these arrangements quietly, stopping to examine mules and wagons. Bull was simmering at the respect given Grant's cautious suggestions, and he was building an ugly temper.

They followed the plan through, got the wagons reordered and started across the rocky ford. Grant, Marsh and Elder rode beside the lead wagon. Bull set his horse midstream, ramroding the train to keep closed up.

Carrie was just driving out of the ford when Grant looked up against the molten copper of the sky and thought he saw a bush move. Then he looked sidewise

along the line of their ascent and definitely saw something glitter in a gully. This was even below the hump where Bull had stopped.

But Bull and Marsh had caught the same glint at the same time, and both bellowed a warning now.

Elder snapped his gaze to Grant, who sang out grimly, "Straight up and through!" and laid his quirt on Carrie's leaders.

Meantime, Bull was bellowing hoarsely, "Turn back, turn back!" an incredible stupidity, which would have jammed the train and left half the wagons floundered on rock, trapped in the ford at the mercy of the Indians.

Marsh hesitated, but Carrie flicked Grant one white-faced glance and lashed her team. The two Heflins following had started to turn, but shots began to come from above and their sister was rushing pellmell into them. They cursed and laid their whips on their teams to follow.

Chiricahua began breaking into view, riding at full gallop down the steep clay grade, firing and rending the air with their hideous cries. The mules turned frantic and put the train rocking and lurching wildly after the lead wagons.

Bull still sat in the middle of the ford roaring. Closing in on a team with fury, he started to turn it. Marsh rushed in on him, his rifle inverted, ramming Bull hard enough in the kidneys to quiet him for the minute. Chiricahua were coming in yelling and trying to board Carrie's wagon, but Elder had turned into a giant of wrath and sent them sprawling. Grant's pistol and the Heflins' guns cleared the way ahead.

More Chiricahua were coming over the hump of the grade now and in one encompassing glance, Grant saw what had happened. They had laid out a beautiful ambush to catch the wagon train on that steep grade all sides at once, but that glint of metal had made them jump their plans and now they were coming in numbers from all sides, but in disorganized batches.

Grant put a shot at a charging warrior. The man pitched from his horse and rolled down the steep grade right under their wagon. The mules, smelling blood, pulled wildly in their harness.

Then Carrie's team heaved over the rim of the hill. Frothed and wild with excitement, they smashed headlong into the oncoming Indians, knocking the Indian horses aside like battering rams, and going into frantic gallop across the plain ahead.

Grant felt a spear rend his shirt and glide along his ribs. Glancing back, he saw Marsh jump from his saddle into the middle of a six-mule team to slash out a crippled mule. One wagon top was afire, and Indians were clinging to another. Carrie's wagon was momentarily clear of immediate danger and lacing out hell-bent for election.

Grant raced out in front of the team, his eyes skimming the plain for what shelter could be had. He spotted a rim-rock jutting up like a shark's fin and prayed there were other rocks behind it. He bent his pony in that direction, his quirt flaying. He gave signal to one of the Heflins who left off shooting to put his weight upon the brakes, and Grant swung behind the rock at a headlong run to come up short at the far end. He prayed the mules could stop and would simmer down without commotion.

Carrie brought them up haunching and the next instant the following wagon slammed in putting up a shroud of dust smoke. Marsh showed for a moment through the smoke, an axe in hand, yelling hoarsely at his brothers as he chopped loose plunging mule teams to be led between lower rocks that jutted up behind the big one. His brothers rolled the wagons forward as the teams were cleared, crowding them solid so there was space for the wagons that were fighting their way in.

One wagon was lost but the men were spared. Bull came in last, his face and chest bloody, but roaring with hell's own victory. Grant had picked a natural fort, and Elder's thundering voice was ordering men into position. Carrie got out powder, shot and bullets for those who had repeaters. She quieted the wails of the women and put them to useful tasks.

The Chiricahua followed the train right in, but the blast of fire that met them

turned them off, and they withdrew now for council.

There was time to take stock and settle down. A proper guard was put upon the fort and a plan was considered.

The stock was quieting finally, and the dust smoke began to sift. Out on the plain, evening's slanting rays cut the brash glare, and the haze drew back against the hills like an outgoing tide leaving them marooned.

"Marooned" was the word that Elder used, and Grant muttered grimly, "It looks it."

Grant climbed on a rock and watched three young warriors race off from the knot of chiefs. Shortly, smokes were rising from a blue, wind-carved butte. It was a signal to gather in other roaming tribes and groups, and he cursed to himself, recollecting that they'd not taken time to fill their water barrels at the creek. The Indians would have noted that.

They'd figure now to thirst the train out while they were awaiting reinforcements, and then they'd stampede the thirsted stock with planted water smell. In the chaos and dust smoke, they'd close in. If even a few of them could gain the lower rimrocks, they'd have the train at their mercy.

Tailgates were broken up to cook supper and the wagon train ate in somber silence. Sundown flamed upon still circling Indians, but they had brought their villages up and made camp back at the creek, sign that short of some unpredictable recklessness or opportunity, they did not mean to press immediate attack.

Dusk fell thick and heavy in the rimrocks where Carrie kept the barest fire aglow for council coffee. Grant smoothed a place in the sand and sketched out a map as well as he could figure from what little he knew of this country north of the proper trail. Beyond sight, at the creek, the tomtoms were thumping out their maddening rhythm and warriors were dancing themselves blood-crazy.

"I figure," Grant said, "that Tanque Verde is almost straight north beyond them dry hills, but Tucson is surer help."

Bull barked a scoffing laugh. "Sure Tucson's help! How we going to get it?"

"I'm going," Grant said.

The Heflins stared at him as if he were crazy. They'd had their smell of Chiricahua now, and they could imagine the rest.

"You!" Bull exploded. "What you trying to pull, Grahame? You're the one's been telling us the Chiricahua keep their scouts moving all sides of them for miles like coyotes. How would a half-pint like you fight your way through, even if you had the stomach for it?"

Grant gave him a bleak look. "I don't aim to try and fight."

Bull snorted another blast of breath. "You're going to outsmart 'em, I suppose?"

"Mebbe he can," Elder said soberly.

Bull swung on Elder with glaring fury. "Him, who didn't even have the nerve to ride across the creek with me? I'll tell you who he's trying to outsmart, Elder —that's you and me! All he'll do is pull a sneak if he can, and hole up right over yonder in them washes until the *waw-waws* are so busy with us he can make a getaway!"

Grant didn't pay too much attention to Bull, but the thing that got him was the grim silence of the Heflins. They weren't ready to call him, but they doubted him. In varying degrees, they sided Bull's hot-tempered accusation.

Elder summed their thoughts up on a noncommital tone. "Proper speaking," he said finally, "this ain't your mix in any case, Grahame. I want you to know that before you get set on anything you don't hanker to do."

"I'll get through," Grant said tersely. "I should be through by tomorrow sundown, and if I am, I'll be back by daylight. You just keep fighting 'em."

Bull pulled to his feet, his face contorted in the low fire's red glow. "I've took enough of this man's wind!" he announced.

Marsh passed Bull a glance and commanded, "Sit down and shut up! You heard Pa say this ain't rightly his mix. He wants to go, that's up to him."

Bull glowered at Marsh but shut up and hunkered down again.

Grant said after a space, "I'll need

some help to get out. They'll be watching just for this. I've got to have a couple of men to go out the other side like they was trying to sneak through and get the Chiricahua's attention. Don't need to go far and more they stall and circle around the better. The Chiricahuas won't be thick enough to close in on a couple without enough warning so they can get back in."

Elder looked at Marsh, and Marsh frowned at the fire. He said after a space, "I figure that's a heap to ask, Grant. They'll have scouts agin these very rocks. This is all your idea. I don't figure you got a right to ask other men to take that chance."

Grant's nostrils pinched and he felt a cold chill. He was taking this risk to save their hides, and now, not even Marsh had trust in him!

But the girl did. Her eyes were a liquid glow of pride beyond the men. He stood up and she said huskily, "You'll make it, Grant!"

He gave her the best smile he could muster and turned to get his pony. Out of the rock's pitch darkness, he felt the sudden, fierce clutch of her hand. He turned toward her and she came against his chest and clung there. Lifting his hand to her face, he could feel the dampness of her silent tears.

He said, "Don't cry, Carrie! I'll get through in time."

"I'm not crying for that," she murmured passionately. "I'm crying for the lost time and the doubts I had, Grant!"

Then she shook clear her tears and kissed him and walked him along to get his pony. He started to lead it through the rocks, but she stood on there. I'll stay here, Grant," she said. "I don't feel like hearing more talk right now."

He kissed her hand, and then moved on to the grim job ahead. He nodded at the Heflins without any show of feelings. "If I don't come back and you get through, my remuda goes to Carrie," he said.

Bull gave a derisive snort. Elder looked at him trying to suspend judgment. Marsh looked at the ground, even though he muttered, "Good luck, Grant."

"Keep an eye into the mists at dawn,"

Grant advised, and turned into the thick shadows, leading his pony.

CHAPTER V.

THE MARCH OF TUCSON.

HE stood in the cover of the big rock, senses reaching out into that saguaro dotted prairie. He took his chance and moved quickly forward, heading toward a stretch of rolling, gullied, broken ground he'd noted. Grant moved cautiously through the area and was beyond it mounting when the guttural cries ripped the air behind him, and suddenly the night was full of shooting.

He rode low against the sides of slopes and through the deep-shadowed hollows. Behind him, the cries and sound of shooting died. He wondered who in hell had decided at the last minute to take the risk of helping.

Then he thought of the girl standing alone among the ponies, and he knew who had drawn off the scouts. His heart squeezed so that it pained and felt like ice within him. He had to steel himself to keep from returning.

It was noon the next day, and he was letting his pony crop at the first sun-scorched grass he'd seen. He was in a small valley, entirely surrounded by low, rounded hills. Looking up valley through midday's glare he saw a whole village of Chiricahua filing out of a wash.

He froze motionless, hoping they'd cross the valley without spotting him. A futile hope. A dozen braves broke from the main party and headed toward him yelling. He hit leather with a loose cinch and put his pony into a headlong gallop.

Leaning down he tightened cinches as much as he could from that position, but the saddle was loose. Grant plunged straight overland, up one draw and down another, through brush, cactus, once through catclaw, along slopes of sliding sand and shale, over humps of wind-slicked sandstone. He made for every ridge that hove in sight, hoping to find a natural spot where he could turn his lead to advantage and throw the Chiricahua off trail.

There were no buttes, he found no valleys, and the screaming warriors still shimmered in the glare behind him.

No horse could stand that pace very long, and his own had already come a long, tough trail. Hardy as it was, it began to stagger. He took it into a brush thicket, hurled off its saddle, loosed its chin strap and left it ground-hitched with the worst choke in his throat he'd ever felt. He hoped his pony would go unnoticed. The Chiricahua were not kind to horseflesh.

Running up the draw afoot and over the rim, he faced a treacherous mountainside, and the whole molten sky was filled with heat. He licked dry lips and loosened his shirt, preparing for the climb.

A renewal of the cries below told him they had found his pony. It was coup and called for medicine ceremony that gave him time to pick his trail over surface that left no sign, and to bury himself in a cranny, in the front of which he piled rocks and brush.

The Chiricahua shortly swarmed up the mountainside beneath him like savage devils, heading directly for the area where he was hidden. He cursed and reached for his gun. His gun was gone. Grant had his knife and a belt of useless bullets. For reasons beyond him, he saved the bullets from his belt before discarding it, and dropped them in a pocket.

The warriors crawled with mounting anger from rock to rock. They loped in spiralling circles, they threw themselves flat to smell the ground. They called out boasts and insults, they claimed they knew right where he was, they howled. All this, right in front of the peep holes he looked through.

This went on all day. A half dozen times Grant could have darted out a hand and grabbed a moccasined ankle that paused in front of his hole. They had already covered every rock, but something kept drawing them back to this area. Every so often, they would draw off to a flat shelf to make fresh medicine and fresh promises to the gods,

and then they'd begin again their incessant yelling.

Toward sundown, they felt hungry and began to drift down to their village, now camped down in the draw where Grant had deserted his pony. The hunt was given up until morning.

Midway down the mountain, one of the last three warriors turned without a pause and came straight back up. An Indian never had any reason for these unpredictable acts except that his medicine had told him. It might be the flight of a crow, or it might be some color connected with his name that showed in the last flaring burst of color in the sky above.

The brave was a big one, sinewy as a snake. He came straight to Grant's hole and hunkered and began to lift away the rocks. He held some brush to lift to the light to study it, to see if it was ripped up or wind strewn. He grunted and leaned over to push aside more rocks, and Grant's knife darted out, hooking him behind the jugular and slicing through.

In the same flow of movement, Grant's other arm shot out, grabbed his neck and hauled him in. He pushed the still hot, still convulsing body beneath him and leaned out to dust the area in front and to pull back the brush and cover stones. He turned back inside to the nasty chore a white man who wanted respect in these parts had to do. He scalped his enemy and then pushed his body down out of the way beyond him.

Turning back to his peep hole for fresh view, he saw that shadow had already closed over the draw at the base of the mountain. Grant could see the flare of a big fire and hear the shrill, guttural cries of a war dance and catch the beat of the tom-toms. One of the three braves who had remained late was almost at the draw. The other had stopped and was looking behind him. Suddenly, he started back up the mountain while the other vanished into the draw.

Grant sucked a deep breath and watched him come. The sky was still light and he could see the wicked gleam of anticipation in the Chiricahua's black eye. He was coming back to look for his brother, but not with the loyalty of man-love that white men understood. He was coming to look for him because if he was no longer there it proved the white man was, and he could have the glory of counting coup on him and laughing at the tribes ahead who'd let this paleface through, for he would have the scalp as proof.

The warrior reached his level again, and coursed from rock to rock like a dog tracking rabbit. This warrior had a rifle. Twice he paused directly in front of Grant's hole and stared at it. Then he circled far out and Grant breathed with relief. Suddenly, the warrior pivoted and came straight back. Without pausing, he stuck the end of his rifle in through the rocks.

Grant backed off from it, with the muzzle pushing square into his head. Grabbing the barrel, he tore it over his shoulder, and was deafened by its concussion as he rammed it backward.

He heard the warrior's grunt of surprise and the Chiricahua was still falling as Grant crawled out of the hole. He dove with his knife in his hand and crashed atop the warrior, and they both began to roll down the mountainside.

They rolled faster and faster as they fought. They came up hard with the Indian against the sharp corner of a rock. The breath burst out of him and for a bare instant he was frozen with the hurt.

In that instant, Grant's knife found the V between his left shoulder clavicle and drove down. He felt the gush of thick warm blood upon his hand. The Indian jerked once, and his body seemed to slowly shrink.

Grant performed the dirty chore again with set jaws, stuck the scalp into his belt, cleaned his knife in the ground, and stood up.

He was dead beat but he had to get out of here fast and while there was still some daylight. He could not risk traveling a strange and trailless mountainside in darkness. There were still no stars to guide him and he had only the last breaking point of sundown. Using that for guide, he had to go straight on up and over the mountain—for a badly gaunted man, a desperately cruel climb.

He pulled over the peak with his heart hammering and his legs feeling wobbly and weak. Night's shadows were not yet as thick on this side of the mountain and he stared dizzily beneath him. For of all unexpected things, this was it. Directly north of him, the lights of Tanque Verde put their glow into the velvet dusk, and farther off, but due ahead, was the brighter glow of Tucson.

He used his known position to pick the first star over Tucson and lurched ahead in that fever of single purpose that will carry men on after their minds and bodies are exhausted. At some point later, he became conscious of the fact that he was lying sprawled out. He didn't know how long he had lain there.

He looked for Tanque Verde's glow and could not locate it, but coming from that direction, he heard the drum of shod hoofs at a canter, headed on a line that would pass maybe a mile in front of him. He reached for his gun and remembered it was gone. He tried to yell and only a hoarse, piping noise came from his mouth.

Grant thought of the bullets suddenly, and clawed for them with a hand trembling with fatigue. He jerked the leads out with his teeth and poured the precious bit of powder out upon his hatbrim.

Looking off into darkness, he prayed he'd get this done before the riders put their backs to him.

He got a little pyramid of powder built and then found he had only one match left. He pulled up his boot with a shaky hand but the sole was mostly a hole, and the sides slick—with blood, he supposed. Grasping the match carefully so that it wouldn't break, he struck, and it sputtered then flared. He rammed it at the powder.

The powder hissed and spurted a plume of flame into the air. A bare instant's flare, but bright as a meteor. He listened hard, but the tempo of the hoofbeats did not change. Sagging down across his smoldering hat, his chest singed for a half minute before he could find the vitality to move or care.

It was all he could do to think of Carrie. He had reached a point where his vitality was limited to one thought, like a badly thirsted man far out on a desert, trying to hold his trail to a known spring.

The gruff voice called out of darkness, "Who made that fire?"

He sat staring, his mouth working, but unable to answer.

A second voice said, "You're asking for trouble, Chick. The Apache been drifting across here for a week."

Grant desperately wheezed out sounds. He heard cautious hoofsteps and the creak of leather and the click of a sidegun. He swallowed hard and licked split, swollen lips and called something that approximated, "Over here! I'm Grahame."

"Grahame? He's from Mesa," one man muttered and footsteps approached till they were beside him.

"Gawdamighty!" the man muttered. "What chewed you up outside of sun and catclaw?"

He went back to fetch his canteen and built Grant a smoke. The two men hunkered there, wetting him down and putting the cigarette to his lips with that roughshod gentleness of men.

Grant felt the strength flow back into him and he got some of his voice back. Briefly, he told them about the wagon train and how it was trapped.

He could stand up now and they booted him up behind a cantle and put their ponies into a fast lope for Tucson. Fort Lowell would take forever waking up and saddling, but they sent a message out and raised their own army at the first three saloons they came to. Somebody rang the alarm and the whole town turned out. Grant was given a horse and another gun and was lashed to his saddlehorn. They started out with the stars still thick as willows in the sky above them.

The sound of shooting came from ahead, stabbing the conglomerate hubbub of distance-dimmed war cries. The party twisted through a valley and came straight on to the plain. Indians were closing in and black smoke came from behind the rimrocks where fire arrows had put some of the wagons ablaze.

The war party went into a galloping charge, spreading out cavalry fashion, putting the Indians in a lethal crossfire.

Indians yelled, sized up the onrushing party anl drew off to hold council.

The white men swooped in close to them and sent in a volley that stirred the Indians into moving over against the bluffs, where suddenly they wheeled and started for the Whites, catching them unexpectedly and putting them to flight racing for the security of the rimrocks where they'd be penned in like pigs.

The Chiricahua let out a whoop, reformed their broken double circle, and began filling the rimrocks with whining lead. The flight was getting hot as a hornet's nest and called, "Cavalry!"

The rock fort lifted a cheer. Before the Chiricahua realized it, they were caught in a fresh crossfire and riders were racing out of the rimrocks to cut them off.

It was a matter of minutes before the cavalry took over the mop up. Grant sat on a wagon tongue because he couldn't stand. He took the cup Elder handed him.

"What happened on your way?" Elder asked.

Grant waved his cup, took a gulp. "Well, I had to leave my hoss and walk."

The two men who'd found him grinned and Elder's eyes twinkled. The girl pushed through the crowd, sound as a brand new dollar, eyes bright. Elder winked at the circle of men and let them off saying, "Quietest little fella I ever knew."

As Carrie went to fetch a keg of whisky, Marsh approached Grant.

"What I hanker to know, Grant," he grunted finally, "is how in hell a jasper tough enough to walk to Tucson like you just done could sit by quiet and take the rawhiding Bull gave you?"

Grant looked at him speculatively for a long minute and then reached to his belt. He said, "I ain't proud of this, but for a man ranching this country it's necessary. It kinds of sets the way a man does his fighting."

He flicked out the scalps. Marsh stared at them, swallowed hard and sucked in a deep breath. He said on a tight note, "I reckon there won't be no more argument about you being tough enough to take care of Carrie! But just for future, case we get drunk sometime, don't you never let me get in an argument with you, friend!"

Carrie came back, toting a brand new keg. Marsh grabbed the keg and poured three drinks. Carrie said guiltily, "Pa would hide me if he knew! I was just supposed to bathe Grant's feet with it."

Marsh shook his head and grinned. "I don't reckon he'll have the right to hide you for long!" He toasted them and threw the whisky down.

"Carrie, go get a pan," he said, and then to Grant, "Say, just lemme borrow them souvenirs of yours a bit. I want to see how Bull looks when I show him."

Humor touched Grant's bleak eyes and he handed the soggy bits over. He didn't want them around him anyway. Not with Carrie moving in.

HELL MOVES TO MONTANA

By TOM ROAN

Slowly Rip Carson lined his sights. It would be a long shot to that buckskin-clad girl—whose dainty skirts protected Buttz and Farday's private renegade army!

CHAPTER I.

When Nesters Fight.

HE stood waiting, hoping that he wouldn't have to fire another shot. A tall, solid man, he was like rock himself on the jutting spur of the canyon wall. His rifle came up slowly and deliberately. His eye looking down the sights was a cold blue dot, his lips a thin line. Under the brim of the white hat his face, long and lean, was as hard and emotionless as a pine knot. He held his breath, finger slowly tightening on the trigger.

For the fourth time in the rising sunlight of this crisp June morning, a deadly high-powered rifle sent its shattering crash through the still air, sounding strangely like mocking laughter. A wild laugh, it rocked from wall to wall, up and down Kettle Drum Canyon.

Down the canyon, in the mouth of a wide gorge in the opposite wall, a tall girl in white buckskins, on a tall pinto, was fighting it out with the high-strung horse. Four hundred yards behind her the lead steers of a herd of cattle were beginning an excited scattering, bawling as they fled from the sudden smell of blood. A young steer had just dropped dead, a fluttering streak of red spurting from a bullet hole over his heart.

Only a wizard could shoot like that at a range of eight hundred yards, but Rip Carson had come by it naturally. The Carsons had been dead shots down through the fighting history of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, as though it was an inheritance, an ability handed down from father to son. This morning he had two warning shots when that pretty girl down there with the cattle and men behind her had first appeared in the mouth of the gorge. He had fired at rocks which had stopped his bullets, the clatter making the girl's horse rear and wheel.

The eight riders behind the girl had immediately found out, flinging up their rifles and yelling at the top of their voices. But the girl, wearing a big white hat, her head sparkling gold in the sunlight, had evidently stopped their notions of making a fight of it, and now had them again strung out in their places with the herd behind her.

Rip's third shot had dropped that young steer, rolling him over. There had been a wait after that, to give them a chance to change their minds and pull out with the loss of only one fat steer—and that could be skinned, quartered and taken away if they wanted to. When there had been no stop, the girl brazenly spurring her pinto right on, Rip's fourth shot downed another steer.

He swore bitterly now, for the girl's strong hand on the reins was sawing down her spooked horse. In a few buck-jumping lunges the pinto came on, breaking into a run as the big hat flapped back onto the girl's head.

Rip Carson swore again. Damn them, it *would* be like Buttz and Farday, that heartless northern Wyoming cattle combine, to get a pretty and headstrong girl to lead one of their herds into forbidden territory: For three years now their hired gunmen had bullied their way into Kettle Drum Canyon, their cattle overrunning everything. Some of the tough, unyielding men who had led those invasions had died with their boots on. But people in this wild strip of the southwest Montana country were not yet in the

habit of shooting women—especially one who had lately won a Wyoming beauty contest which had entitled her to reign as queen over one of the big annual Frontier Days down there.

The girl knew exactly what she was doing. Suddenly turned screaming wildcat, she was still two hundred yards away from Rip when she swung up a silver-mounted pea-shooter, a pretty gun like her pretty self! Carson cursed her through his teeth, blue eyes glittering, jaws set. It would serve her right to send a bullet that would lift her golden hair and spatter the few brains inside her skull skyward.

Sure that damned girl knew what she was doing! By dashing on like a hare-brained fool she knew the men behind her would follow, cowards hiding behind a woman's skirts. With those men would come the cattle, more than two thousand head. Up the canyon that herd would go, goaded into a high-tailing, wall-eyed stampede.

Squatter fences in the canyon less than a mile away would be smashed to splinters. Cloven hoofs would cut the planted fields to worthless strips and squares of plowed ground, marking the third time in three years that the settlers had had their crops wiped out. In the twenty-odd cabins and houses the settlers would fight back, and there would be blood spilled and more blood.

By turning down the canyon with the big herd the girl could yet save the settlers, going back across the Wyoming line only a few miles away to cattle grazing territory set aside by the government. But such a move would not satisfy Buttz and Farday, land hogs wanting it all—and usually getting it. If the combine got away with this invasion the nesters would have to give up the struggle, load their wagons with what was left of their belongings and move on, leaving everything to cattlemen whose record had been one of long and bloody oppression.

As the girl closed the distance between Rip and herself, she began shooting. A bullet spatted against the rocks a yard above him. Another struck to the left. Buttz and Farday gunmen had probably told her to rush any opposition, depending on her sex and beauty to make a man hold his return fire. No Carson, Rip knew, had ever shot a woman, but now his rifle was coming up again. He had to consider other girls and women in this canyon—and a damned sight better than that brazen she-cat on her pretty pinto.

Damn it, he had to stop her! Another bullet splattered on the rocks to his left, another just above him. His rifle swung up, steadied, his cold eye again on the sights. This shot had to be good.

As she stormed across a level strip of grass his finger tightened on the trigger. The splintering report of the rifle again filled the canyon. The pinto left the ground in a wild leap, bawling. As his forefeet came down they were like buckling stilts under him. In a sliding fall he landed on his nose. The girl left the saddle like something blown from a gun. Horse and girl tumbled.

The six-shooter left the girl's hand. In a final skid she came to a halt, flat on her back in a wide-legged sprawl. The horse was down three yards to her left. The girl herself seemed not far from dead.

Yells came from the men in the distance. Shots crashed. There was no one now to hold back the firing.

Carson's rifle blazed again. A man on a lunging horse suddenly buckled at the middle and pitched head first to the ground. An instant later another man rolled backward over the cantle of his saddle, while a wild-eyed herd of cattle made a surge forward. The two downed men disappeared under the hoofs of the herd as their horses galloped on, the stirrups of empty saddles flapping.

Carson lowered the rifle. He took a pace forward. Standing on a flat rock he took off his big hat and started waving it in a circle over his head. All notions of fighting back by the men in front of the herd had come to a sudden end as the cattle surged forward. No man was going to hesitate with a gathering stampede behind him.

High on the west rim other men now appeared. As cattle and riders poured out of the mouth of the gorge an arching

blue streak of smoke left the rim, thrown by a long, strong arm. Down came the streak, as the panic-stricken men in front of the herd set up a terrified yelling. Those who had been headed up the canyon were swerving their horses aside when ahead of them something struck the ground and bounced. Tremendous noise rocked the high walls, dust and gravel lifted in a dirty-gray cloud mushrooming skyward from the valley floor.

It was dynamite this time for the invaders. As the first stick went over the rim another immediately followed it, making a second arching blue streak in the air. Then back along the rim of the gorge other tremendous explosions were shuddering over the tall hills, sounding like a duel between batteries of giant artillery.

The spooked cattle, muddled and terrified, turned as the riders in front of the herd turned. Dynamite falling ahead and exploding in great clouds of yellow dust had balked the invasion. Explosions back along the rim of the gorge were playing hell with the rest of the herd. Back there in the gorge it had split in the middle. Half of the cattle wheeled, fighting, steers goring steers as the rear half turned back into a stampede in the direction from which it had been coming. The forward half still came on, snorting, bawling damnation, pouring out of the gorge, thundering down the canyon. Buttz and Farday's big invasion had been shot completely to hell—at least for this morning!

CHAPTER II.

Gunmen in the Sky.

Rifle in his right hand, an old six-shooter sagging a holster at his hip, Rip Carson stood above the girl, a tall, grim-faced man of twenty-six looking down at an unconscious girl of twenty. The wall-eyed hell of horns and hoofs still poured out of the mouth of the gorge.

Eight men had been at the head of the herd. A dozen more had brought up the rear, half of them flank riders who had fallen back after the herd had been pointed into the gorge. Six of the men who had been behind the girl were riding like madmen on down the canyon, staying well ahead of the spreading mass of cattle following them—were still back in the mouth of the gorge, shapeless, broken figures chopped to ribbons under pounding and slashing hoofs.

"I'm—I'm hurt." Rip looked down as the girl whimpered. Her big brown eyes had opened in a dazed stare, her face was as white as death. "Something—happened to—to me."

"Oh, hell, yes!" He nodded. "Something happened to pretty you! Over in Glory Hole—" he jerked his head to the eastward—"about twelve miles from here, we have quite a few of your kind in the honky-tonks. Only I doubt that any of them would have the guts to get on a platform in front of about a thousand people to be measured and ogled at. They're maybe a damned sight more modest."

"You—you're the squatter!" Some of the daze was leaving her eyes. "Why—why, yes, you're the man who started the shooting!"

"And you,"—again he nodded, hard and unyielding—"are the she-cat who tried to push your way in on your sex appeal! If Buttz and Farday fire you, maybe you can open up your own joint over in Glory Hole. We've heard all about you up here. You're Grace Riddell, 'Miss Charming, Cattle Queen of Frontier Day!' Maybe you can take off your clothes and give us a show up here in Kettle Drum. If you do that for prizes, why not pick up a few plain dollars without so much—"

"My horse!" She was trying to roll herself up to her left elbow. "You shot Starlight!"

"Glad of the introduction to Starlight!" He curled a lip. "Too bad I didn't get to shake hands with him before he stopped the bullet! Did he win a beauty prize somewhere, too, or did his daddy and mother bring him up a little more respectable?"

She blinked and stared at him as she managed to get to her elbow. "I know

you! You're Rip Carson! You won first saddle money in Cheyenne last summer!"

"With my clothes on, yeah!" Again that cold, stiff-necked nod. "Up here in the canyon we don't know anything about folks who don't keep their duds on in public. In Montana when a woman goes out to sell her charms she's usually honest enough to go to One-eyed Mag's or Blackjack Mabel's in Glory Hole, and just hang out her sign."

"And up here," she said angrily, "everybody's so good and devout! Everybody in Kettle Drum Canyon goes to church on Sunday!"

"Not since last year!" His smile was hard. "A couple of Buttz and Farday gunmen set the squatters' church afire and burned it to the ground when they were pushing through, destroying the fences and crops."

He was a damned fool, standing here quarreling with her. A man would get absolutely nowhere arguing with a girl like this. Watching the cattle still pouring out of the gorge, he had already made up his mind. When those cattle were gone she could pick herself up and start walking on her pretty high-heeled boots, following the herd she had tried to lead.

Her hand came up. "Please help me. I—I can't seem to make it. My left leg's numb. Maybe it's broken!"

"That's too bad." He gave her another sour smile. "You prize-winning mares have to take care of your legs. If you get knots and kinks in them you won't be winning any more contests."

"Would you please go to hell!" she cried, desperation getting the upper hand at last. "And get away from me! I—I don't know why I'm trying to talk to you in the first place!"

A rifle answered her, one of those ringing, ear-shattering reports again filling the canyon. This time it was a downward streak of flame from a spur of the cliffs hanging like a pointing finger high above them. A spurt of dust and gravel jumped from the ground only inches to the left of the girl, the bullet whistling away up the canyon.

The girl was halfway up. Without thinking of what he was doing, Carson swung his left arm around her, lifting her. He was only an instant ahead of a second bullet from the rim. This time it was a certainty that the gunman up there was shooting to kill the girl. That bullet tore through the cartridge belt around her waist. Before a third shot could come down on them Carson had carried her close to the cliffs and out of danger.

But it was not the end of the shooting, Another shot crashed from up on the rim. A man on the high spur wailed, was suddenly buckling and twisting, trying to jerk himself to his feet. He stood there in a crouch big, broad-shouldered and garbed in gray, a wide silver-gray hat on a curly blond head. His rifle clattered, dropping on the edge of the spur, bouncing down, turning end for end in the air. Before it could reach the canyon floor another crash of a rifle had sounded up there.

With a screech of pain and terror, the man on the rim became a buzzardlike shape taking to the air, twisting, turning, big arms and legs flapping, bound for the jagged rocks below. When he was halfway down another shot crashed. Dust spurted from his clothing as a bullet tore through him. He spun on down to crash in the rocks and weeds.

"They were shooting at me!" screamed the girl. "I—don't understand it!"

"You recognized him as he was falling!" Rip cried.

"Yes!" she gasped. "He was in Mr. Farday's office the day they hired me to —to come here with the herd! Why, that was Marvin Clancey!"

"And he was shooting at you—not me?"

"I believe he was!" She was gasping for breath now, real fear taking hold of her. "But who was up there to shoot him? And why would he want to shoot me?"

"So they could blame it on Kettle Drummers." He frowned. "And brand us as woman-killers. That answers the first question. As to who shot him"—he shrugged—"I wouldn't have the slightest idea about that."

"Because you know it was a Kettle Drummer!"

There was no need to answer her. Kettle Drummers were up there this morning watching everything from both rims. So he was silent, watching the cattle still pouring out of the mouth of the gorge. Plans had been made for dynamite to split the herd far back in the gorge if he failed to turn it down the canyon here, but it looked now as if there had been twice the number of cattle the Kettle Drummers had expected to come pushing in on them.

It might have been wholesale murder in the gorge this morning if he had left the job to some of the hotter heads. People could stand only so much, and the Kettle Drummers had already stood for more than their share of trouble. They were trying to farm the land of the canyon. That in itself was enough to warrant the contempt of the big cattle companies. All the West as an open rangeland would not be enough for many of them, since their insatiable greed for grass and water could never be appeased.

The small cattlemen back here in the towering hills had no lasting quarrel with the settlement. They had expected the usual barbwire fences along the creeks and around the water holes, but that fear had soon died.

Kettle Drummers had left the big creek open. Cottonwood poles had taken the place of barbwire. No one had even thought of trying to block the old cattle trails across the canyon. When sizable herds were going through, the settlers had turned out, quietly guarding their fields and helping the herds along. Now the small cowmen sent word a day or two ahead when they were coming through.

The small cattlemen had almost as much to fear from the Buttz and Farday combine as the nesters themselves. If the combine could push and slug their big drives through Kettle Drum Canyon, heedless of resistance, then no range would be safe anywhere.

Herds had been split and drifted up the grassy draws and canyons, fighting men streaming after them, reaching for the best ranges. Little men could rage and threaten, but none were rich enough to hire professional gunmen.

For that reason Big Sam Carson's old 2 Bar T had jumped into the fight this spring. Siding Carson were the Bleeding Heart, the Flying Cross and the old Wagon Wheel. None were big enough to fight the combine openly, for Buttz and Farday were in the habit of striking back from the timbered slopes and the canyon rims. A man would drop dead from his saddle and no one would ever know who had killed him.

Banded together this year, little cattlemen helping nesters, nesters in turn helping little cattlemen, there was a chance of winning against the great combine. But where it had taken time for them to get together, the combine was always ready, and never asleep when a big move was planned.

With the last of the cattle coming out of the gorge now, bullets were suddenly slapping and glancing against the rocks close to where Rip Carson and the girl, Grace Riddell, were standing. For a second it was impossible to tell where they were coming from. High-powered bullets traveled so much faster than sound.

Then the sound was coming, a crash like the noise of planks being torn from the sides of a great-walled house. Faint puffs of smoke rose from up on the south rim of the gorge. Men were down among the rocks, their firing fast and deadly as they raked the other rims where men yelled and fell back in startled confusion. One man, turning, fell dead in his tracks.

CHAPTER III.

Devil Throws a Beauty.

Stumbling, half-falling, Rip and Grace Riddell drew back. He grabbed her arm. She was limping, but that was forgotten now with bullets slapping the rocks, splattering, or glancing away with shrill whines.

Around the spur of rock Rip's tall bay waited, a pair of heavy old bullhide chaps hanging to the saddle-horn. But he

had no thought of leaving here without showing that gun gang on the rim just what he thought of them.

"Wait here—unless you want to die!" he barked at Grace. There had been nothing gentlemanly about him from the start, there was nothing like that now—not with this girl! "And keep down, away from that horse of mine! If you try jumping his saddle and making a run for it when my back's turned he'll kill you!" He added with a twist of his lip, "Not that I give a damn, but we don't want your damned beauty prize carcass on our hands here!"

He wheeled back to the rocks with his high-power, and dropped flat on his stomach, wriggling forward into position. The combine's men on the south rim of the gorge seemed to have everything in their hands right at the moment. Six of them had grown bolder, jumping to their feet from their hiding places, as if they were drunk.

In two crashing reports he downed two of them. One stumbled forward, staggering and rocking on the rim. Another shot from the west rim of the canyon, pitched him over the edge, a spinning figure going down and down.

The other hit man up there had dropped his rifle and staggered back, slumping to his hands and knees behind a rock as if suddenly dazed. Again a shot from the west rim reached its target, pitching the fellow flat on his face.

Another staggered when Carson fired his third and fourth shots. After that, no longer able to face the deadly fire, it was a riot on the rim. Heads were bobbing back of the rocks, fleeing figures could be glimpsed here and there. Suddenly all the would-be killers were giving up the fight. It became every man for himself and no thought of the others as hired gunmen fled the scene.

"You're a deadly man with a gun, Rip Carson!" Grace Riddell was sitting where Rip had left her, staring at him when he lowered the rifle and slid back. She nodded. "Yes, I was just fool enough, I suppose you'll say, to take a peep over the rocks while you were shooting. I'm getting ashamed of myself for being in this mess."

"I don't see you blushing!" He looked at her searchingly. "You took a damned nasty job. Being a beauty winner, you pushed your sex into the game, thinking it would keep you from getting shot and—"

"But I didn't want the job, Rip Carson!" she said sharply. "I was forced into it by my mother and stepfather!"

"And I suppose," he said, "they helped you skin out of your clothes and climb to a platform in front of a crowd—"

"I've heard enough of that!" she cried. "My God, can't you get something else on your mind?"

"Maybe, now," he said, "I was one of the thousands who saw your shining charms Frontier Day, and was impressed by what I saw."

"Rip Carson, you're a bald-faced liar!" Her hands knotted into small fists. "Nobody saw my—er—my shining charms! I didn't win that crazy contest on a platform with my clothes off! I had an ordinary picture made by a photographer, dressed exactly like I am now. The photographer submitted the picture without my knowing anything about it, and I won. Does that satisfy you?"

"I wasn't satisfied in the first place." He scowled, looking down the canyon. "When you're ready to start walking, you can walk."

She stared at him. "Walk? You mean—"

He set his jaw. "Down the canyon and on your way. If those feet and high heels of yours hold out you'll make it. One of your gunman gang may still want to kill you, now that your Mr. Melvin Clancey failed, but it'll be no skin off our noses up here."

It was quiet in the canyon now. Men on the rims east and west were holding their fire, but watching, rifles ready. On the west rim the body of a cowboy was being carried away across his saddle. But the combine gunmen were still on the move, out of sight around a bend and heading back for safer territory. For the

first time they had failed to push a herd through Kettle Drum.

Big Sam Carson, Rip's father, was coming down the canyon on a wall-eyed half-outlaw roan. A six-footer with wide shoulders, a deep chest, dark-red hair, mustache and goatee, he looked like a a gray-clad Buffalo Bill in his saddle. His ruddy face had been scraped with a close morning shave as always.

Rifle across his lap, a big six-shooter at either hip, he pulled up. His cold blue eyes were on the girl as she stumbled awkwardly to her feet to face him.

"So that's her, huh?" He frowned. "The gal who led the herd!"

"That's her!" Rip Carson nodded. "I've just told her she can start walking when she's ready."

"Quite a looker!" The older man stared again, then looked off down the canyon. "Looks like we've broken the teeth of the lordly Buttz and Farday crowd, but they'll be certain to pay us a return visit. Where's the damned snake who was shot off the spur up there? I won't call him a man. Didn't when I first saw the damned varmint three years ago in Glory Hole. Brought a couple of young gals up from Wyoming and turned 'em over to Blackjack Mabel!"

"Then you know him?"

"Hell, yes!" Sam Carson's big face twisted into a frown. "Crimp, tin-horn gambler and ladies' man—living up to the general reputation of his damned breed! You would find him sticking close to something like that." He jerked his head toward Grace Riddell. "Let's take a look at him—and if nobody in his own crowd wants to come back and pick up his carcass we'll let the buzzards have it. We saw him shooting at you."

"Only he wasn't shooting at me." Rip Carson told him the truth as he climbed on over the toe of rocks while his father rode on around the end of them. "He was shooting to kill the girl."

"Odd, if true." Sam Carson swung out of his big saddle when they were a few yards away from the body of the dead man smashed into a bloody wad in the rocks. "Why in hell would them want to kill their queen bee who was leading the cattle and the cutthroats for them? To blame her death on us and get the whole country against us?"

"That's right, Dad." Rip Carson was looking at the dead man. A fine high-powered rifle was half under the body. The weapon that had come spinning down just ahead of its owner. It had bounced to a halt with its muzzle wedged in a crack between two flat rocks. Marvin Clancey's falling body had landed against the butt, his smashing weight putting a sharp bend in the barrel.

The older Carson smiled. "That gun won't be doing any more shooting, without a trip back to the factory for a lot of repairs and a new barrel! Let him lie there. He—"

A noise stopped him. It was a sudden snort, then a wild slashing and beating of hoofs just beyond the rocks where they had left the girl. The two Carsons made a few quick jumps, and stopped to stare, their mouths sagging open, awe in their eyes.

Grace Riddell was in the saddle of Rip's bay, trying for a run-out on them while their backs were turned. Under her, the tall horse had suddenly become an ugly and mean outlaw. But she was trying to make a ride that would have won money in any contest. Her body was swaying, shoulders rising and falling. The horse was confining himself to only a few square yards of the hard and rocky ground, a fighting, cork-screwing equine maniac trying to hurl his rider from the saddle.

"Devil!" yelled Rip Carson as he went stumbling and leaping forward, going over the rocks. "*Devil!*"

"Stay out of the way!" screamed the girl. "I'll ride him!"

But even as she screamed, she was going. The tall bay had suddenly backfired, a trick known to only a few horses. In a fierce lunge forward he had stopped, forefeet solid again the ground, legs stiffened stilts.

The jar seemed to throw the horse straight backward, a whiplike surge that probably covered no more than a foot of ground, but the girl was caught, pitched forward. A lightning upswing of the horse's shoulders, again a twisting,

sprawling at full-length on the ground, her face once more like death in the morning light.

"Damn it, Rip," yelled old Sam Carson, "he's busted her wide open! Killed her!"

CHAPTER IV.

A Bullet Stops a Quarrel.

Each dropped to one knee as father and son bent over the girl. Devil, the bay, stood snorting and watching them from a few yards away.

"Might have broken her back, Rip!" groaned Sam Carson. "She hit that ground hard!"

"You can't tell her anything, Dad!" Rip took her by the shoulders, squaring them on the ground and straightening her legs. "When she comes to her senses maybe we'd better let her have a plug horse to get out of here on. I had to kill her pinto."

"I know—I saw you." The father nodded. "What the hell's the matter with young gals these days? Not a lick of damned brains in their heads, taking fool chances where a man with the sense of a billy-goat wouldn't dare set a foot! What if Devil's killed her?"

"He didn't—kill me." Her eyes had opened. "I just seem to be getting the worst of everything—this morning!"

"Maybe you've sort of got it coming." Sam Carson looked at her quizzically. "You come here playing the part of a she-jackass, and it ain't been good for you. A good quirt taken to your tail might yet make a woman out of you if—"

"Let her alone!" Rip came suddenly to her defense, not knowing why, or quite realizing it. I've been giving her hell enough, and I still say we might let her have a plug to get out of here on and back to her gang."

"You're forgetting, I guess"—Sam Carson was frowning—"that you told me one of her gang tried to kill her!"

"And I'm not going back to them!" Grace was white-faced and looking sick at her stomach, but still had fight left in her. "I came here to get my stepfather's brother out of jail down in Tombstone. I was to stay with the herd only until I could see the nester fences up the canyon. But with Marvin Clancey up there taking two shots at me I know what it all means now. Even if you hadn't tried to stop the cattle he would have tried his best to kill me."

"Seems like sister," drawled the elder Carson, "you're beginning to think a little for yourself. Maybe we can start thinking with you if you'll just tell us the whole tale from your side. Step over there, Rip"—he nodded toward a damp pocket in the foot of the cliffs—"and get her a drink of that good cold water in your hat. Damn it, ain't you got no manners a-tall!"

"And that"—she tried to smile, rocking herself up to her right elbow—"is the first kind word I've heard this morning! I'm awfully thirsty."

Rip came back with the water, but it was not in the cupped brim of his hat. One of the nesters had left a new tin can under the drip, and the water in it was icy cold.

"Thank you so much!" When she handed back the can it was almost empty. I'm not hurt, really, but I did take a hard bang on this hard ground. And now look at him!" She pointed to the bay, head down, grazing in a little swath of grass. "As pleased as Punch with himself!"

"I told you to stay off him." Rip turned back to the rocks with the can. "He's a one-man horse, like the most of 'em you'll find up here are where few of us have more than two at a time instead of the usual cowboy string."

She looked at Sam Carson. "Then you're not farmers!"

"Cows and horses," he said. "The settlers here try to work along with us, and we let 'em alone. They're good folks. Somebody should have told you what we're like up here before you headed out of Wyoming. I reckon they didn't."

"But you must have heard things about me!"

He set his jaw. "Little else for the past two weeks. A proud wench, they

say, on a proud pinto horse with a fancy saddle and bridle. Better looking than sin. Won a beauty prize with nothing on but a ribbon around the middle quarters and two sewing thimbles to cover the other parts. Maybe we're old-fashioned up here, but decency's that way, maybe. If one of Blackjack Mabel's worst strumpets in Glory Hole walked out on the porch like that they'd run her out of town!"

"She's told me all about it!" Rip was back. "It wasn't like that at all! The tales we got up here were for only one thing—to make the woman folks here hate this girl long before she got here, so every door'd close against her. Among the religious folks, at least! There's been talk and threats. If she'd been killed this morning everybody in the hills would have sworn a settler did the shooting. And—and I think"—he was stumbling at the finish—"we've already hashed over it enough. Too damned much. From here on we'll leave it to you to explain it to the others." He nodded up the canyon at a group of seven riders galloping toward them, rifles across their laps. "I'm through!"

"In other words"—a slow smile moved Sam Carson's lips as he came to his feet, and turned back to his horse—"you believe her. A good-looking critter like that can twist a man around her finger, Rip, and damned quick!"

"Thank you, Rip." Grace's voice was low as Sam Carson swung into saddle and galloped up the canyon to meet the oncoming riders. "That pays for some of the terrible things you've said to me. From now on I'll tell you anything I know."

"Maybe," he said through his teeth. "I no longer give a damn whether you do or not. Last summer you did see me in Cheyenne, and I saw you. I said then that you were the most beautiful thing that ever put a foot on the ground, Maybe I fell for you."

"Rip," she said, looking at him intently, "you believe what I told you about that beauty contest?"

"I guess I'm already trying to believe it, Grace!"

Sam Carson seemed to have headed into trouble. He had stopped about eighty yards away, facing the seven riders. They were all nesters and, leading them as usual on a big red mule, was tall, hawk-nosed and hawk-faced Leander Malvern, the settlement's old preacher who tried to hold all things under an iron hand. Malvern's voice had lifted in an outburst of indignation.

"Mr. Carson, must I always have to remind you to never use profanity in my presence!"

"Damn it, who the hell do you think you are, Malvern—Moses or somebody?" Sam Carson was in a good mood this morning for arguments. "Don't set there under your big old parson hat with that buzzard face of yours, trying to look so damned shocked! Why in hell didn't you stay back there among the women where you belong?"

Deacon Seaton Cowley, another tall, lean-faced man took it up. "Don't cuss at 'im, Carson! We won't tolerate blasphemy! Not before our women, our children or ourselves! We—"

"The hell with you!" barked the cowman. "We come here trying to help you. You and that long Jackass on a mule have always tried to run the show in Kettle Drum, and all you've done has been to get yourself just about wiped out each time. Still, damn it, like all fools wanting to lead, you pop up again. We told you right at the start that you and Leander Malvern were not going to run this show. All you do is get people killed and everything around shot to hell!"

Grace Riddell was smiling as Rip Carson helped her to her feet. "Now I can see where the hate campaign started," she said.

"Part of it, yes," Rip agreed. "But the big reason for it was deliberately sent up here by your cow combine. That outfit stops at nothing to gain an end."

Leander Malvern's voice was lifting again. "That girl is going right out of here! You've heard my decision, Carson. I'll stand for nothing like that hussy in the canyon!"

Sam Carson was red with rage, *"You* won't stand for her! Why, you long-necked, fish-faced old skinny crow, you ain't telling anybody what—"

A wail in the air cut him short. With it came a slapping and shattering sound, and right behind it the ringing report of a rifle from the east rim. Deacon Seaton Cowley let out a wild goat's bleat as his long body shot high in the stirrups, terror suddenly filling his pale and popping eyes as he stared downward at where his big old saddle-horn had been. Now it was only a bullet-splintered nub of wreckage.

"Lord, Brother Malvern, look!" he cried. "Look!"

Leander Malvern was not bothering to look at anything. He had suddenly humped forward, long hands clawing into his red mule's uncut mane. The mule was wheeling, long ears pointed. In a snorting charge that brushed men and horses aside, he headed back up the canyon, the long tails of his riders black coat fluttering above the cantle.

CHAPTER V.

Elmer Spills a Tale.

The sound of excited voices came almost immediately from the rim. Three shots punctuated the noise, each the heavy report of a six-shooter. Then came a frantic wailing, a voice pleading, crying out in terror, heavy voices cursing. The frantic voice, higher than all the others, might easily have been mistaken for a screaming woman's.

"I didn't aim to hit nobody! I didn't aim to hit nobody!"

With the big red mule fleeing with Leander Malvern, Deacon Seaton Crowley was not long in wheeling his own horse to follow. The five remaining settlers scattered, bug-eyed and white-faced, for they were not fighting men by a long sight. Arms flapping, elbow beating his ribs as he tilted forward over his bullet-splintered saddlehorn, Cowley was hot behind Malvern.

"And there now," rasped the big Carson, "go your fine leaders and big talkers who take such a heavy interest in their fellow men! They're always the big noise to tell you what to do, then hell-fast to run when the first gun goes off, thinking only of their own damned dirty hides!"

Noise was still coming down from up there beyond the rim, the frantic voice was still pleading. Laughter roared, then curses, then more laughter. Cowboys were up there. Some were from old Milt Mason's Wagon Wheel, one or two from the Flying Cross or the Bleeding Heart. Four of them appeared on the rim. Between them was a long, lean scarecrow in shabby gray, his eyes popping.

A voice bawled, loud enough to be heard a full half-mile, and punctuated with laughter from other men, "Why, hell, yes, pitch him right on over!"

"Naw—naw!" wailed the thin man. "I told you I didn't—didn't aim to hit nobody a-tall! Hell, men, I'll tell you everything I know!"

"Bring him on down here!" Sam Carson's shout seemed to fill the canyon. "We'll burn him at the stake after cutting his ears off!"

Rip Carson and Grace, watching and listening, knew that thin scarecrow the moment the lean, hawk-nosed face showed over the edge of the rocks. It was Elmer Parley, not much more than halfwitted and too often the victim of jokes in Glory Hole where his main occupation was that of swamper around the saloons.

"Will they throw him over, Rip?" Grace asked tensely.

"No!" Carson looked down at her, grinning for the first time this morning. "Elmer Parley doesn't have sense enough for anybody to want to hurt him, but they'll have him telling everything he knows before they're through with him."

It was the first break in the grimness of the morning. With the tension broken, Sam Carson was making a deal with a long-legged nester on a small black horse. With the horse ridden bareback and with only a ragged rope halter, the rider was now going to double up with a short, squint-eyed man on a big bay.

In ten minutes Grace's saddle and bridle had been taken from her dead pinto and put on the little black horse.

Rip Carson found her six-shooter, and calmly handed it back to her. When all of them were mounted they headed up the canyon, Rip Carson and the girl bringing up the rear.

Before they had gone a mile three mounted men came down a narrow trail from the rim, one behind the other, their horses slipping and sliding. The rider in the middle was the lean and ugly Elmer Parley, mounted in the ragged saddle of a one-eyed old bay. He was still begging, half-crying when the riders stopped behind Sam Carson.

"I only done what Mr. Malvern Clancey said he'd gimme ten dollars to do!" pleaded Elmer. "I stayed hid in the rocks! I was just to do some shooting and make some noise after everything got quiet! Shucks, I never shot a man in all my whole life!"

A big, dark-bearded Wagon Wheel rider was keeping him scared. "You should of killed at least one, Elmer. Maybe then your bullet would of killed just one down here, instead of three or four! Your so light and thin Sheriff Smith Walker's going to have to tie rocks to your feet to make you heavy enough to hang!"

The Wagon Wheel man looked at Sam Carson. "But we think he's telling the truth, the best Elmer can. Little sense as he's got, that Clancey feller must of been drunk to hire Elmer, or maybe he aimed to put a bullet in the back of his neck and blame that on us when they were through with him."

"Elmer's the kind," said Carson, "to do just what he's told and ask no questions. Tell us the rest of it!"

"Ain't much to tell, Sam." The Wagon Wheel man slumped forward on his saddle-horn. "Two of the boys are still up there on the high point watching the herd. They've signalled down that it's been stopped just below the mouth of the canyon. That means the gang ain't through by a damn sight, and next time it's going to be tough. Even Elmer tells us that much!"

"Yeah, yeah, it's going to be tough!" Elmer Parley was suddenly talking without having to be prodded. "I didn't want no part in it, you see, all you folks knowing how honest and upstanding I am! Me, now, I was standing behind Jim Riley's saloon last night and heard Mr. Clancey and three men a-talking over that round poker table in the little back room. I've got long ears and just can't help using 'em!" He tried to grin, yellow teeth protruding. "Another feller must of been on guard outside. He eased up and had a big black gun in my ribs before I knowed he was there. Scared me slap-nigh to death! He took me inside where he said I could listen good and not strain my ears.

"Hell, Sam, they didn't aim to kill that gal!" He laughed as if suddenly happy about what he was telling. "They was aiming only to wing 'er, maybe break a leg or just an arm, and—kill her horse. They come in set for a fight this time, though I reckon they didn't think it would go so fast and hard agin 'em. They ain't done. Hell, no! If they can't come up the canyon, then in two days they'll push up the east rim. The nesters, they say, ain't got no right to the land here. They're only here 'cause the law says people can try out government land and see if it'll grow things. If it does, then they'll have some sort of a claim to homesteading it.

"Smart as I am, I couldn't get it all through my head, Sam, and I oughta, big as my ears is and me setting there free and easy with 'em, and drinkin' the finest whisky you ever tasted until 'way after midnight. Why—why, I was one of 'em! Yes, sir, and the finest whisky you ever slopped a tongue around!"

"You forget maybe," Sam Carson said, glowering, when Elmer came to an end of his chattering, "that it was you drinking that whisky, Elmer. Go on with the rest of it!"

"Hell, there ain't no more, Sam." Parley grinned from one big ear to the other. "Only I didn't think to say they ain't going to use these parts just for summer range any more. They're just going to keep their herds in here. While the land's still fresh-plowed there was some talk of scattering it full of seed for hay. They aim to be using the settlers' houses and barns for winter quarters and such.

Going big from now on. That's pretty much to be expected, ain't it, Sam?"

"Why, damn it, yes!" Sam Carson stiffened in his saddle. "One of you jolly-whacker boys roll good old Elmer a nice cigarette. Maybe Elmer is on our side after all!"

Anything could happen now, Rip thought as he rode on with Grace Riddell and it was going to happen soon.

Little cattlemen too often had to give up range when big outfits came pushing in, and nesters in the heart of a rich cattle country were generally the first to feel the weight of the strong. Big outfits had money to hire lawyers and swing political power. Professional gunmen flocked to them, sticking close to those who had plenty of good gold and silver to spend for hiring gunhands.

Big money could elect sheriffs, judges and prosecuting lawyers, making the courts their hirelings. A gunman jailed was a gunman bailed as soon as lawyers and bondsmen could get to him. Little people laid in jail and rotted. Their cases dragged through the courts, special prosecutors keeping them for their fees. A few months in jail meant a little rancher out of business and with nothing left except to quit the country or ask for a job punching cattle for the very people who had ruined him.

Once firmly established up here, Buttz and Farday would expand north and south across the Wyoming-Montana line. The tentacles of the ever-greedy octopus would reach deeper into the tall hills. Little ranchers would find themselves squeezed into smaller pockets and would be forced to move back and back, erecting new houses and corrals. Buttz and Farday would merely wait until they were ready to take them into the great maw of the steadily growing combine.

"Take that girl on home, Rip." Big Sam Carson swung back from the head of the little group when they were nearing the first of the fenced fields. "Tell your mother to take the girl in, which'll be a waste of breath because she'd do that anyway. And you, now"—he stabbed a finger at Grace Riddell—"keep out of sight lest you get shot at again."

His voice lowered. "A lot of things are coming out of Elmer Parley. You can't go at his kind rough-shod. You only scare 'em. I'm having a talk with the rest of our bunch, then I'll be along home and we'll get set for the rest of the big show. It looks even bigger than any of us ever thought it'd be. Watch yourselves!"

CHAPTER VI.

FRONT AND REAR.

RIP CARSON and Grace swung away, heading for the 2 Bar T. Keeping to an old cattle trail under the west wall of the canyon they passed the settlement and turned in between the high shoulders of rock that marked the mouth of a wide gorge. After a mile, a deep, high-walled basin opened ahead of them.

"This," he told her, "is the 2 Bar T. It's like most of the grazing lands up here, compact and high-walled, and none of them are large enough for any of us to ever become bigtime cowmen."

"But it's big after all!" She was staring ahead and to the right and left, then at a small lake five miles away with log houses, barns, sheds and corrals rimming what looked like a tall bluff of blue-gray rocks shadowed by big trees. "And like something cut from a picture book!"

"About a thousand sections!" He smiled easily. "When we count all the draws, the little canyons and pockets in the sides of it. None of us back here want to grow fat and rich. We hire only four steady men, and never over four more in branding and driving time, and maybe we've been smug and proud of the little we have, envying no one else. Like it?"

"I've already as good as said that." She nodded. "It's beautiful. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it could always be like this!"

"It will!" He set his jaw. "Nothing's going to change it!"

"I hope not, Rip."

They were quiet again after that. When they were closer to the houses on the rim of the bluffs he stared at a

strange fringe-topped black surrey with two black horses under the trees at the long old hitch-rack in front of the flagstoned porch facing the lake. Grace Riddell also was studying them, and finally she spoke.

"Do you know them, Rip?"

"No, I don't." He frowned. "Looks like a Sunday school rig, and people in times like this are not in the habit of going visiting. Besides that, I don't know anybody around here with a surrey pulled by two shiny black horses. On a second thought, that thing looks almost like a funeral rig!"

"It could be something like that!" She was staring, eyes big. "I think I've seen it before, Rip! Walker Farday and Rodrick Buttz sometimes travel in a thing like that!"

He tried to laugh. "They wouldn't dare come here!"

"You don't know what they'd dare!"

"Damn it, Grace," he said, "you haven't told all you could tell yet!"

"Maybe I'd be ashamed to tell." Her head went down, and he thought she was about to cry. "Maybe I had a reason for wanting to come up here that didn't have a thing in the world to do with Buttz and Farday. I'll let you try to figure that one out, Rip."

"And me," he grumbled, "never worth a damn at riddles!"

She sat up straight, squaring her shoulders, setting her jaw and looking ahead. "All right! I was told that you would probably be the first one I'd run into up here. When we have more time I'll draw you a picture of what I mean."

"I know one thing." He was deeply thoughtful. "You were shooting pretty straight when I killed your pinto."

"And for a good reason!" She shook back her shoulders. "You were doing straight shooting, not missing! I was scared half to death, making a big bluff with my heart in my throat. And there was one more highly important thing. I didn't know I was shooting at Rip Carson, the tophand cowboy I saw in Cheyenne. Truth being truth, I really didn't know what I was doing."

A sound ahead stopped anything he might have said, straightening both of them in their saddles. It was like a big door being slammed or even a shot—a muffled noise that apparently came from the old bunkhouse or the barn eighty yards from the sprawling ranch house with its big rock chimney at either end.

Then two big-hatted men sitting on the edge of the porch caught their interest. They saw one of them slowly rise, lifting long arms and stretching himself as if tired of waiting. Carson and the girl were close enough now to see a tall red-headed man of somewhere about forty. But the main thing Carson noted was that the man had no sign of a weapon on him.

Both men were up when Carson and the girl reached the big porch. The other man was short, dark-bearded. Again here was no sign of weapons, not on either of the men not on the saddles of the two good-looking chestnut-sorrels at the hitch-rack. The redhead lifted his hand and spoke.

"Hi-yah!" He grinned. "Guess you're Rip Carson. Your mother's inside talking to the patent medicine drummers. Me and Heck"—he nodded to the short man —"are sort of acting as guides for 'em. If anything ails you, they'll cure it." His grin grew wider.

"Yeah, they will, they say." The short man shuckled. "Anything from lumbago to growing hair an' making you live an extra two or three hundred years."

It looked all right. Patent medicine men came every spring and summer. As he passed a window Carson saw his mother sitting at the end of the long old living room table. Even Grace must have failed to see anything wrong about the two tall men garbed in black and looking like undertakers or preachers who were sitting quietly on the other side of the table.

When Carson and the girl walked in, Rip's mother, a tall, gray-haired woman in dark-blue, looked up. Her face was ashen.

"There's trouble here, Rip!" she said.

"But too late to do anything about it, Carson!" one of the tall men said, merely looking up from his chair with

a thin smile. "Don't try to reach for your gun. Your mother might get shot, you know. You're covered front and rear."

"Rip!" Grace grabbed his arm. "They—"

"Quiet!" Two more men had given the open front door a push and stepped from behind it, cocked six-shooters filling their hands. There was another stir in the doorway beyond the table. Two men appeared there, each with a short, double-barreled shotgun.

"Front and rear, yes, Mr. Carson," said one tall man, gold-capped teeth glinting in a thin leer. "We're here to keep a date with Big Sam Carson. He just hasn't yet been informed of it!"

"They're Buttz and Farday men, Rip!" Mrs. Carson sat there, cold-faced, as the men behind Rip were taking his six-shooter and the girl's. "We have a regular gang here hiding out in the barn with their horses hidden with them! I saw only two riders with this pair when they came driving up out front." She turned contemptuous blue eyes on them. "They flashed United States deputy marshal shields on me the moment they got inside the front door!"

The man with the gold-capped teeth smiled. "But made no claim to the—er—doubtful honor, ma'am. As lawyers—the firm of Midwell and MacTaggerty—we would not be quite so crude. We merely showed you a couple of pieces of metal without saying who they belonged to or who had the authority to wear them."

"Not that it makes or would make a hell of a lot of difference!" put in the other man, tall, thin and dark and dressed so precisely like the other they could have been taken for twins. "Buttz and Farday are here to carry through a long undertaking. Death—unfortunately—has been no stranger to either side in the project. Death again will be no stranger unless people come to terms. There is room, plenty of it, for all the herds our firm desires to send up here. There will be horses, and — perhaps — sheep at a later date. We are fighting a great battle for the American people." His smile was thin, dark eyes twinkling. "Sad-faced, lean-bellied yokels, such as myself and Mr. Oliver MacTaggerty so often worry our hearts and brains about! There is not enough beef, not enough—let's say—warm clothing."

The other man chuckled. "And not enough lamb and mutton. I like mutton. I like nice, warm clothing made from the wool on a good sheep's back. In fact"—his grin stretched from ear to ear—"I like everything about a sheep but his bleat and his smell!"

CHAPTER VII.

Derringer Man.

With one man holding the muzzle of a six-shooter against his ribs, another was already tying Rip Carson's hands behind him. As soon as the two gunmen finished with him they turned their attention to Grace Riddell, quickly getting her hands behind her.

"Take what they hand you now, Rip," Mrs. Carson said grimly, watching her son. "Old Botch and poor old Wang Lee are in the cellar under the kitchen. I don't know what they're doing out in the barn, but I thought I heard a shot out there a while ago."

"Nice of you to tell them!" Oliver MacTaggerty smiled, showing his gold-capped teeth again. "Nice, too, that Miss Riddell has caught up with your bronc-riding son, Mrs. Carson. Fell in love with him, it seems when she was in Cheyenne. Quite a daughter-in-law you

can have if you want her. And as we have explained, you can stay on here as it nothing has happened, if your husband listens to reason."

"Yes," Mary Carson said. "All we do is to sell what cattle we have for a song and give Buttz and Farday complete control of our ranch. Then we'll go on slaving for the combine. I think Sam will have an answer for that." She jerked up her hand again. "No, Rip! Keep your mouth shut! Mind what I'm telling you, son! Right now I know what is best for all of us. These people are cold-blooded killers."

"Take them away!" The man, Midwell, jabbed a thumb toward the door behind them. "Keep them in the cooler. And another thing! If that damned big ape down there doesn't stop his whining, bring him up to the top of those cellar steps and crack his infernal skull!"

Carson knew that the "big black ape" would be Botch Smith, an old Negro who had been with the 2 Bar T for more than twenty years. Botch's voice came to him as he was marched on with the girl and out into the long kitchen. The old Negro was down there in the rock-walled cellar, his moaning coming up through the cracks in the heavy trap-door in the end of the room.

"Lawd, I don't want to die! Lawd, I don't want to die!"

That was puzzling, and not at all like Botch. For if ever Rip Carson had known a fearless man it was Botch. But when the men with the shotguns opened the trap Carson saw him sitting down there on a box with his hands behind him and a lantern burning above him, groaning and sobbing as if the gang had scared him half to death. At his side stood little cherub-faced Wang Lee who had been 2 Bar T cook for nearly thirty years.

"Shut up down there, you black ape!" growled one of the men who had lifted the door. "If you don't we'll come down and bust your skull with a six-shooter!"

"I'll handle Botch!" Carson spoke through his teeth, white and grim as he led the way down the steep stairs in front of Grace. "He's always been afraid of guns!"

That was a lie he might have kept from telling. Within a second after the heavy door had dropped above them Botch Smith was on his feet. His powerful black hands flew from behind him, cupping like shovels to Carson's shoulders.

"Cuss me out, Rip!" he whispered. "Help me carry on. They don't know I've got my hands loose." His voice shifted into another groan. "Lawd, Lawd, I don't wanta die. Lawd, I—"

"Shut up, Botch!" Carson's voice drowned him out. "They're not going to kill you, you old fool!"

"But I'm so scared! Oh, Lawd, I—"

"Shut up!" yelled Carson again. "Damn it, we're not going to stand for your weeping and wailing!"

One of the men above them banged a spurred heel on the floor. "Keep him quiet or we'll fix his wagon!"

"What's the game, Botch?" Carson was whispering a couple of seconds later.

"They don't know what I know, Rip." Old Smith again put his big hands on Rip's shoulders, voice a whisper. Carson saw that broken ropes still hung to his black wrists. "Go take a look while I play on with my monkey business to keep 'em fooled."

He pointed to a huge old cabinet standing back under the dusty beams and across a corner against the stone wall. Hands behind him, Carson walked to the cabinet and looked behind it, while old Botch kept up a low mumbling and pretended crying.

Rip Carson had completely forgotten that the old cellar under the front part of the house had been walled-up, leaving only the long and ample cellar under the kitchen. Botch had removed about a dozen big rocks, making an opening two feet square in the top of the dividing wall. Once in the old cellar it would be possible for them to crawl all the way back to a point under the bedrooms in the west end of the house.

Taking only a look at the dark hole, remembering everything, Carson turned back, again lifting his voice.

"I told you to shut up, damn it!"

"Yas, yas-zuh, I'll shut up 'long as you's heah!" Botch was putting it on thicker than ever. His next words were whispers. "You see what I mean now?"

"Miles ahead of you, Botch. We'll get under the living room, then back under the hall between the bedrooms, and maybe we can lift that old trap in the hall. What'll we use for fighting tools if they catch us?"

"These." Old Botch looked up with a grin. "In the palm of each big hand lay a little two-shot Derringer pistol. "Had 'em for years, like you know. Soon as I heard this new trouble was comin' I slipped 'em down in my boot legs." His voice lifted into another low wail. "Save me! Save me! I don't wanta die!"

"Shut up, Botch!" Carson grinned and turned his back to Botch to untie his wrists. "The next time you let a groan out of you I'm going to kick you in the belly!"

"That's the ticket, Carson!" A spurred heel again banged the floor above them. "Give 'im hell!"

Upstairs in the big living room everything seemed to have settled down peacefully again. Always cocksure, especially where women were concerned, Oliver MacTaggerty was smiling like a satisfied cat, gold-capped teeth glinting. His partner, Blandon Midwell, had slumped back in his chair, having no more to do now than to sit there with his long hands folded in his lap.

The two gunmen who had handled Rip and Grace so speedily and efficiently had gone into the kitchen to join the other two with the shotguns. Now they were drinking coffee at the big range, cocksure themselves when it came to handling men, so long as they could hold the muzzle of a gun in backs or ribs.

Out in the barn an even dozen more of the bunch were waiting. With them was an old half-breed Cheyenne Indian they had found working out a young horse on a long rope in a rear corral. None of those in the house knew that it was when the half-breed had made a sudden attempt to run that a single shot had been fired just ahead of his feet in the earthern hallway and stopped him in his tracks.

Given a little more time, it would all be over. It was always like this, people fighting back at the start, threatening and cursing as Big Sam Carson would storm when he came in. Rough and tough handling would put him in place, make him come to terms.

Back in Chicago, up until three years ago, Oliver MacTaggerty and Blandon Midwell had learned the art of selling protection to balky men who at first swore and be-damned that they wanted no part of it. Out here among these Western yokels it was sometimes hard going, but they all would come around in time.

"Be sensible!" Midwell was again turning his big guns of argument on Mary Carson. "Today Sam Carson stands alone, one man against the world. Tomorrow he becomes part of a magnificent organization, rich and powerful, backed by the best lawyers in the county, untouchable as a fighting unit, no longer one man asking—"

"Yes," she finished it for him, " 'the great organization demanding, forcing, and receiving.' Mr. Midwell, you and Mr. MacTaggerty have been over it so often I know every word of it. Strange that we never thought of needing ourselves organized until you two came along! Thank you for not bringing it up with my son. He's usually quiet and soft-spoken, but he's not as patient as I am."

"You are an amazingly calm and far-thinking woman, Mrs. Carson! We meet so few like you it—"

"And I've heard that, too," she cut him short again. "You might add just one thing. I'm not subject to flattery."

"Think of the blood!" Oliver MacTaggerty now leaned forward. "We're here as gentlemen, trying to bring this thing to a peaceful end instead of fighting like wild animals. There has been bloodshed today. There will be more tomorrow unless you and your husband listen to reason and use common sense. Your son or your husband may be the next to die."

"And you and your husband and son are giving away absolutely nothing, ma'am!" put in Midwell. "You are simply signing a few legal papers and

joining a large and wonderful organization for your own protection. You become part of a great combine. Experts in the cattle business are with you, behind you, shielding you! They'll know when to sell, when to buy, the type and breed of cattle to put on the range. We don't sell by the dozen, fifty or a couple of hundred head at a time. We sell by train loads! Our Eastern offices are right on the ground at the stock markets."

"You'll talk to Sam." She held up her hand again, weary of it all. "Not to me. I'm not the one to have the say."

"But you can sway him, Mrs. Carson! You can talk to him, make him see what's best all around."

"I won't even try!"

"Then you're a damned fool!" snarled MacTaggerty. "You're just a dumb old fool willing to sit here and see your husband butt his brains to death against a stone wall—or get his guts shot out! We came here to have him join the Buttz and Farday combine. He'll sign with us, or the whole damned bunch here will die—Let her alone from now on, Blandon!"

"Sam Carson's coming!" one of the men on the porch called through the front door. "Four men with him! Damned if they don't sort of look like dudes!"

"Handle them as you handled Rip!" Midwell was suddenly on his feet. "Don't kill him if you can help it. Pass the signal to the men in the barn." He whirled and spoke to the two shotgun men in the kitchen. "We'll soon be through here, then we can move on for the rest of it!"

"It's time you started thinking, Mrs. Carson!" MacTaggerty whirled on her. "Damn it, you don't want your husband and son to die! You have your last opportunity to—to—"

CHAPTER VIII.

Black Puma.

MacTaggerty stopped short. He looked at Midwell. Midwell had turned his head with a jerk and was staring toward the end of the room, trying to look past the half-open door to the little hall leading back between the bedrooms. A noise had sounded back there, something like a plank cracking, something giving way under sudden pressure.

The short man on the front porch had his attention elsewhere. "Damn it, I'm beginning to believe one of them fellers with Carson is the Glory Hole sheriff and another is his deputy!"

"Ira!" Midwell sent a startled yell now toward the kitchen, calling to one of the shotgun men out there. "Get in here and see what the hell's going on in the other end of this house!"

Something fell in the kitchen as a short, bottle-bellied man came darting in with his shotgun in his hand. In a crouching trot he headed for the half-open door. Before he could reach it the door was hurled back. As if it had materialized out of thin air a grinning, sweat-streaming black face appeared, white teeth shining. Old Botch Smith spoke just as Rip Carson appeared behind him. In the Negro's right hand was a dark glint of metal, the big fist all but swallowing it.

"I'm scared of you." A blaze of fire come with the words, a burst of noise in the room. Caught with his shotgun lowered in his hand, the little gunman stumbled, skidded on a throw rug, and hit the floor on his back. Out of his hand flew the shotgun, rattling on the floor as it spun forward.

"Under the table, Mis' Mary!" Old Batch yelled. "Under the table, ma'am! My dum-dum bullets will kill the devil!"

He fired his second shot as he yelled. The two gunmen who had hidden back of the door to take Carson from behind had dropped their coffee cups in the kitchen and were suddenly darting into the room. With Botch rocking the first one back on his heels, Carson fired his first shot, stopping the second man as the first fell back against him. Both men went sprawling on the kitchen floor.

Botch Smith grinned as he lunged forward. In a bobbing blur he grabbed up the shotgun, but he was not quick enough to stop Oliver MacTaggerty. Already on his feet, the tall man simply wheeled. In a head-first rush he went plowing

into the two downed men in the doorway, long legs kicking as he went over them and on to fall in the kitchen.

"No, you don't, damn you!"

Blandon Midwell was usually a man who could think in times like this. As he yelled he was out of his chair and around the end of the table. Mrs. Carson was out of her chair, white-faced. Midwell's long arms flapped around her, snatching her to him.

"You'll kill her before you kill me!" His voice lifted to a near scream of both rage and terror. "Help! Everybody get here—stop these crazy fools!"

Botch had the shotgun now. The man who had dropped it seemed to be about to get to his feet dazed in spite of a growing red smear spreading across his stomach. Having no more shots in his little Derringer Botch did the next best thing to save the loads in the shotgun.

He tossed the Derringer aside and lunged closer. A fist that might have been a big black hammer drove forward. There was a gushy sound as it struck, and the dazed man dropped like a beef under a butcher's maul. The black hand clawed for his six-shooters and big cartridge belts.

Carson still had a shot left in his Derringer in his hand. In the doorway, he stood watching right and left. Behind him, coming up through a small opening in the floor, was Grace Riddell. Right behind her, a clawing monkey sputtering Chinese, was old Wang Lee.

"Take a gun, Rip," Botch Smith handed him a long six-shooter. "We're just starting to go places! Watch the doors and windows until I get that thing loose from Mis' Mary!"

"No, you don't," yelled Midwell. "I'll kill her! Damn you, keep away from me! Help, Somebody!"

"You got help, lawyer man!" Shotgun in his left hand, six-shooter in the right, empty Derringer on the floor, Botch Smith was still going forward, slowly rocking, crouching, every inch of him the grinning black ape they had called him. "You hurt one hair on Mis' Mary's head, and I'm gonna cut me a little hole in your belly and pull your guts out one at a time."

"Keep back, I tell you!"

"Hurt her." The big Negro grinned, voice low, eyes glittering black dabs of onyx. "Hurt just one little hair. I ain't never had a chance to take me a lawyer man apart a gut at a time to see what makes him so nasty. I ain't missin' this chance."

"Keep away, damn you!"

"All I ever got out of your kind," Smith chuckled, making sounds that were strangely like the clucking of a porcupine, "has been an old jailhouse and all my money gone. Go on and hurt her!"

Carson fired the big six-shooter then. The tall, red-headed man on the porch had jabbed his head inside. It was there for only an instant, eyes popping. At the six-shooter's roar it fell back, bits of bone, flesh and blood flying, the entire chin shot away.

Old Botch was coming on, creeping now, black eyes shining, white teeth gleaming. Blandon Midwell's mouth was working, lower jaw a nervously flapping hinge, dark eyes bulging in their sockets. Not a sound was coming out of him, paralyzing terror holding him as if he was watching a big black puma slowly coming to him.

Suddenly he moved, and a sound that might have been a madman's shriek tore out of him. With a violent shove he sent the woman stumbling and falling to her knees in front of him. Wheeling, he headed for the kitchen, with Botch Smith, the big panther, leaping the table to follow him.

"Keep back, Botch!" Rip yelled as he fired. "The others are out there!"

A scream came from Midwell. Caught by a bullet in the left side that shattered the hip bone, he went down, twisting and wailing, with his feet still inside the living room, the rest of him sprawling across the two gunmen who had fallen backward on the kitchen floor.

Nothing was stopping Botch Smith. Out of the corners of his eyes he had seen the short man leave the front porch to rush to the hitch-rack and throw himself in the saddle of one of the chestnut-sorrels. Wheeling the horse, the man was

gone, yelling something to others out in the barn as he headed in that direction. The tall redhead was left behind, lying flat on his back, arms flung out at either side of him, chinless, near-mouthless, with his head in a glowing pool of blood.

Flying over the table, eyes and teeth still shining in that hellish smile, the big Negro drove the heel of a boot down in the back of the squirming Midwell's neck.

Oliver MacTaggerty was halfway to the barn when Botch saw him through an open window. Foot still planted against the struggling and crying Midwell's neck, he swung up the shotgun. He took a split-second's aim.

With a roar that seemed to shake the entire house Old Botch fired both barrels of the shotgun. The running Oliver MacTaggerty, out in the bright sunlight, threw up his long arms as a double load of buckshot caught him between the shoulder blades and pitched him flat on his face.

Hoof sounds came now, a dozen horses racing away from the other end of the big barn, their riders hugging a dense little thicket of pines. Gunmen were suddenly deserting, no longer wanting any part of it.

A strange quiet now held the big living room, broken only by the sounds of racing hoofs coming from the direction of Kettle Drum Canyon. Old Botch peeped back inside. For a moment his eyes were big and round, then his smile came, and not with the bared fangs of a plack puma. It was a real smile now, like the smiles he usually wore, but it was much, much broader.

"Dog-gone," he whispered. "Dog-gone, now ain't that something the cat hid on the roof!"

Mrs. Carson was up, on the other side of the table. Rip was with her. With Rip was the pretty girl he had brought home with him. A man just had to blink a couple of times to see all three of them. They were in a huddle, arms around each other. The girl and Mary Carson were crying, hugging each other, and Rip was hugging them both at the same time. In the background, a quiet and pious-looking statue with his hands folded on his skinny belly, was little old Wang Lee, his head lowered, something like a smile in his yellow-cherub face.

Then hell looked the situation in the eye as far as Botch Smith was concerned. Big Sam Carson was banging up to the hitch-rack and throwing himself out of the saddle. Behind him dropped the sheriff of Glory Hole and his big deputy. Right behind the sheriff and the deputy dropped two big men with shields on their vests.

Dropping the empty shotgun, Botch Smith was suddenly on the move. In a couple of jumps he was out the back door and sidled against the wall, all ears as he stood there, every muscle stiffened. The talk and noise inside was all crazy for a minute, then Sam Carson's voice was booming, swelling over everything else.

"Why, you bet your life they want them! These are United States deputy marshals! The government jailed Farday and Buttz this morning in Wyoming. Now they'll take what you've got here, mainly two skunks who call themselves MacTaggerty and Midwell. The war's over, and this time, damn it, it'll stay that way!"

There was a lot more of it, but Botch Smith was not waiting to hear it. As long as everything was all right with the Carsons, then the world was rosy as far as Botch was concerned. On the way toward the barn he stopped and looked at the still figure of what had been Oliver MacTaggerty.

"Dog-gone now, dog-gone." He rubbed his chin, deeply thoughtful for a moment. "One of them men back there in the kitchen sho' did shoot you up bad, didn't they! You know I didn't have nothin' a-tall to do with it. Me, now, I was just a cryin' black ape, too scared to lift a hand to fight!"

THE END

THEM ORNERY WELCHES!

By FRANK R. PIERCE

It was a package deal. If Tim Mitchell wanted the girl, he'd have to take along— the worthless, steal-'em-blind Welch clan!

CHAPTER I.

RANGER'S MISSION.

DOLPH HARRINGTON, feature writer, leafed through the records at the Fir Ridge ranger station and read:

> Lightning storm set fire to timber at Beaver Lake. Crown fire. Extinguished same after three days fighting. Tim Mitchell, Ranger.

"My God, Tim," Harrington snorted in disgust. "Why so brief? There must be more to it than that."

"That about covers it," Tim Mitchell answered.

Harrington left, muttering, "No need of hanging around here. This fellow Mitchell doesn't know dangerous living when he lives it."

An hour later Tim scowled at the run-down Welch ranch and growled, "Love can get a man into more messes. Ord Welch and his six ornery sons hate the Forest Service and all its rangers. Now I ask why do I get steamed up over Anne Welch, when I know a hundred pretty girls already? And, as ranger, I'll meet scores more who spend their vacation at the Fir Ridge Inn."

It was a thought, no doubt, advanced by the cave man, and handed down through the centuries. But it was original with Tim Mitchell and he felt very profound. "I guess the answer is, when a man sees the right girl he courts her and makes the best of her family."

The week before, Tim's boss, Lonnie Lawton, who Tim was sure had forgotten more than he himself would ever know about forestry, had said, "I sort of hand picked and hand raised you to be a ranger, son. Can I talk plain? What I'm about to say could get your fist into my teeth."

"Talk plain," Tim said. "I'll understand. It will come from the heart, and that's good enough for me."

"The Welch tribe is no good, Tim. As a man, or as a ranger, all you'll get out of them is trouble," Lonnie Lawton had said in his quiet voice that was so effective—so convincing. "They hogged the open range for years. Then when we closed some of it and started a reforestation program, they got nasty. Ord Welch said trees that could be logged forty or fifty years from now would do him no good. I asked him what about his children and grandchildren. He said he figured they'd make out, forests or no forests.

"Now comes the touchy part, Tim. There's talk Anne isn't as nice as she'd like people to think," Lawton said. "It's claimed there's craft in those large, innocent blue eyes. But that's the way it is. I don't want you hurt."

"I know you don't," Tim had said, keeping his temper with difficulty. "But many a decent girl has gone through hell because some cuss who wanted to boast, or a woman out to do her dirt, told lies. And there are times a situation will develop and a girl will look bad, and can't help it."

"That's right," Lawton conceded, "and I hope that's the way it is with Anne. And I'll admit this, what you do off duty is none of my business as long as it doesn't reflect discredit on the Forestry Service."

Had anyone else spoken as plainly about Anne, Tim wouldn't have knocked his teeth in, he would have *kicked* them in. As a ranger, Tim grew cold with rage at the destruction on the

Welch wood lot. Trees had been felled with no regard for the small firs. They had been flattened by the big trunks. Wood wagons, drawn by big horses, had moved in a direct line, trampling and killing the seedling trees.

As a matter of fact, Tim grew increasingly indignant each time he called on Anne. Good water that should have been used for irrigation purposes was going to waste, while nearby the grass had been burned by the sun, or eaten down to the roots by hungry cattle. "And he wants to cross the forest reserve and trample down hundreds of newly planted seedlings to reach free range beyond." Tim growled. "I'll see Welch in hell first."

He rode to the nearest gate, opened it, passed through and carefully closed it behind him. He didn't want it said the cattle had moved to the reserve through a gate left open by a careless ranger. In the distance he saw three of the six Welch brothers riding, slouched in the saddle. He gritted his teeth. Imagine having them for brothers-in-law. Well, it hasn't reached that stage yet, and probably never will, but . . .

Ord Welch came out, looking as if he had hastily pulled on a clean shirt without taking time to wash up and comb his hair. He said, "Well! Well! Tim. Glad to see you. Mighty glad to see you!" Tim thought, "Nothing real about you. That's a stage smile and a stage heartiness in your laugh. Trouble is, you can't keep the craft out of your eyes."

Tim knew, too, Ord Welch was forgetting a forest ranger has an amazingly broad knowledge of human nature. All types come into forest areas—fishermen, hunters, those who stalk game with cameras and those who bring canvas and paints. There are the wealthy who come to resorts like Fir Ridge Lodge and do nothing but talk or play bridge; and there are the young people who climb mountain peaks in summer and ski in the winter.

They get lost; are careless with matches and start fires or are hurt. They all look to the ranger when in trouble. Their reactions to rules and regulations, to peril and to injury, are as varied as their types.

Now, with an unconscious narrowing of the eyes, Ord Welch said, "Put your horse up in the barn. Give him some grain. Ain't much, but when man or horse stops here he's what the city folks call a guest, and nothing's too good for him. I'd take your horse myself, but I ain't got my boots on."

"That's all right," Tim said, "And . . . thanks."

Ord Welch stepped inside and closed the door. "Annie! Annie! Damn it, where's the brat?"

"She's primpin'," her mother, a gaunt, tired woman said. "A girl can't catch a feller without primpin'."

Anne, who disliked the name Annie, came from a back room. "The courtin' ranger's here," Ord said. "Work on him. Love him up a little. Get him in a soft mood. Never saw the man yet who wouldn't lose some of his hardness after a little lovin'. If the law won't let him let us drive them cattle across the forest reserve, then mebbe he can look the other way."

She was a slim, blonde girl with normally warm blue eyes, but now they were filled with the cold, blue flame of defiance. Her fire and spirit seemed too big for her small body.

"I'll not use animal passion to help you with your scheming, Pa," she said. "I'll carry my share of the chores and I'll be a respectful, obedient daughter up to a point, but there's some things I won't do. And you can't make me."

"A woman's never too old to beat or whip," her brother Abner Welch growled. "Don't let her get out of hand, Pa." He was a younger copy of his father, and he sat in a rocking chair, his boots off, his feet resting on a bearskin rug.

"Touch Anne," her mother said, "and I'll throw boiling hot water all over you. She ain't going to take what I took from any man—not even her own Pa."

A hush fell on the room. Ord Welch stared in amazement. He had never lifted a hand against his wife, because she had never resisted his demands. It left him speechless. "Min," he said to

her, "damned if I don't think you'd do it."

"I'd do it," his wife said quietly. "Do it . . . and take care of your burns afterwards."

Anne Welch was sobered by her mother's unexpected attitude. She wondered if some strange, fierce strength slumbered in her own body, waiting only the opportunity to assert itself. For a few, brief seconds this quiet, usually beaten-down woman was a stranger to her.

While Ord Welch remained speechless, Ab stirred slowly, then said, "Maybe beating or whipping might not work. Suppose if you don't do what Pa says, I tell about you and Pete Varnell and the cabin at Rainbow Falls."

"He's fine, clean and he wouldn't believe your lies," Anne snapped.

"Funny thing about a man," Ab said. "He might not want to believe me, but such things sorta haunt him. He gets bothered. And if he's stuck on a girl, he's bothered to beat hell."

"So that's what you call the family loyalty you're always talking about," Anne said. Her voice was high and carried a wild, desperate note.

"That's about the size of it," Ab said. "If you won't be loyal and help the family get them cattle over closed land, then we've got to do something to bring you to your senses. Here he comes. Think about it."

Anne patted her hair into place, waited with beating heart until Tim Mitchell knocked, then went to the door. Outwardly composed she said, "Come in, Tim."

Tim came in and while Anne put away his hat, he greeted the rest of the family. "Just in time for supper, Tim," Min Welch said. "I'll flax around and finish up. No, Anne, you don't need to help." She disappeared into the kitchen. Ord and Ab Welch smoked and talked. Plenty of time, each reasoned, for Anne to work the magic of her sex on the ranger. When evening came, Ord would build a roaring log fire in the fireplace. Not that it was needed, but there was something of magic in a darkened room when the fire became glowing coals.

Now Ord said, "Keeping you busy, Tim?"

"Plenty," Tim answered. "Fir Ridge Inn and all of the cabins are full up with folks taking vacations. It's pretty crowded year-around, but particularly bad this time. We can make rules and regulations for visitors' protection, and enforce them as long as they are on government land. The trouble is, we have no control when they get off government land and get into trouble. They naturally expect rangers to come to their rescue when they get in trouble."

Ab Welch's crafty eyes betrayed his line of thought when he asked, "What kind of trouble?"

"A few years ago Chimney Peak was climbed for the first time," Tim answered. "Every so often someone lacking experience tackles it and gets into trouble. Things like that."

Min Welch's, "Supper's ready," broke up the conversation a few minutes later.

Ab Welch helped himself first, then passed dishes and platters down the line where his six sons, daughter, Tim and wife waited with empty plates. The boys wolfed down their meal in silence. Eating, drinking or laziness was a business with them, requiring few words.

After supper Anne helped her mother with the dishes, while Tim talked to the men. It was Ab Welch who again and again turned the conversation toward the ranger's problems. He managed this without once mentioning what was uppermost in his mind—driving cattle over the forest reserve.

With grim humor Tim thought, "It sounds as if Ab were trying to learn the ranger business the easy way, but he isn't."

When Anne came in, flushed from effort, but with a shy smile, Ord Welch got up and said, "Might as well have our card game in the kitchen and leave the parlor for the kids."

"There's a dance Saturday night at the Inn," Tim said. "Why don't you ride over, Anne? I'd call for you, but I'll be on duty, but I can ride home with you."

"I'd love it," she said. They sat on a sofa, reasonably close together. Tim

wanted to sit closer, but there was an aloofness in her manner that was a barrier. At eleven o'clock he said something about having a hard day ahead of him, and stood up.

"I'll see you Saturday night for sure," he said. "I'd like to talk to Abner." Tim liked the friendliness of a nickname as well as the next man, but the time when he would feel like calling Abner Welch "Ab" was far in the future, if ever.

Anne looked surprised, but hurried into the kitchen. Ab followed Tim out to the barn. He was as genial as his father. He was quite sure his sister had used her sex appeal successfully. "With her looks and figger," Ab thought gleefully, "no man could hold out long." He said. "Tim, what's on your mind?"

"Why do you have to cross government range?" Tim asked.

"Thin cattle don't bring much of a price," Ab answered.

"That's true," Tim agreed. "Three or four years from now they wouldn't do much damage. But now, they'd ruin hundreds of seedlings."

"As I figger it, it ain't your loss," Ab said, "just the gov'ments. So, what the hell?"

"It you don't fatten 'em, then what?"

"Why're you asking all these questions?" Ab asked. Didn't Annie talk this over with you?"

"Never mentioned it," Tim said. In the gloom, he saw Ab Welch grow tense and angry. "What happens if you don't fatten 'em up?"

"Can't get any price for 'em," Ab said. "The bank won't give us any more time on our mortgage. It'll foreclose."

"And the place will be sold to the highest bidder?"

"That's the size of it," Ab admitted. "We'd have to start all over again, with nothing. When mortgages are foreclosed, folks don't bid high. They get bargains."

Abruptly Tim Mitchell changed the subject. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven," Ab answered.

"That's my age," Tim said. "You're six feet two, weight around a hundred and ninety. That's about my size and weight. That makes us an even match."

"What're you talking about?" Ab asked suspiciously.

"Just this," Tim said. "You've got a loud voice. I couldn't help hearing what you told Anne. You wanted her to love me up, get mellow so I'd let you cross government land with your cattle. I'll tell you this. Loving me up would never get you want you want. If I were married to Anne I still wouldn't play favorites. I'm a forest ranger. I get my orders and I carry 'em out. She wouldn't play your dirty game, either. You're a louse to put her in a spot like that."

A throaty growl came from the surprised Ab. He clenched his big fists. "What about Anne, Pete Varnell and Rainbow Fall?" Tim asked.

"She was up there all night with him," Ab said. "It hurt like hell to hear that, didn't it . . . ranger? And it's going to keep on hurting."

"Maybe," Tim admitted. "I hope so, but you wouldn't understand that. The point is, a critter who'd talk like that about his sister instead of covering up, isn't man-sized in my book. Can you get it through your thick head I think you've the manners of a rat?"

CHAPTER II.

STAMPEDE.

AB caught up a pitchfork and charged. It was a blind charge, luckily. Tim sidestepped it, and before Ab could either swing the weapon, or drop it and put up his fists, Tim drove his fist into the man's ribs. Ab stumbled, drove the pitchfork into the ground and fell on his face. Tim grabbed the pitchfork and hurled it through an opening to the barn's upper floor. He was ready when Ab struggled to his feet. He smashed his fists through Ab's guard and drove punches deep into the man's stomach. He kept Ab off balance until a clean blow again dropped him.

"You're a dirty fighter," Ab gasped. "You're afraid to rassle where a man can gouge or use his knees. You stand off safe and punch. It ain't my kind of fighting."

HER HIGHNESS

JOAN THE WAD

313, JOAN'S COTTAGE,
LANIVET, BODMIN,
CORNWALL

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK?

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . ., who won £2,000 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Falmouth, says, 1951: Since receiving Joan the Wad . . . my husband's health has improved 100%.

Mr. Jones, of Cheltenham, says, 1951: ... Send me J. O' Lantern. Since receiving Joan the Wad have won two 1st prizes in Crosswords . . . *John Bull* and *Sunday Chronicle*.

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JOAN THE WAD

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HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP.

If you will send me your name and address, a 1/- stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish.

ASSPECULATOR. A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

All you have to do is to send 1/- stamp (saving stamps accepted) and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to

313, JOAN'S COTTAGE, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENG.

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"I'm busy for the next few days," Tim said. "I'll meet you on the boundary line Thursday night, eight o'clock, and we'll fight your way."

He saddled and rode home. Lonnie Lawton was working on reports in the ranger station, and he looked up, his expression serious, and asked, "Did you get away with a whole skin?"

"Yes," Tim answered. "Why'd you think there would be trouble?"

"Can't help but be when the Ord Welch code clashed with yours. A red-blooded man can only take about so much from that trash," Lawton said. I can't see how you can win, son. Again, it's none of my business, but. . . ."

"Go ahead," Tim urged. "You've always been a clear thinker."

"They're a lazy outfit," Lawton said. Suppose you marry Anne? You fix up a nice little home. Maybe you buy yourself timberland and plan to treat your trees as crop, cutting only the annual growth, planting little trees as you cut the big ones. You know, practicing what the Forest Service preaches. You get ahead, because you work hard, and pretty soon you're living high on the hog. You know what will happen. By that time Ord Welch will have lost his place, and the whole bunch will move in with you. They won't pitch in and help. You know that. If you throw 'em out, it'll make trouble between Anne and you. Have you thought of that?"

"A man kicks around the angles even though he tells himself the girl might not care for him, nor he for her after they've gone together awhile," Tim said thoughtfully. "He weighs the odds, sees the possible problems and makes plans to meet them. You know how it is when a ranger rides alone."

"I know," Lonnie Lawton said. "He's on duty, and he checks the timber and all that, but his own problems come up, and he goes into them, at the same time not neglecting what he's paid to do. How far have you gone into this Anne Welch and her family business?"

"I wouldn't tell anyone but you," Tim said. "But in imagination we're married, her family has looked on me as a meal ticket, and it turns out the ticket is only good for a family dinner once in awhile."

Lawton looked at the younger man a long time and grinned. "Damned if I don't think you might work this out . . . if you really fall in love with Anne. Any trouble tonight?"

"Ab and I had a little rukus," Tim said. "I tried to give him lesson number one in decency and family loyalty. He flunked and is taking the lesson over again."

"No marks on your face, no cuts on your knuckles," Lonnie said. "What kind of a fight was it?"

"I didn't want to hurt my hands, so I worked on his stomach," Tim explained. "I kept my own head away from his fists. Think I'll turn in."

Tuesday, having a day off, Tim drove to town, stopped at the bank and talked to the president, Steve Jenner, who was a typical ranch and timber country banker. He knew the problems of the rancher, logger and sawmill man. He would go as far as banking laws would allow to give a hard-working, sincere man a break. He looked like a cattle rancher who had been dragged from the saddle and seated at a desk, which is exactly what he was. "Tim, your fellows aren't going to let Welch drive over government range," he said. "You're right. If Welch had shown good faith and tried to make something of the ranch I'd be reluctant to foreclose. But his cattle are getting thinner, his equipment poorer and his buildings going to pot. Our security is getting less each month."

"That's right," Tim agreed. "And whoever buys the place will have trouble getting rid of the tribe."

"I know that," Jenner said. "Things happen—little, mean things—that will drive an honest man crazy. But, when the time comes, what can I tell prospective bidders?"

"There's a good spring that flows steadily year-around," Tim answered. "Even when the rest of the country is dry and the snow's gone off the mountains. Put in an earth dam. Then build a system of flumes that will cover every

acre of grass land. Clear out the weed trees that are slowing the growth of fir, hemlock and spruce. Plant the ridges with seedling trees, and unless the bidder has plenty of money, he should plan to work when extra help is needed on cattle and wheat ranches."

"What will flume lumber cost?" Jenner asked.

"It will cost the rent of a portable saw," Tim answered. "The Forest Service will permit the cutting of trees at low stumpage costs. The Service is always willing to help deserving ranchers."

"Will you sketch out a plan?"

"Sure," Tim answered.

On his way back to the ranger station, Tim rode along the barbed wire fence that separated government timber land from Welch's overgrazed range. He pulled up suddenly as he topped a ridge and caught sight of the country beyond. Welch cattle were bunched along the barbed wire. A dozen steers had thrust their heads under the wire and were reaching for grass beyond. There was a constant pressure on the staples, and a few had worked loose.

Tim opened the tool box he carried on the truck, got out hammer and staples and reinforced the wire. Welch was relying on the probability that the animals would slowly but surely break down the wire. Once it was broken the cattle would pour through, scatter and keep moving until they reached the reserve's closed range. If brought to book, Welch would whine and claim the government fence was in bad shape, and it wasn't his fault.

A sinister calm followed. Tim saw neither Ord nor his sons the remainder of the week. He was on duty Saturday until nine o'clock in the evening, then he changed his clothes and went to the Inn for the dance. Ann had arrived and was dancing. She gave him a quick, happy smile. He was waiting when the number ended.

She introduced him to her partner, a visitor at the Inn who surrendered her reluctantly, but cheerfully.

"Is the next mine, Anne?" Tim asked.

"Of course," she answered. "I refused to promise ahead because I didn't know when you would come."

They were about to dance when a tall, good-looking fellow with bold, reckless eyes and confident manner hurried up. "Pete Varnell," Tim thought. "Always something to spoil a man's evening."

Varnell said, "Hello, Ranger. Remember me? I was all set to climb up the Chimney when you talked me out of it. Good thing you did. Lightning storm came up and there was lightning all over the place." He turned to Anne. "Are you booked solid?"

"Not quite," she answered. Tim felt her fingers, resting on his arm, grow tense. He noticed a couple of old biddies who made a practice of watching the dancers, then commenting knowingly, were lifting their eyebrows. "You're keeping track, Tim, what dance is open."

"Third from now, Varnell," Tim said. "I couldn't get here early. I'm trying to catch up."

"Fine! Fine! Thanks, Ranger," Varnell said. "Some day when you aren't looking, I'm going to tackle that mountain."

"Better get some experience first," Tim advised. "I've done some climbing, and expect to do more, but that one isn't in my book."

Anne was stiff in his arms. He kept the conversation cheerful but failed to break through. She had retreated to her shell and the shell was hard. But he noticed she was gay enough later on when she danced with Pete Varnell.

She relaxed some during intermission when everyone stopped for coffee, sandwiches and cake. It was two o'clock when the dance ended. Tim brought their horses around, and they rode side by side through the tree tunnel that in daytime was a mountain road bordered by firs. The moonlight trickled through the interlaced branches. It was a night made for lovers, but Anne said little until they arrived at her gate.

"Tim," she said gently, "I'm a coward. I'm beginning to care for you and if we go on seeing each other, well, I'm not up to it. The way things are shaping up

they'll get worse before they could possibly get better . . . if ever."

He guessed she knew her family's plans and he said, "Maybe you've thought this through, Anne. You've more information than I have. Suppose we take a rain check until the storm's over?"

"Yes," she answered, "a rain check."

"One more thing," he said, "you aren't a coward."

He jogged back to the Inn in a gloomy mood. There was a light in the kitchen and he decided to panhandle a cup of coffee. The cook grinned. You pulled out too soon, Tim," he said. "All kinds of excitement. Just after you left the dance Pete Varnell goes around behind them two old biddies who're always peddling dirt about young girls, and knocks their heads together. Oh, he was gentle about it! But about now they've got splitting headaches. You heard, of course, the Rainbow Falls talk. Pete learned 'em a lesson, Maybe other folks will keep their yaps shut."

Tim laughed and realized the night, or what was left of it, was really beautiful. "Pete Varnell is quite a lad," he said.

"He's hell on the girls, but he shoots square," the cook said. I think he's kinda stuck on Anne Welch, but marry Anne and you'd be married to her family. No man in his right mind would get into that mess." Tim made no comment. "You know something," the cook concluded, "My hunch is Anne won't let a nice guy marry into the family."

Tim turned in. He needed sleep, but he wasn't sleepy. His life as a ranger was running smoothly enough, but his personal problems were piling up. "I'll take it easy tomorrow and Monday," he mused. "Because Tuesday night I fight Ab Welch—his way."

He was thinking of Ab Welch Monday afternoon when the telephone rang. He answered. "Tim Mitchell speaking. Why? Billy DeFoe? I'm afraid I can't place you. Go ahead, I'm listening."

After a while he hung up, his face grim. "Trouble?" Lonnie Lawton inquired.

"Could be," Tim answered. "Ab Welch climbed Chimney Peak. He's stuck on a ledge and can't get down." Tim lit a cigarette and paced the ranger station office. I'm getting the picture. I mentioned, when I was calling on Anne, that people climbed the peak, or tried to, got into trouble and looked to the rangers for help. A crafty gleam came into Ab's eyes. The hell with Ab! It's a trick. Let's see what they're doing with the cattle."

"This will be a saddle job if Welch is up to something," Lawton said. "Think I'll get in on this. In my younger days I was a humdinger in the saddle."

"No hurry," Tim said. "If it's a trick, they'll wait until we're on the way to Chimney Peak."

Lawton picked up the telephone and quietly ordered rangers to report to headquarters. "Pick up three cow ponies, put 'em in trailers and bring 'em here," he directed one ranger.

While the rangers were gathering, Tim drove to the lookout station. The man on duty had the station's most powerful glass fixed on Chimney Peak. There was no mistaking Ab Welch. He was sprawled on a ledge and it looked as if he were smoking. A half dozen people in the meadow at the peak's base were watching him. "How the hell did he get on there, Tim?" the lookout asked.

"That's one question," Tim said. "The real question is—how the hell will we get him off?"

When he returned to the ranger station Pete Varnell was waiting. "If you need a hand getting the damned fool down, I'll help," he offered.

"I may take you up on that," Tim said.

"Just between us," Pete said, "how tough are the six Welch boys? Everyone is afraid of them."

"Their toughness hasn't been tested by any specific incident that I can recall," Tim said. "It's commonly said, 'They come no tougher than Ord Welch and his six boys.' No one ever took them on. No one wanted to."

"That's what I've heard," Pete said. "Even the bank would like to get rid of that mortgage, but can't."

"See you later," Tim said. He saw no point in relating his fight with Ab, but he wondered how Ab expected to engage in a rough and tumble fight with him tomorrow when today he was marooned on a ledge. "The man must follow a tight schedule," he thought with grim humor. "Well, the boys are ready to meet the Welch cattle, if that's what's in the wind."

Lonnie Lawton said, "Sometimes I delegate authority, Tim. This is your party . . . in a way. Run it to suit yourself."

Tim resorted to diversion. He apparently headed a group to rescue Ab, then doubled back over a game trail and emerged within a hundred yards of barbed wire. The Welch cattle no longer grazed near the fence. "Funny, Lonnie," he said, "Maybe Ab's mountain climbing wasn't a Welch trick."

"If I know the Welches, and I think I do," Lawton said, "they're too lazy to climb mountains unless there was a jug of whiskey at the top. And even then the mountain must be a low one."

"Listen," Tim said.

A low rumble came from a nearby draw, then the Welch cattle emerged on the dead run. It looked as if Ord and his five sons were trying to turn the cattle away from the fence, but Lawton and Tim Mitchell knew otherwise. An experienced eye could detect direction and purpose in every move.

The leaders hit the barbed wire before they could stop. The strands snapped in several places and they were through. It was a mad flight with the excited animals dodging big trees, tramping down brush and shrubs, and pounding through thickets as if they didn't exist.

Small fur-bearers were running in every direction to escape. A skunk stood his ground and died in his tracks. Bucks, does and fawns sped toward distant ranges, and a black bear, her small cub following, broke into a clearing. She sent the cub up a tree with a quick cuff, stood her ground, and strangely enough the animals passed on each side of her.

CHAPTER III.

Man On the Shelf.

On the dead run, Tim led the rangers to open ground above the long, sunny slope that was planted with seedling firs. As the first two steers burst into the open, he held his gunfire. It might cost a few seedlings, but the cattle weren't bunched. Unless they were bunched the rangers were licked.

He looked rather grim as a dozen young trees were not only trampled, but tossed into the air by flying hooves. "Okay," he yelled. He fired, dumped the lead steer, then got the second with the next shot. Now the rangers turned the next animals slightly. Slowly but surely the cattle were forced to give ground until the top row of seedlings was safe.

"Keep 'em moving," yelled Tim. Gradually the animals were turned toward a recently cleared ridge awaiting planting. They were breathing hard now and losing some of their fright. They hit barbed wire again and were on Welch range.

Ord Welch and his sons rode up. Inwardly, Tim knew, Ord was burning with resentment. Outwardly, he was contrite, almost humble. "I'm right sorry, Ranger, but they spooked," he said to Lonnie Lawton. "We figgered to move 'em to new range, and first thing we knowed they'd got plumb out of hand."

"That story might have gone over, Ord," Tim said, "but for the fact Ab climbed a mountain to draw us away from here."

"You mean to tell me Ab went mountain climbin'?" Ord's astonishment was almost convincing. He turned to his sons. "So *that's* where he went."

"I'll be darned," one of them said.

Tim began laughing and the Welches scowled. "What's so funny?" Ord demanded.

"Lazy Ab, climbing a mountain to draw the rangers away, and the rangers not falling for the trick," Tim said. "He can probably see the cattle bunched on Welch range about now. His face must be red and he's likely kicking himself."

The Welches sat on their horses, scowling, and Tim broke the silence. "You'd better butcher a couple of steers we had to kill and send the meat home. After that, you can help us replant the seedlings. You'll be billed for those we have to replace. And the sooner you get on the job, the more you'll save."

The boys looked at Ord, and he nodded. Grimly they followed the rangers. "You'll find tools in the truck," said Tim. "We had it follow us down here just in case."

While two of the boys butchered the beef, Tim with no little satisfaction taught them how to plant trees. He made them fill in spots where hooves had gouged out the sod. It was almost dusk when Ord said, "Guess that's all."

"Not quite," Tim said. "One steer took out a bridge railing over Fern Creek. You'll have to replace that."

"What about tomorrow?" Ord asked. "My back's killing me."

"Tomorrow, then," Tim said. "If you don't show up, we'll do the job and bill you for it." And have one hell of a time trying to collect, he thought to himself.

As the rangers rode slowly home, Lonnie Lawton chuckled. I owe Ord Welch a vote of thanks. Best fun I've had in a long time. I got to thinking I wasn't the man I used to be. Now, I think I'm doggone near par. And I was thinking of retiring."

An indignant Inn visitor greeted Tim with resentful eyes. "I'm Billy DeFoe," he said. "I'm the one who called you about Ab Welch. He's still up there and the rangers have done nothing about it. I'll write to my congressman about this. Fooling around with cattle when a human life was in danger. And just wait until all the people who are watching him come back. You'll hear from them, too. Who is your superior officer?"

"I'm your man," Lonnie Lawton said. It was an old story with him—visitors growing highly indignant because they knew nothing of the background and formed conclusions on surface evidence. Such people had to be handled with tact and understanding. "This fellow, Mr. DeFoe, tried to pull a whizzer on the forest rangers." He marked a small map. "Go down there tomorrow, and you'll see where the Welches attempted to drive cattle over newly planted trees."

Lawton gave DeFoe something of the background. "Well, that's different," DeFoe said. "Of all the dirty tricks. As a citizen and taxpayer I approve of what you've done, and I'll tell others. It would serve Welch damned well right if you left him up there."

He hurried off to spread the tidings and Tim said, "The rangers have made another loyal friend, Lonnie, but it won't get that damned fool down from the mountain."

Lonnie looked beyond his ranger and his eyes widened. "This is strictly your business, Tim," he said, reaching for his hat. "Anne Welch just jumped from her horse without waiting for the critter to stop. S'long. Whatever you do is right with me."

Anne was breathless when she hurried into the ranger's office. "It's our fault, Tim," she said, "but something terrible has happened."

"Begin at the beginning," he suggested.

"Must I?" she asked.

"I'd like to be sure my conclusions are right," he said. The Welches tried to pull a fast one on the rangers?"

"The Welches tried just that," she admitted, "but Ma and I knew nothing of it until five of the boys saddled up and rode toward the cattle. Ma asked, 'Where's Ab?' and Pa answered, 'Mountain climbin', Ma. Wanted some fresh air, seems like. Wanted to see more of the country than shows from the foothills.' Well, Ab pretended to be in trouble. When it didn't work and he tried to get down, he really *was* in trouble."

"And instead of waiting for the rangers to come he tried to get out of trouble and got into a worse mess?" Tim suggested.

She looked wretched, but she nodded. "That's why I'm here."

"Pretty late to do anything tonight," Tim said, checking on the sun, "but I'll have a look. Come along." He hurried her to the lookout station. The lookout had his glass on Chimney Peak and was tense.

"Let's see," Tim said.

"Help yourself, Tim," the ranger said, "I can't look. Oh, I'm sorry, Anne, I didn't see you."

Tim peered intently through the glass, then asked, "What's happened?"

"When you were here earlier," the lookout said, "he was wandering back and forth on that right hand ledge. He was looking up, then looking down. People were gathering at the base of the peak and watching. He stayed there for two or three hours."

"That was about the time he realized his trick hadn't worked and he was figuring a way to get himself down," Tim said. "Then what?"

"He jumped to a lower ledge, realized there was no way down and he couldn't get back to where he was without wings," the lookout continued. "He figured he could climb an almost sheer wall, and maybe get to a ledge above. He got his hand on the ledge, but when it came to pulling himself up, with his feet dangling in thin air, he couldn't take it.

"He went back down to the ledge, looked over and saw a ledge lower down," the lookout said. "He fastened a rope to an outcropping, knotted it and went down. But the ledge was five feet away, so what to do?"

As he watched Ab, Tim grew tense. The man was working his body back and forth as a child builds up the arc of a swing. The rope twisted and sometimes toes clawed at the ledge, sometimes his heels. Tim sensed his trouble. The rope was not quite long enough, and Ab was tiring. He lacked the strength to pull himself back up, hand over hand. Evidently he had tried it, but he lacked the skill to cling to the rope with one hand and legs while his free hand clutched the rope above the edge of the ledge and pull his body up.

Tim knew what Ab had in mind—to swing toward the ledge, let go of the rope and claw at the rock. Mean, worthless, domineering he may be, Tim thought, but he's a human being fighting for his life. And the sight of the struggle puts my nerves on edge. There he goes! Ab landed on all fours, clawed and slowly slipped toward the edge of the lower edge. Then his fingers held and he crawled to safety. He did not move, but lay there, and Tim knew he was panting and probably badly shaken. What a sweet problem he's posed for the rangers, Tim thought.

"Is . . . he safe?" Anne asked. "You held your breath, Tim, so long. And the muscles stood out in your neck. I knew you were . . . well . . . *helping* him."

"He's safe for tonight," Tim said.

"Tonight? But the temperature drops," she protested, "and . . . he will die." She caught her breath sharply. "But of course it wouldn't be safe to attempt a night rescue."

Stones will be dislodged," Tim said. "And it's hard enough to dodge them in the daylight. Go home, tell your brothers to get a good night's rest. We're going to need plenty of manpower tomorrow." He added, "The ranger, here, will take you back to the Inn. I want to study that Chimney."

He watched the spectators in the mountain meadow head hurriedly toward the Inn as purple shadows began filling the draws and canyons. The sunlight withdrew from the meadow and darkness drove it up the Chimney with its lofty ledges and sheer, hundred-foot drops from ledge to ledge. Not even the mountain sheep and goats frequented the Chimney. Briefly, the sunlight lingered on Ab Welch's sprawled figure, then it was gone, Darkness wrapped him like a cold blanket. He hadn't moved.

Tim drove back to the ranger station. It buzzed with excitement as visitors began arriving from the Chimney area and discussed the situation. Tim's chief interest at the moment was the morrow's weather. He telephoned in and shook his head over the answer—an electrical storm was in the making.

Lightning liked to prove it did strike twice in the same place and used the Chimney as a proving ground. Lightning could start forest fires and the situation, unless followed by rain, could be bad.

"Hit the hay early," Lonnie ordered when Tim next saw him. "You've got to be in shape tomorrow. We have plenty of volunteers to help, but the trouble is

the best intentioned man is a burden unless he has mountain savvy."

When Tim hurried over to the Inn before dawn the next morning Pete Varnell was at a table putting away ham, eggs, fried potatoes and flapjacks. "Fortifying myself, in case you need me, Tim," he said. "You'll know whether I'll fit in as soon as the climbing starts."

The way Pete said it convinced Tim that this rugged fellow the girls found so attractive had mountain savvy. "I think you'll do, Pete," Tim said. "Have you seen anything of the Welches this morning?"

"The family, except the mother, went to the base of the Chimney last night," Pete answered. "They packed in and made camp. What's your plan?"

"I studied the Chimney last night until it was dark," Tim answered. "I've got to climb the north side of the damned thing, then work my way along, drop down the west side, and somehow, reach Ab. If he's alive. I'll give first aid, splint broken bones and lower him down to the rock-littered mess called the Switchback. We'll need four men to pack him out of there. If he's dead. . . ."

"It'll be easier," Pete Varnell finished.

Volunteers began appearing and when Tim was ready to start men were on hand in sufficient numbers to carry the needed equipment including a stretcher of the wire basket type.

The Welches were huddled around a campfire, eating the breakfast Anne had prepared, silently gulping coffee and waiting for the sunlight to reveal Ab's sprawled body. The men nodded by way of greeting and Anne looked uncertainly at Tim and asked, "Coffee?"

"Thanks," Tim said. He noticed Anne's and Pete's eyes met and held briefly. She poured two cups.

"Some tin cow?" Pete asked, handing Tim a can of tinned milk.

"Take it straight and black this morning," Tim answered.

The sunlight touched the peak, and, from somewhere, an eagle came and began circling. They could see its white head turning in the morning light. Satisfied at what it saw, the eagle settled on a nearby outcropping and looked at Ab's ledge below. Then the sunlight spilled down Chimney Peak and they saw him. "Looks like he shifted during the night, but I can't be sure," Tim said in a low tone to Pete.

"Yeah, looks that way," Pete said. "I don't like that eagle. They go for the eyes. I've seen salmon in Alaskan rivers. . . ."

"So have I," Tim answered in a grim, low tone. "Let's get going." He turned to the Welch brothers. "Your job is to work your way up the Switchback, and be ready in case you're needed. Rope yourselves together, in case one slips. Here's how it's done."

He showed them how to handle the rope, made them repeat it several times, then said, "Take your time. It may be hours before I reach Ab."

Anne broke in with a sharp cry, "Tim . . . the eagle."

The eagle had launched itself from the outcropping, and with hardly a flap of wings had spanned the distance and landed near Ab. Every face was upturned and a hush settled on the score of people gathered at Chimney Peak's base.

Tim had brought his thirty-thirty rifle along on the remote chance it might be needed for signaling. Now he picked up the rifle, removed the oiled rag thrust into the muzzle and walked over to a rock. He levered a cartridge into the chamber. The eagle was perched on Ab's boots. Its head jerked as it began pecking.

Tim knew what everyone was thinking. He could miss the eagle and hit Ab if he failed to draw a fine bead on the bird. There was an alternative—to hit the rock immediately above the ledge and hope to frighten the bird away. But there would be the chance of a glancing bullet hitting Ab.

Tim got down on his knees, sighted, and from this angle the bullet should just clear the rim of the ledge and find its mark without too much danger to the man. If it fell short, it would shatter under the ledge and cause no trouble.

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built up, he leaned the rifle against the rock, walked several steps, dropped to his knees, aimed, held his breath and slowly squeezed the trigger. Feathers exploded from the eagle, it flopped off the edge and bounced off of lower ledges to the Switchback where it lodged among broken rocks.

A cheer broke from the group, and Anne's quiet sobbing released her nervous tension. "An amazing shot, Tim," Pete Varnell admitted.

"I was in a war once," Tim answered, smiling faintly. "Shall we climb?"

"Lead off," Pete answered, "You're the boss."

CHAPTER IV.

Chimney Rock.

Burdened with ropes, axe and pitons to drive into rock cracks, Tim led the way slowly to the chimney part of Chimney Peak. He stopped here and said, "Let's catch our breath, Pete."

Pete nodded. After a while he said, "Got something on my mind, Tim. How is it with Anne and you?"

Tim's voice was edged with resentment, but he said, reasonably enough, "Too many complications. The course of true love is supposed to be rugged, but . . . well . . . you know how it's gone."

"Yeah. I'll stop beating around the bush," Pete said. "You know the gossip. Perhaps I'm no gentleman, but I knocked a couple of old biddies' heads together. You're a ranger. Couples can be caught out in bad weather. They do the sensible thing, and find shelter. That's the way it was with Anne and me at Rainbow Falls. The only evil was in the minds of evil people. I'm no angel, but I played it decent with Anne."

"Which is what I concluded long ago," Tim said. "But it's nice to be told."

"It was a lightning storm," Pete said, and we were drenched before we reached the cabin. By the time we dried out, it was dark and you know the trail."

"Yeah. I came down at night . . . once." Tim said. "And we're due for one today. Relay some of this gear up, and I'll go back down. This is bad country for lightning. There are no trees to stand under, which is all to the good, but there are other dangers."

Tim descended and everyone, sensing something amiss, met him. "Weather bureau predicts lightning storm," he said. "The safe thing is to go back to the Inn. The storm may not develop, but if it does it'll come sudden. Don't stand up straight when the lightning comes. Bend over. Scatter. We don't want groups hit. Stay out of caves. . . ."

"What?" Ord Welch shouted. "It can't get you in a cave."

"But ground electricity can burn you plenty," Tim warned. I've no authority to order you back to the Inn. This isn't within the forest reserve. I can only advise you, and hope for the best."

He resumed the climb, knowing curiosity and the possibility of drama in the attempted rescue would keep people there. "Hell," he thought, "I'd stay myself if I were a spectator."

"You're in good shape," Pete said as Tim joined him. Pete had relayed their gear to the actual chimney. Except for its rough interior, it was not unlike a large home, or factory chimney with a side ripped out.

Tim squeezed through, put his back against the rock, found outcroppings that would support his weight, then squirmed upward. Pushing his hands hard against the wall, to force his back against the opposite side, he cautiously groped with his toes for another hold. Literally he was seeking toe holds. It was a slow business. Oddly enough, coming down would be easy—rigging a rope with one end fastened to his body and the other free. Paying out the rope, through an improvised pulley, he could regulate his descent.

He pushed through the top of the three-hundred-foot chimney and heard the applause from below. He hauled up the needed gear on a line, then waited for Pete to join him. Looking down, he saw the five Welch brothers slowly crawling up the Switchback. To the north he saw the first stab of lightning. Two

hundred feet below, a rock mass called the Ramp led to the ledges over which an experienced man, with luck, might make his way to a point overlooking Ab Welch.

"Breathing hard, Pete Varnell joined Tim, "Mister, I'm plain scared," he panted.

"A healthy state to be in. It's the man who doesn't appreciate the danger who falls," Tim said. "Storm's headed this way. We've got to get the hell off the chimney. See the broken-up rocks on the Ramp? Lightning knocked some of that stuff off the Chimney."

"What am I doing up here, anyway?" asked Pete.

"Damned if I know," Tim replied. "Democracy at work, maybe. Guy gets into trouble, and people rush to his aid." He rigged the rope and went down to the ramp. Pete lowered the equipment and followed.

"Call *this* a ramp?" Pete muttered. "It's almost straight up and down!" They slid, clawed, clutched their way down, taking some chances, but keeping their heads. Lightning stabbed through the air to the north. Nearer now, An imaginative man might have likened the almost flat mass of rock, some three hundred feet in length and fifty feet in width as the *roof* adjoining the chimney.

Tim went to the edge of the roof and looked down. A ledge hid Ab from view and Pete looked at the ranger and shook his head. "As the Indian said, *'How?'* "

"Along that wall, then down," Tim answered. "I've done things like that in practice, but if I slipped I'd only drop a few feet. Hope it doesn't rain. Wet rock makes it worse. Let's separate. Here comes the lightning."

The crash was deafening and it struck the Chimney and the air was blue, with forked flame stabbing at nearby objects. Tim and Pete crouched and waited. Below they could see the Inn visitors scattering—following the ranger's advice. The Welch brothers now well up the Switchback, retreated hastily and vanished into a cave. Nothing will happen, and that will make a sucker out of me, Tim thought. Nothing Tim had experienced in war equaled that crash of thunder. Lightning was everywhere.

With a cry, Pete went down. He got up. "I feel kind of funny, but I'm okay," he said.

"It struck a snag in the timber, too," Tim said, "and started a blaze." His emotions were mixed. Rain which would make his job even more dangerous, would put out the fire. A series of crashes that tumbled loose rocks from the Chimney silenced them.

"Look!" Pete yelled. "The Welches are coming out of the cave. There *is* a Santa Claus. Poetic justice, Tim."

"Hold on. Five went in and three came out!" Tim answered. "Two are going back in again."

A minute passed, then the pair emerged, carrying a limp figure. The two went back and brought out the fifth brother. "They got a jolt of ground lightning," Tim said. "I hope those two aren't badly burned or paralyzed."

"It wouldn't take much of a jolt to send any of them to a wheel chair for life," Pete said, "The hell with them. Shall we try to beat the rain?"

"Yeah," Tim answered. He slipped down and worked his way to a wall. He roped himself to Pete, showed him where and how to brace his feet, then began working along the wall. He stopped, drove a piton into the wall, rove a line through, then went on. He stopped on a shelf three feet wide and seven in length. "Okay, Pete, come on. If you slip, the rope running through the piton will hold you. Hang onto the rope around your body and I'll pull you to the ledge."

The first few drops came. Wisely, Pete moved slowly, deliberately. He joined Tim without incident, while those below watched tensely. A few took motion and still pictures. They went down to the next ledge on ropes, then Tim said, "He's under this one. I'll lower you down."

Pete Varnell disappeared. After a while Tim's rope grew slack and Pete called up, "He's alive. Nerves badly shocked, though. Talks in whispers and is badly confused. Can't find any broken bones, though he may have a slight skull fracture. Hell of a head bruise."

"I'm coming down with ropes," Tim said. With coils across his shoulders, Tim went over the ledge, hung briefly in midair, then Pete drew him to the ledge. "A few eagle feathers and Ab," he said. "And here comes the rain."

It came in torrents, and water cascaded from the higher levels and beat against them. Gusts of wind whipped the spray through the air. They kept Ab dry with their own clothing and watched a party crawling along the Switchback to a point below. "Not a Welch in the bunch," Pete said. "I guess they're busy packing out the two shocked brothers."

The party carried the wire basket and brought it within a hundred yards of the cliff. Tim roped Ab and with Pete's aid got him clear of the ledge without injury. They paid out the rope until it grew slack and a voice yelled, "We got him!"

"You're next, Pete," Tim said.

"What about you?"

"I'll come down last."

"What about the rope?"

Tim grinned. "I'll cut it, then come down it!"

"What?" Pete yelled.

"Mountain climber's trick," Tim explained. "You make a series of knots near the point where the rope is secured. Then you cut the part between the knots. As long as you keep pressure on the rope the knots will stay put. When you reach bottom you shake the rope, the knot loosens and down it comes. You save most of your rope that way."

"*You* do, not me," Pete said.

"Watch your fingers," Tim warned as he eased Pete over the ledge. The line, hard against rock, served as a brake. Pete's voice carried a note of relief when he reached the bottom. All that remained was the Switchback, which was easy after what he had been through.

Tim rigged the line and went over, the rope between his crotch and over his shoulder regulated his descent. Pete shook hands warmly. "From now on I can take my mountain climbing, or leave it alone," he said. He looked at the Chimney, now cutting the low-hanging clouds to shreds, "Still . . . there's something about reaching the summit of the damned things and looking down. It feeds the old ego, I guess."

"Hunt cover," Tim said, and shook the rope. It tumbled down like a great snake. They coiled it, then taking things easy, made their way to the meadow. There were handshakes and exploding bulbs. Volunteers carried their gear for the weary men back to the Inn.

"Be seeing you," Pete said, "I'm too tired to eat. I'm hitting the sack. Hell . . . morning seems a long time ago."

Tim went into the office and opened a book. He scrawled the date near the top of the page. Then wrote:

Rescued Abner Welch on Chimney Peak ledge. Peter Varnell accompanied me. Subject in fair condition. Tim Mitchell.

Tim scratched his head. "Feature Writer Dolph Harrington would claim that isn't enough. But what more is there to tell?"

Several days later Tim and Lonnie Lawton were called away for a general conference of foresters. He telephoned and learned that Ab Welch had fully recovered. Two of his brothers, temporarily paralyzed about the legs were about relating their experience, which grew better with each telling.

On the way back to his station, Tim dropped in at the bank. "I hear you're foreclosing on the Welch ranch. Anyone interested?"

"Not an inquiry," the banker answered.

"I'll buy the mortgage," Tim said quietly. "And I'll tell you something else. I'll foreclose if I have to."

"You're a nice young man," the banker said, "and . . . well it's none of my business. You're going into this with your eyes open. Or . . . are you? Is it love?"

"Business," Tim said.

When he departed an hour later, he held the Welch mortgage which was in default and could be foreclosed at his option. It was evening when he rode up to the Welch ranch. He tied his horse to a tree, walked up the front steps and knocked. Ord Welch admitted him.

"I'm here on business." Tim said, without smiling. "It concerns the men of

the family. The women can listen if they want to."

Anne's expressive face betrayed her confused thoughts—surprise, hurt, dread and finally she was puzzled. "All seven Welch males are here," Tim said. "I've bought the mortgage. I'm going to foreclose unless there are changes here. The rangers preach forest conservation, and you're going to practise it!"

His eyes were hard as he looked from man to man. "You fellows have been throwing your weight around for years. Had people afraid of you. Well, you aren't tough. Ask anyone of those who saw you hightail it out of the cave and the hell away from the mountain when lightning hit. Sure, you took your brothers with you. But you two who were in good shape didn't go back for Ab. And Ab, you could have been a little braver.

"Here's my proposition—take it or leave it," Tim continued, "You're getting the lead out of your shoes and you're making improvements under my direction. We're going to make a model out of this ranch. It'll take a few years and a lot of hard work. I'll put up the money, and I'll borrow as needed.

"When the job's finished, you'll have a chance to get full possession by paying me what I've invested, plus interest. I'm not asking you to think it over. I'm telling you either to start making something of the place and of yourselves, or pack and get out. That's all." He turned to Anne. "I'd like to talk with you."

She followed him outside to his horse. He didn't mount, but in the gloom she saw his face soften, the hardness leave his body and a gentleness that was moving come. "Angry with me?" he asked.

"It was hard to take," she said, "but it was long overdue. They'll go along with you. They know you mean it."

"Then I've failed," he said. "I want them to grab an opportunity, not obey commands. But I had to make them understand they couldn't slip back into their old ways."

"They're ashamed." she answered. "We were all ashamed up there on the mountain. They knew it all. They went into the cave and . . . you know the rest."

"Now about us," he said, "for years it will be a ranger's life. Maybe a tree farm development on a small scale, and then on a larger scale as your brothers return what I advance."

"I'd love it, Tim," she said softly. "And I was afraid, so afraid you wouldn't want to come . . . ever." She almost cried. "You see . . . my brothers. . . ."

"That's past," he said. "And what's ahead, I like." He kissed her gently. "See you tomorrow night and we'll make plans."

"Pa would like to build a roaring fire for us two," she said. "And the urge comes from his heart."

"I'm sure it does," Tim answered. "Tell him to go ahead."

He rode hard on the way back to the station. Lonnie Lawton's shrewd old eyes read the story, but he wanted to hear it. "I'm a good listener, Tim," he said.

Tim told it all, and in detail. "So you buy the mortgage and give 'em a chance," Lonnie said. "Hell, boy, why didn't you invest that money in a tree farm of your own?"

"What?" Tim yelled. "And have them move in on me. This way's better. Even if they lose the place, which I'm sure they won't, the tribe couldn't very well move in on us. Maybe that's why ranger's cabins were designed for a ranger, his wife and his kids."

"Could be," the old ranger answered smiling. "Could be."

  

GUNSIGHT BRIDGE

By GEORGE H. ROULSTON

A TRAIL-TOWN newspaper receives its news in many ways. One is through the front door, across the counter; another, is through the back door, late at night, spoken in the dim light behind the presses.

Through the front door came a copy of the *Clarion,* the rival weekly newspaper across the street, with a brief editorial about how much benefit Macon would receive from a bridge across the Kaw River. No one could deny this, but as my father read Canby's article, I noticed that his lips moved silently to form Tod Beecher's name. Even then I was dimly aware that some day the many differences between Tod Beecher, mayor of Macon, and my father would be settled in an old, old way, man to man, leaving somebody dead.

Late that night, out of a whipping rain, Jim Cameron slipped through the back door to tell my father the rest of the story. As I remember, Jim Cameron was then a young man, about thirty, and he held some office in city hall under Beecher. But he was like my father in that he believed that men in public office should be honest.

There was a wooden partition between the front of the office, where I was, and the presses, and all I could hear was Cameron's low, excited murmur and his frequent mention of Tod Beecher and a man named Carson.

Finally, I heard my father exclaim, "Those scalawags! They've got to be stopped."

Seconds after the back door shut gently I heard the sounds of rain-muffled shots and a man's final scream. I raced through the shop and into the alley and in the faded triangle of yellow light that showed through the door, I saw Jim Cameron lying face down in the mud. My father was standing over him, pistol in hand, aiming and squeezing off shots at the dark blot of a man who was running up the alley and who found safety in the darkness.

"Get inside, quick!" my father cried and shoved me roughly in and shut the door. I watched him as he stood braced against it, Cameron's pistol in his hand.

We heard only the sounds of the heavy rain as it plunged off the roof and tormented tiny canyons across the alley. From Elm Street, uptown, came the faint sounds of a wild trail town.

Slowly my father uncoiled from his tension, walked over to his desk, and put Cameron's pistol in a drawer. It was the first I had ever seen him with a gun.

He was a short man, my father, and at twelve I was almost as tall as he. But his breadth of shoulder and solid hips carried an impression of strength and power. His face was rounded, somewhat handsome. Faded brown hair was set above a high forehead, and his eyes, gray as new steel, were constantly roving and recording every detail. The most striking thing about him was his hands with their long tapering fingers that moved in quick gestures.

He turned from the desk and looked at me and I knew he was studying each word carefully before he spoke, a habit he had when he was excited. Sometimes I think it was because he was thinking in French and speaking in English.

"You must tell no one about this. Understand? No one," he said gravely.

"Yes, sir," I answered and looked questioningly at him, hoping he would explain what had happened. But he only rolled his shoulders and stood there, his face set in a serious expression.

Now, years later, I understand why. It was part of the deadly game he was forced to play with Tod Beecher, a game in which he failed to understand all the rules.

Two men, both iron willed and fiercely proud, had met, and because their ways of living and their ideals were different they hated each other, yet were forced to compose that hatred and hide it from Macon.

It was Macon, the town itself, that made them hate each other. Macon, then, was a raw, beginning city with streets of mud and hastily erected buildings congested beside the railroad loading pens.

It was the end of the Texas trail, the place where the longhorns met the stock cars and the Texas cowboys met the vices of civilization, often in stark violence.

Somehow my father failed to understand this—that in Macon, law and order was carried on each man's hip and that group law was shown in terms of the cottonwood limbs beside the river. But Tod Beecher understood. He was a product of all this—a cowboy turned saloon keeper and finally mayor—and ruled Macon accordingly.

My father was French, of Paris when it was filled with radicals. He was young then and like all crusaders, determined to reform the world. In his cheap-paper journal, he bitterly exposed the corruption in the government until, for his troubles, he was invited to marry the knife—la guillotine! Only for a high price was my mother able to arrange his escape to England, thence to America.

Now he went to the window and stared out at the street, quiet in this part of the town. His shoulders sagged under his thoughts. France was ten years behind him and he was that much older now and was enjoying moderate success, for his weekly, *The Eye,* was a respected newspaper in Macon. But a reformer's pay is small in coin, large in hate and broken presses. He considered all this, then walked to his desk and began to write: WHY JIM CAMERON DIED.

Without expression or emotion in his voice he looked over at me and said, "It's late, son. Better go to bed."

I said good night and hurried to our house next door and without saying a word to Kathy, our hired girl, went upstairs to bed. My mother was in France on a visit. As I lay there, despite the rain, I could hear the cowboys uptown, enjoying a wild night before they returned to Texas.

Tomorrow, and many tomorrows after, fresh herds would come up the trail with more men anxious to "ride the tiger." It was a part of our normal life, for without the herds, there would be no Macon, and if you didn't like it, move on. Only years later would the voice of reformers rise to change it.

The next morning when I hurried across to the print shop, there was a slate-colored sky that turned the world a dreary gray. Canby, the *Clarion* editor, was standing just inside the door. The others inside were my father, Tod Beecher bothered to smile at me. It was a bitter smile that sent chills down my spine and seemed to carry an ominous meaning that I could not understand.

Al Wyatt seemed to be doing most of the talking. "It looks to me like someone killed Cameron for his money. His pocketbook and watch is missing." He turned his frosty eyes toward my father. "Is that the way you see it, Frenchman?"

"It looks that way," my father answered slowly, and I saw his gray eyes move to Beecher's face. The mayor said nothing, nor did his face reveal anything.

In build he was larger than my father, heavier of flesh and bone, almost inclined to pudginess. Years ago he had trained his features into a set, expressionless pattern and he looked at the world with ebony eyes that saw no hope or faith in his fellow man. He regarded my father as an impractical dreamer, a man of useless theories, a dangerous one.

Wyatt eyed them both carefully and then said, almost to himself. "We'll put it down as that."

They all agreed and filed out of the shop after Wyatt, leaving my father standing there.

"Who do you think killed him?" I asked. "Beecher?"

My father was grim-lipped when he answered. "He was behind it, but he probably had someone else to do it for him." He noted the expression on my face, judged my thoughts, and nodded, "Wyatt's in with Beecher, too, you know."

That was a blow that stung. I knew from my father's talk that Beecher's corruption of public money was the reason my father hated him. I knew, too, that it was my father's newspaper and his vigilance that kept Beecher from more graft and that this made Beecher hate my father and worry over exposure.

Later, I realized that Beecher was a product of his times. The money that flowed through Macon was easy money,

made suddenly across gambling tables and bars; and the philosophy of each man was to get it while the getting was good.

But to me, during those impressionable years, Al Wyatt was a hero. He was quiet, friendly in a cold way, and efficient as a lawman.

"Anything goes but me and the street lamps, boys," he would say to the Texans who rode into town. He had a way of backing it up and, somehow, they liked him for it.

It was true that each morning he would walk down Mary Street and collect a stack of gold coins from each front porch. But his marshal's pay was small, and for him, each night was one of violence with the dawn an uncertain promise. I think, now, that he must have regarded those gold coins as part of his actual wage. My father didn't.

That morning, as usual, we set the type and got ready to print the paper. My father had a brief paragraph about Jim Cameron being killed and robbed, but the editorial that he wrote was missing.

That afternoon, freed from work, I met Clay Phillips. He was a boy two years older than I and far wiser in the ways of the town. His eyes were wide with excitement when he said:

"Come on. They're going to hang Whitely down on the cottonwood. If we hurry, we can watch."

Together we raced down the alley behind Elm Street and cut across Mary until we came to the town's edge. To our right, on the flats, we could see the stock pens and the cattle cars lined up on the siding. The pens were filled with milling cattle, brawling and rattling their horns against the wood as the men, yelling and shouting, punched them into the cars with long poles. The wind carried to us the starp stink of manure and sweat.

In front of us was the wide curve of the Kaw river, and beyond it were the faint blue hills of the frontier. The last Indian attack had been only three years before, and to the south, bands of Comanches still roamed.

We followed the river road until we came to the "hanging cottonwood," a tall tree that grew beside the Kaw and whose limbs grew parallel with the ground.

"Beecher sent Wyatt out of town," Clay informed me out of his superiority. "That's how come they get to hang him."

We hid in the weeds on the cut bank above the road, and I trembled with excitement when we saw a band of riders coming down the road toward us. There were six men with Whitely riding slack in the center and Dr. Stamley behind him. The others I recognized as men who were all loyal to Beecher.

Whitely was known as the town drunkard, and everybody liked him. He played with the younger children, watched over them, and protected them. He was just an old man, full of booze and always eager to run errands for everybody.

I watched him as he sat there in the saddle, dazed and blinking his watery eyes. Suddenly he jerked his head up, saw the tree, and recognized its meaning. He screamed, and the sound cracked in the middle, as with wild strength he started to fight the men beside him. His horse began pitching and exciting the other mounts.

I watched, wide-eyed, as Dr. Stamley reined in his horse beside Whitely, with something shiny in his hand. He and another man grappled with Whitely and pinned his arms down. I saw Dr. Stamley press the shiny object against Whitely's bare arm, and they held him until he eased his threshing and began to whimper.

"Dope," whispered Clay. "Doc pumped him full of dope. Old Whitely won't know a thing now."

They tossed the rope across the limb and the free end came down and dangled before Whitely's face. He sat slumped in the saddle, his back rounded and slobber running from his mouth. Giving him the dope had been an act of mercy. Then the noose was tightened around his neck, and a quirt cracked across the horse's flank. The frightened animal jumped and twisted Whitely from the saddle, snapping his neck like a rotten stick. He spun rapidly in half circles, and his sightless eyes gazed up at the limb.

"What—what they hang old Whitely for?" I asked.

"Murder," whispered Clay. "He killed Jim Cameron. Beecher found him wearing Cameron's watch."

I left Phillips and, sick at my stomach, hurried home and told my father what had happened. His face reddened with anger as he sank back into his chair, brushing angrily at his hair.

"There's nothing we can do now," he said slowly. "Nothing yet—not for a few days anyway." He looked up at me with blazing eyes. "But we will."

He pulled a fresh sheet of paper from his drawer and began to write. His action was a disappointment, for to me, words on paper seemed a weak and hopeless way to fight Tod Beecher. I left him and returned to Elm Street to look for Clay Phillips.

It was getting dark when I reached lower Elm. Already lights were blazing, and cowboys in boots and jangling spurs crowded along the puncheon sidewalks. The saloons and dance halls emitted the mingled sounds of laughter and music. To me, it was a street of fascination, charm, and mystery, and I looked upon the sunburned riders from Texas as giants of the earth and listened eagerly to their stories of Texas and the cattle trails.

The Longhorn Bar was a small saloon, quieter than the others on Elm Street, and it was the meeting place for the town's business men. I went in through the family entrance and stopped at the steam table for a sandwich. Seconds later, Beecher, Canby, and a stranger entered. The stranger was well dressed and, from the dust on his clothes, looked as if he had come to town on the last stage. They threaded their way through the tables and came directly to me.

"Mr. Carson," Beecher said, laying his hand on my shoulder, "this is the Frenchman's son; Macon's distinguished editor I was telling you about."

Somehow his words seemed to be a warning for Carson.

Mr. Carson nodded and smiled down at me. "Mr. Beecher has told me all about your father and his newspaper."

I felt Beecher's grip tighten on my shoulder and saw his eyes narrow to slits.

"Unfortunately the Frenchman has a lot of ideas that are impractical for this town," Beecher said. "I know because I am a practical man and I do not believe in theories." He smiled a thin smile. "However, his ideas serve some purpose. I cannot please everyone, and opposition is good for a man in office."

Mr. Carson carefully looked at me. "Just how does your father feel about building a bridge across the Kaw River. The reason I ask is that I am an engineer and if the bridge is approved, I may get the job of building it."

"He is for the bridge." I answered and quoted my father's words: "If the funds are handled honestly and the bridge is built correctly."

The three men exchanged glances, and it was Canby who said, "It will be that way, don't worry."

Beecher turned on his heel and left; the others hesitated and then followed him to the bar. Somehow I felt that Carson was in with Beecher and Canby. I ate my sandwich and watched them as they talked in low tones. Finally, Canby hurried out into the night.

I left the Longhorn and walked up Elm Street, peering over the swing doors in the hope of seeing some of the excitement that was so common in Macon. It was the era of fierce individualism, and men still settled their quarrels in the dusty center of Elm Street. "A man for breakfast" was the expression used, and each morning the citizens of Macon asked who had been killed the night before. Each week my father would print a list of those who had been shot. Mostly they were men with names like Denver, Ace, or Bat, and little else was known about them.

It was getting late when I turned homeward, walking slowly, hoping to catch some sight of Al Wyatt. But it looked as if he were still out of town.

I was passing Newton's saddle shop, in a quieter part of town, when I saw a familiar figure walking down the other side of the street. Stopping in the shadows, I saw my father turn into the

dark passageway between two stories and knock softly at the side door.

Just as I started over to him I saw a woman open the door; and my father stepped inside and shut the door quickly as if he didn't want to be seen. Going closer, I saw it was the living quarters of Mrs. Emerson, a woman I knew only vaguely as the owner of a dress shop.

This puzzled me as I walked up the street toward home. Then I saw the lights of Canby's shop burning. I slipped through the alley, circled the building and approached it from the rear. Looking through the back window, I saw Canby working his flat-bed press and his helper folding the papers.

When I returned to our shop, the lamps had been lit, and my father was standing beside a type case, smoking a cigar. I thought of my mother, away in France, and with a man's knowledge of the vices of the world and with a boy's emotions, I stood there and judged him.

"Canby's getting out an extra," I said. He nodded. "I know. It's about the bridge. He and Beecher are trying to get the jump on us. Get the people all worked up to a vote on the bond issue before they have time to think. But we'll let Macon read their extra and then we'll get out one of our own and tell them the truth."

I stood there a moment and summed up my anger and my courage in these words: "If you are not too busy visiting women."

His eyes blazed anger for a brief second, then it seemed my words had crushed him. He gestured feebly with his hands and spoke with clipped words, heavy with French.

"Son, listen. There's things—things you don't understand. Things—about your mother, that—that—"

I didn't listen. I turned from him and ran out of the shop and up the street toward the prairie, leaving him standing in the doorway, calling my name. I ran until I fell into a buffalo wallow and lay there, panting for breath. Looking up at the stars, I made a solemn promise that I would never return to my father's house. For a time I listened to the crying of a coyote on a distant hill and then dropped into a worried, unhappy sleep.

The next morning I sneaked home, and Kathy fed me in the kitchen without saying a word. But I noticed the shy smile that played around the corners of her mouth. She was a young girl, recently from Ireland, and like the other hired girls we had had before, she would stay with us only until she found a husband. Then my father would give her his blessing and a year's subscription to *The Eye*.

While I was eating my father came into the kitchen and stood in the doorway watching me.

"You've come back," he said simply.

"Only to get my things," I answered, but I could not raise my eyes from my plate. "I'm going to Texas."

He nodded "You wouldn't object to helping me get the extra out, would you?" He asked, and there was a trace of humor in his voice.

In silence, we walked across the lot to the print shop. I knew there were many things he wanted to tell me, but that he didn't know exactly how to put them into words. He was always that way. What he thought, he preferred to put on paper than speak aloud, unlike Beecher, who was a good speaker and could sway men's minds with his pounding phrases.

On the counter was the *Clarion* that Canby printed last night. Across the top there was a drawing of the proposed bridge, and the rest of the front page told how much benefit Macon would receive from the bridge. Settlers going on west could use the bridge, instead of the expensive ferry, and the trail herds would not have to make a dangerous crossing.

Canby pointed out that the tolls would pay the cost of building the bridge—fifty thousand dollars—in a very few years. After that Macon would have a constant source of revenue, besides drawing people going west through the town. The city council had approved the plans submitted by Mr. Carson, and it was now up to the voters to vote on and pass the bond issue. The voting was to be held next week. The rest of the paper was the same as last week's issue.

We took off our coats, and while I pied type and inked the presses, my father set up his editorial: WHY JIM CAMERON DIED.

As I remember it, he said that Jim Cameron had been murdered because he had gone to *The Eye* office to tell the truth about the bridge and that Whitely had been hanged to stop any further investigation into the matter.

The actual cost of the bridge would be less than twenty thousand dollars; the other part would be divided between Beecher, Carson, and Canby. "*The Eye,*" my father wrote, "recognizes the value of a bridge across the Kaw, but it objects to men like Tod Beecher's receiving the credit of the graft from it. If Macon is to build a bridge, let us hire honest men to do it or not do it at all."

There was more—about the graft and the bribes that flowed to Beecher and the stuffed ballot boxes and the dummy city council. All that my father had learned about Tod Beecher in the past three years he put in that one issue.

By sundown, we had the paper published and distributed throughout the town. Afterwards, we washed our hands and started down Elm Street to the Longhorn Bar to eat supper. I could see men talking on the street corners with our paper folded in their pockets. Some spoke to us, some nodded, and some looked the other way. The tension was as real as if someone had drawn a wire tight through the town and the people were stepping back from it.

I turned my head to watch some cowboys who were driving a herd of longhorns up the street to the stock pens, and I wished to be one of them. My father beside me, noticed my gaze, read my thoughts, and said:

"Stick to the newspaper, Son. It will give you more adventure than a thousand trail drives—and more heartaches than any other life."

When we stepped into the Longhorn, we came face to face with Tod Beecher and Carson. I recall how Beecher jerked his head up and lifted his right hand slightly to his shoulder holster and stopped midway. That was all. His face showed nothing.

My father nodded at them, and we went past, but I felt their eyes burning hatred into our backs and I can still remember the green acid taste of fear in my mouth and that my hands were slimy with sweat. My father ate calmly and said nothing.

We ate a leisurely supply and afterwards, my father hired a buggy from the livery stable, and we took a ride across the prairie. As we drove slowly past the herds bedded down on the river flats awaiting shipment, and past the camp fires of a wagon train heading west, my father slumped in the leather seat with the reins dangling in his hands, saying nothing and contained in his own thoughts.

I wondered about a lot of things. My father seemed to have chosen a strange way to fight Tod Beecher, and I had an unreal feeling that we were running away from Macon. But in the years that have followed that night I have come to realize the deep insight my father had in people. He knew Tod Beecher and he knew how Tod Beecher would respond to his editorial. He knew!

We returned home, late at night, to find the shop a tangle of scattered type, broken marble, and sledge-hammered presses. All our back files and paper supply had been taken into the alley and burned.

My father surveyed the wreckage, shrugged his shoulders and murmured, "This is what I expected." Then he straightened up and said in a stronger voice, "We have work to do."

We hurried across the lot to our house and my father went down the storm cellar steps three at a time. I stopped in the doorway and gasped in surprise when he lit the lamp. He turned to me proudly, holding the lamp above his head so that the yellow light showed me the room.

"This is like the old days in Paris," he said proudly. "I fixed this up a long time ago. In Paris, I always had two presses, one above and one below in the sewers. When the police would wreck the one above, I would go underground and keep on printing. We will do that now."

It was only a small hand press and two cases of type. On the marble proof stone was a cut of the bridge that Canby had

printed in the *Clarion,* but above it my father had drawn grotesque figures of Tod Beecher, Canby, and Carson.

Beecher was standing with a foot, as large as the bridge, on each side of the river and he was aiming a gun at a Macon that lay crushed beneath his heel. In the other hand he held a moneybag marked "Graft."

Carson and Canby, their faces resembling weasels', were crouched behind him, grinning as they cut a hole in the bag and scooped up the falling coins. A balloon above Carson's head showed him to be saying, "Boys, this has got the James boys beat. This is legal."

Beecher was saying, "Maybe they'll even name the bridge after me."

My father's cartoon made these men look ridiculous.

I still held it against my father for visiting that woman, and although he knew it he said nothing about it. But as we worked, I could tell that it was a worry to him, and several times he stopped printing to say something, but changed his mind. I helped him all night, and by sunup we had the paper, one sheet, printed.

By ten o'clock every person in town had read our paper. Al Wyatt was the first to come into our print shop. He stood in the center of the room.

"Frenchman, I hope you can fight as well as you can write."

Puzzled, my father looked at him, and said, "I don't understand."

"You've made a fool of Tod Beecher," Wyatt answered. "The whole town is laughing at him, and he's coming up here to settle accounts with you." Then Wyatt turned and left the office.

Wyatt's words summed up the happenings of the day. The proud Tod Beecher awoke to find himself being laughed at by the same men he had once controlled by might and loud words. The hatred that he had built up against my father was gone, dissolved in a wave of laughter aroused by the cartoon. In their laughter, they saw the truth.

Blind rage was collected into systematic hatred and planned destruction. Pistol in hand, Tod Beecher started up Elm Street toward our print shop. It was the old story, so familiar to Macon, of personal vengeance coming into being again. This is what Al Wyatt had come to tell, and my father understood.

Calmly my father took Jim Cameron's pistol from the desk drawer and walked to the door. Then with the thoughtless action of a man intent on one single detail, he returned to his desk and laid his cigar on the tray. He returned to the doorway and watched Tod Beecher march steadily toward him.

I saw it through the window. Tod Beecher, still walking, raised his gun and fired. My father ducked, and the bullet grazed his head, while his own pistol returned an answer that stopped Beecher in his tracks and wrinkled his body toward the ground. He hit face down and rolled over. A bright red dial enlarged on his white shirt front.

That night we walked down Elm Street, and the wild free life was unchanged. The Texans rattled past us in their haste; the night lights and the music were the same as before. Sometime tonight, Carson, for his part in Cameron's murder, would be killed by Al Wyatt for resisting arrest.

My father took the cigar from his mouth, hesitated, and told me this: "Your mother left me right after you was born. She didn't like America or towns like this." He motioned towards Macon with his hand. "She returned to France, divorced me and married again. Perhaps I should have told you before."

It came to me, with a sudden realization, that I had never seen my mother and that the picture I carried in my mind was not of her. We walked on in silence and with the understanding that can come, without words, between two people.

We came to Mrs. Emerson's dress shop, and he ushered me inside. In the years that followed I came to know the woman who greeted us as a kind and understanding person. She extended her hand to me, and when I took it, my father said, "This is my son."

Outside, on the streets of Macon, there was talk of the Frenchman as mayor and of the right man to build the bridge, talk that pleased my father very much.

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