COWBOY LIFE ROMANCES

Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE

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The Brand-Twisters

A Big Rip-Roaring Novel
by LES SAVAGE Jr.

QUIT TEXAS or DIE!

A Long Cowboy Novel
by CURTIS BISHOP

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inside front cover.

Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE

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A Rangeland Novelet

Four Fast Short Stories

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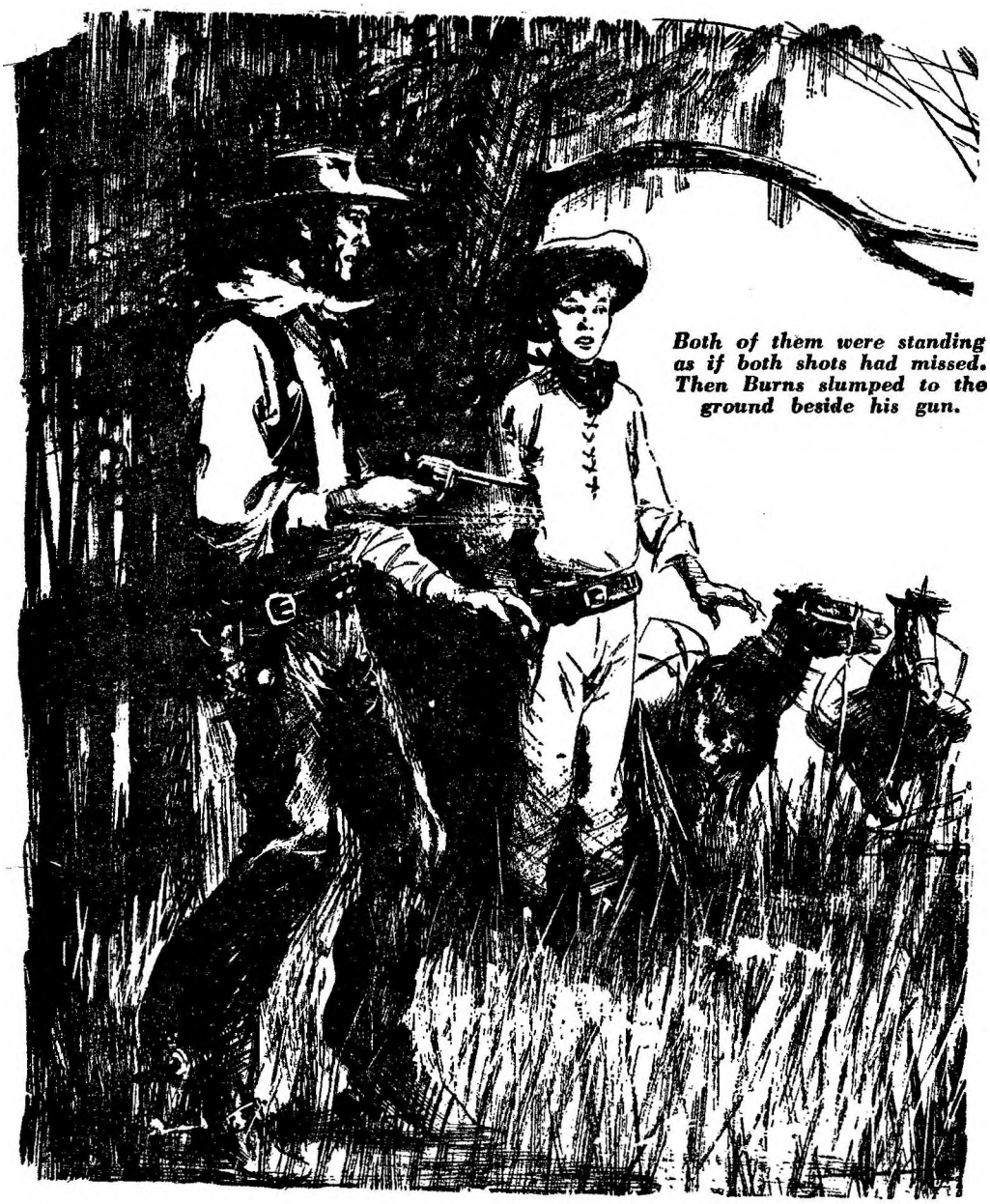

Both of them were standing as if both shots had missed. Then Burns slumped to the ground beside his gun.

QUIT TEXAS—OR DIE!

BY CURTIS BISHOP

Graves marked by small rockslabs on the rolling Frio slopes gave mute evidence of the blood-bold feud. Now, once again, the old hatreds were being fanned to six-gun heat . . . for all Texas wasn't big enough to hold the hard-riding Cowleys and the stubborn Allisons.

THE GREAT RUSH of the longhorns northward was over by the time I came to know what the mile-wide, hoof-torn trail was for, but still herds were going up and still the consciousness of it was enough to excite any man, much less a restless, easily excitable button. It was plainly visible from the windows of our one-room school house at Cotulla, which I always thought was the cruelest trick on a kid the school board could play. There I squirmed on a pine bench, only fourteen years old but tall enough for a man and able to ride a horse like a man, a boy old enough to have ridden alone to Cotulla and to have listened to yarns in Yancey's saloon of the greatest march of men and beasts the world had ever known. And yet I was supposed to fix my attention to reading, writing and 'rithmetic, and keep it there, oblivious to the longhorns sweeping forward like swarms of red grasshoppers.

I think my father would not have cared if I had thrown my text books into the teacher's face and gone galloping up the trail without a backward look. Often I

overheard him say to my sister, Alice: "A colt must run, sister; a colt must run." But my sister's mouth would go tight and I would know there was nothing ahead of me but the dusty school room overfilled with pine benches and the reproving glares of a bad-tempered teacher who could not even ride a horse without clinging to the saddle-horn.

It was not a pretty prospect, and I think I was very near to revolt that spring, which had broken our cold, dry winter earlier than usual. The urge to go had risen up in my young joints with the same pulse that swelled and burst the buds of the red-stemmed willows along our Lower Creek, and me as wild as any of the yearling colts running in our thousand-acre pasture.

I know that on this late afternoon when our schoolmaster lifted his bell and rang for dismissal I slammed my books into their box under the desk top with a force that brought from him an immediate threat to "tan my hide." Afterward I rode as far as the Frio River with Betty Lee, teasing her about the dance set for Saturday night at the Hillman's, and then had to gallop my horse back through Cotulla's dusty streets to make up for lost time.

I saw Dad's horse hitched in front of Yancey's saloon and reined-up. I would wait and ride home with him.

Usually the saloon at this hour was a bedlam of laughter and talk, but all was still as I stepped inside the door and I saw my father and another man standing at the bar, each with a drink before him, but neither touching it. I recognized Moss Cowley with a sudden twitching of my throat and I understood why the saloon was quiet and the usual drinkers backed away from the bar, waiting still and tense.

Moss Cowley was a big man, bigger than my father. He was a big man with narrow hard eyes and a bushy black beard that was sprinkled with white hairs. I knew him for the man who had killed my grandfather and I hated him with the sullen unyielding hate only a fourteen-year-old can feel. He wore a gun and I shrank back against the door, afraid, yet ready to fight with whatever I could lay my hands on if he dared to strike my father.

"You say you're a peace-loving man, Allison," Cowley said harshly. "Mebbe so. But you're an Allison, and this range is too danged small for the Allisons and the Cowleys both."

"Stay on your side of the river," answered my father, "and I'll stay on mine. That way we won't have any trouble."

I WAS too young then to understand my father, a clear-eyed smiling man who worked hard on our fences and our barns until we had the best-kept ranch in the entire Frio country; who made money with a comparatively small spread even in the dry seasons and who would not even talk of going to Montana or Wyoming, where all the bigger cattlemen were moving. Nor had he ever mentioned the feud between the Cowleys and the Allisons; I had pieced together the story from remarks dropped here and there, and graves marked by small rockslabs on the pasture slope that fell away into the Frio Canyon three hundred feet below. I knew that in a blazing gun-battle in this very saloon my grandfather had died before Moss Cowley's guns, and that the following morning my Uncle Tom was found dead just inside our lower pasture fence, with two distant relatives of Cowley lifeless and stark-eyed over the hillside.

But my father, to my knowledge, never carried a gun. And obviously, though he was not shrinking from Cowley, he was asking for peace and an end of a feud that had touched almost every home in the Frio.

Moss Cowley would not have it so. He shrugged his broad shoulders and scowled.

"It's too late for that, Allison," he grated. "I'll buy you out at a fair price if you'll move out of the country. Otherwise I'm asking you to be wearing a gun the next time we meet."

I held my breath. In this strange wild country, old to the ways of cattle but otherwise new and unrestrained, men didn't listen to such talk. It need only such a statement to set off a range-war.

"There is no question of selling," my father answered tonelessly. "That would be running from you, and I can't do that. I don't see why the Cowleys can't stay on their side of the river and the Allisons on theirs."

He pushed his drink further away; evidently he didn't intend to touch it again. He looked around the saloon, from one expressionless face to the next. I think he

realized what they were thinking. Never in this Frio country had a man refused such a challenge, and held the respect and the friendship of neighbors. I think he realized it, for he sighed.

"I don't like fighting, Cowley," he murmured. "I don't carry a gun when I ride to town."

He looked down at the floor and I sensed, rather than heard, the murmur from the men who were watching, and waiting. Then he raised his eyes, and his face was stern.

"But I suppose I can learn," he said softly. "Other Allisons learned, Cowley. Out of your family and mine there are just four left—you and your son, me and mine. It seems silly to me. But next time, Cowley, I'll have a gun."

My heart leaped up into my throat in pride. My father wasn't a coward. He had more courage than this renegade who whirled on his heels with a sneer and stomped out of the saloon, almost brushing my shoulder as he passed out the door. Then my father saw me, and the sternness left his face.

"Thought I would wait here and ride home with you, Chet," he said pleasantly. "Figgered you would notice my horse."

Once more his eyes swept around the saloon. It seemed to me he was a little defiant of them and their code, that was the code of their fathers before them. Any of them would have drawn upon Moss Cowley and it would have ended—one way or another—then and there.

"Good day, men," he said pleasantly.

There were friendly answers. My father was not one of their kind, but they were bound to respect him. He meant what he said; next time he met Cowley he would have a gun.

I don't think the significance of that dawned upon me that late afternoon. I was too thrilled that my father had stood his ground before bearded Moss Cowley, known over the country as a man who killed pitilessly and fought bitterly.

"Gosh, Dad, you were grand," I blurted out as we rode down the rim trail. High on the banks of the Frio Canyon sat the sprawling buildings that were the Sleepy V headquarters; we were climbing from one ledge to another, our horses with their heads almost between their forelegs. "You didn't let Cowley scare you, did you?"

My father smiled. "He did scare me, Chet," he answered, and then he spurred his horse and galloped ahead. I understood. He did not want to talk about it.

I had chores to do before supper; we were one of the few ranches who kept a milk cow and chickens. And, though Alice herself had planted the garden, it was up to me to keep it weeded. At times I revolted against such undignified work, but my revolts went for little against the calm efficiency of my sister, who merely smiled indulgently and reminded me we lived better than the Pinkney's, the Carter's and other nearby families whose sons were already full-fledged line-riders instead of school boys performing the chores of a hoe-man after school had been dismissed.

I SENSED something had passed between my father and Alice. The table was set and they were waiting for me, but there was none of the usual jocularity. My father liked to tease Alice, and I joined in frequently. Tonight my father ate rapidly and with little appetite and then he stalked outside. For some reason or other I offered to dry the dishes—a startling offer; it was a wonder Alice didn't faint from the shock. But, instead, she smiled and gripped my shoulder tightly.

In my opinion she was not a very pretty girl, although it was quite true that most of the men in the valley thought otherwise. She was tall, with big blue eyes, and I thought it was silly the way she piled her yellow hair up high and curled long bangs across her forehead. Then, of course, I did not appreciate how well she had done at replacing my dead mother in our house on the rimtop. Then I resented the autocratic way she ruled my father and myself, without realizing, as he did, how fortunate we were to have such a controlling hand.

Afterward she supervised my studying, sewing on my socks and my father's shirts as she watched me struggle with arithmetic. My father came back and sat smoking his pipe and staring into the fireplace. When Alice suggested a little fire wouldn't hurt he went out again and soon a blaze from mesquite roots filled the room with a drowsy warmth. I began to blink over my studying and Alice said I might go to bed without finishing my lessons.

I was glad to obey, yet, once the bedroom was dark and the covers warm against the spring chill, I found I wasn't sleepy after all. Perhaps it was the low hum of conversation I could overhear by straining my ears.

"I can't run, Alice," my father was saying. "You don't have to tell me that these feuds are silly; I know it. But they are here. And we can't live in this valley and hide from the Cowleys."

"Then we can go north," my sister argued. Her voice wasn't calm as it usually was. It was the first time I could remember ever hearing her sound excited. "Other ranches are moving to Wyoming or Montana lock, stock and barrel. We can . . ."

"*I* can't, Alice," my father interrupted. "Already I've decided to send you and Chet north."

"Without you?"

"Yes. Your judgment is as good as mine, Alice. Perhaps better. We're sold short already against the summer drouth. I have forty thousand dollars in cash. That will start you in Montana or wherever you decide to locate."

"But you, Dad! You won't try to stay and . . ."

"Yes."

"But, Dad, you're no gunman! Moss Cowley is. You haven't a chance against him."

"Other Allisons have done well with guns. I can't run, Alice. Perhaps it will blow over. If it does, I'll sell out the ranch and join you. Perhaps I will kill Cowley."

"Tbut there is no use of Chet and me leaving. This valley is good grazing land. You've never overstocked it and you've dammed up the creeks to make overflow pasture land. Dad, if you are going to meet Cowley anyhow, we may as well stay here."

"No," my father said firmly. "I have looked into Cowley's eyes and have heard his threats. Chet hasn't. Chet can leave without being a coward, Alice. If he stayed here, the Cowleys—well, this feud hasn't died out in two generations. Why expect it to end with Moss Cowley and me?"

"I have thought about that," she murmured.

"He has the right to a peaceful life, Alice," my father said fiercely. "He has the right to own his land and graze his cattle upon it. That will never be his along the Frio."

He hesitated a moment, then snapped: "Can you be ready to leave day after tomorrow morning?"

"So soon?"

"Yes. I will dodge Cowley tomorrow; I'll work around the barns. It won't take much getting ready, Alice. You'll travel light. No wagons, no furniture. And I thought Blaze Bush would go along."

"Blaze Bush! No, Father. I had rather go alone."

"You can't go alone. It is two thousand miles. You need a man to protect you."

"But not Blaze Bush! I don't like his type, Father."

"You are old before your time, Alice. Blaze is all right. He'll do to ride the river with. He's young and he's restless, that's all. Blaze never did a crooked thing in his life."

"But he's so—so utterly worthless, Father. What does he do besides parade around in loud clothes and show off his guns?"

"He is the only one I will trust," my father said with an air of finality. "Pack your valise tomorrow. And Chet's. But keep it light. And at dawn the next day—before anyone gets a hint of it . . ."

"Surely you don't think the Cowleys will harm us!"

"I wouldn't put it past them," father said grimly. "Moss Cowley has sworn to kill every Allison in the Frio Valley. He is the kind of man who keeps his word."

"Yes, Father," Alice said after a long while. It seemed strange to hear her talking so meekly; usually it was she who gave the orders. But I guess she realized this was a decision a man had to make, and she knew how immovable my father could be when he had made up his mind.

I lay awake a long time after their voices dropped off and I heard them retire to their beds. I was too young to worry much about my father's reconciliation to his fate; I couldn't grieve that he was resigning himself to death before Cowley's blazing guns for chortling at the prospect before me—a ride to Montana or Wyoming up the trail I had heard so much about.

II

THE next morning Alice told me, even before breakfast, that I did not have to go to school. I pretended to be surprised as she and father explained that I was going for a long trip; it would not have done for them to know I had overheard their discussion.

But it was a busy day for me. Father rode off after gulping his breakfast and when he returned Jim Mitchell of the Tired T and three of their riders were with him.

"Help us comb the lower pasture, Chet," father said crisply.

I obeyed happily, thrilled to be in the saddle and working cows instead of being in school. We herded two hundred head of cattle, mostly stockers, out of the brush of our back pasture. Jim Mitchell looked them over with a frown. "Not much beef, Frank," he said. Though my father's name was Franklin, he was "Frank" to the Frio Valley.

"I didn't promise much," father grinned.

"Twenty-five a head unless I can cull out some of it," Jim Mitchell offered.

"I'll take it if you pay cash," father said.

"Cash? Today?"

"Today."

"I suppose I can," Mitchell agreed. "I'll send in to the bank."

And he dispatched a rider toward Cotulla.

That was not all. Our riding stock was driven into the corrals and father sold Mitchell all but ten of our horses. Some of them were good mounts; father believed in fine horses. Mitchell paid us over twelve thousand dollars before sunset, and then went driving toward the Con-can Creek just about all that was left of our stock.

And I did not have long to mourn over horses. As we rode back to the house, hungry and tired with not even a drink of water since mid-day, I saw Blaze Bush's Texas star tethered at our gate.

No ship returning from around the world could have held me in such awe as that tall blue-roan horse did. A year ago he had walked out of this same yard after Blaze called on Alice. Now he had been to Montana, all the way, and back—a trail boss for the Big W. He had swum the Red River, the Cimarron and the Platte. He had seen Dodge and Ogallala and drunk from the waters of the Yellowstone. That horse, to me, was something to worship.

"Blaze!" I yelled, leaping from my horse and running inside. I found him in the big front room where two coal-oil lamps burned upon the fireplace mantel. Blaze rose to meet me, and I can see now why he was one of my boyhood idols. It was because, although only past twenty himself, he knew so well how to handle an awkward, loose-jointed boy. He always made me feel like a man.

After his handshake he said with a grin: "Got your plunder ready, podner? We got a long trail to ride,"

"It's in the war bag, podner," I answered joyously.

And it was. Alice had everything ready. There was a heavy valise for each of us

and then a pack to swing over the back of an extra horse. Further details were discussed that night, but with no mention of the reason why we were going, and why my father was staying. We could carry five horses, an extra mount each and a pack animal. Blaze would follow the main trail and we would wait five days in Dodge City.

"Perhaps," father said wistfully, "I can catch up with you there."

Alice had little to say. She did not like Blaze Bush, that much was obvious. I could not understand why; he was the best-looking man in the valley and the best-dressed. No other young man could dress like Blaze and get by with it. His black hat had a row of heavy silver conchas for a band; he had actually been to Mexico and could speak the Tex-Mex jargon. I saw no reason why any girl should not throw herself at Blaze; and yet I knew that he had been "sweet" on Alice for a long time and she had not only turned him down curtly but had invited him to stay away.

I could not know then that, with my mother's death, she had matured before her time, and that she could not understand the restless spirit that kept Blaze Bush younger than his actual years.

I was thrust to bed early, though why they expected me to sleep I don't know. I lay awake half the night, trying to make out their words through the thin walls. And when I did sleep, it was a feverish restless sleep. I saw the trail stretching away to the north, and I dreamed of Blaze Bush and myself standing shoulder to shoulder and fighting it out with Indians and outlaws. I dreamed of strange towns and heard people murmur: "There's a Texan" as I stomped by in my high-topped boots.

TOO soon Blaze was stirring me. "Let's get going, podner. What do you think this is—a day and night lodging house?"

I rolled out of bed, stumbling over a chair in my sleepiness. Alice was already dressed and there were fried steak and flapjacks. And father was drinking a cup of coffee, his face stern and worried.

We wolfed our meal. The key word was hurry. Father wanted us out of sight of the Cowley spread before sun-up. I wrapped my windbreaker around me and stepped outside. Limpy Fremont had already saddled our horses. There was the shiny paint mare and . . .

"Dad, you're not going!" I exclaimed. "Why is your horse saddled?"

"Your horse, Chet," he said gravely.

I gulped. My father had paid a thousand dollars for that mare. She was the pride of his life. And, just like that, she was mine.

He held out his hand. "Son, you're going north to start a new Allison ranch. Help Alice all you can. Stay with Blaze on the trail. Maybe I'll see you in Dodge City."

"Yes, sir."

Between father and daughter only a look passed, no more. But no more was necessary. They understood each other. Father held out his hand to Blaze Bush and the young rider grinned.

"I'll prod 'em along, Frank, and ride close herd on 'em. I'll get 'em to Wyoming, and don't you worry another minute about that."

It seemed to me that his grin was a little too wide and his voice was a little too casual. I was too young then to realize that all of the Blaze Bushes of those days grinned and teased to hide their true feelings.

That was all. "Into the saddle with you," father told me gruffly, giving me a push.

I needed nothing else. Blaze was already trotting on and Alice was right on his heels. She was wearing a split leather skirt she had made herself so she could ride a-straddle, and suddenly I was very proud of her for the quiet way she spurred up her horse and matched Blaze and me through a dozen rapid miles.

Then we changed horses, and stopped at a spring to let our tired mounts blow. The sun was already peeping over the blue hills but Blaze said it was safe to stop, that we were out of sight of the Cowley spread.

It made me feel funny inside to look back and not see the rimtop. From wherever we were in the Frio Valley we could see our house perched high on the bluff, and usually see life stirring around it. But now all was empty space behind us, and the ranch house ahead was strange. It sobered me to reflect upon how many of

these strange houses we would pass before we came to a hilltop that would be our own again.

But I didn't have time for much reflection. Blaze was back in the saddle and we were riding after him.

To me that trip into a new land, across new ranges, was a constant thrill. I tried to handle my end of the trail duties; Blaze taught me how to throw a diamond hitch, explained how to balance the loads in the two kiack boxes, how to make Dutch oven bread, and many other things that a man must know on a pack trip.

Nights, when we camped out under the stars, Blaze would pull out his harmonica and play for us, or sing cowboy songs. For several nights Alice was a reserved and forbidding figure, staying apart from us, watching us soberly with never more than a twinkle in her eyes for Blaze's tomfoolishness. But, at last, one night, camped on the rim of a wooded mesa, as we sat after an early supper and watched the sun go down in a blaze of color that turned the desert, far below us, into an unbelievable pattern of pastels, she came over and sat down by us.

"Play something I know, Blaze," she said. "I feel like singing."

He did, and she sang softly. I had never heard her sing before. It was chilly and I pulled the blanket around my shoulders and listened, and looked. Upward the evening star came out and others followed it. Below us the desert became a mysterious silver vastness in the moonlight and I felt that I was looking out across the entire world.

Finally she had sung all the songs she knew. "Thank you, Blaze," she said gently. "That was good for me."

"It always is, ma'm," drawled Blaze.

I rolled over and pretended to be asleep, hoping that one word would lead to another between them. But it didn't. The next morning Alice was as reserved as ever, and no direct speech passed between them.

We reached the Red River and I was disappointed to see that it was only a narrow muddy stream. "You oughta see her when she's on a rise," laughed Blaze. "She can pull a horse right out from under you, she can."

This was Indian territory and I was thrilled at the prospect, but Blaze shrugged his shoulders. "No Injuns bother the trail riders any more," he said carelessly. "The last two times I came up the redmen bummed food and tobacco."

I glared at Alice accusingly. How could she resist a man who had mingled on even terms with Indians, and was not afraid?"

We were tired, all three of us. Blaze kept us riding from early dawn until past dark; and our horses were thin and some of them had saddle-sores. Once or twice I heard Alice remonstrate with him after I had curled up and was supposedly asleep.

"Is is necessary to go so fast, Blaze?"

"I think so, ma'm," was the slow answer. "Anyhow, I don't figger on taking chances. Frank Allison said to get you to Dodge City like a bat out of hell. And that's what I figger on doing."

"I suppose," Alice sighed.

Poor girl, no doubt she almost died from aches and fatigue. She had ridden all of her life, yes, but not for long hours. To Blaze it was only another trip up; to me the excitement and the thrill was enough to make the fatigue worth bearing.

I know that she heaved a sigh of relief when we rounded a crest in the rolling prairie land and Blaze pointed to a small dot on the far horizon.

"That, ma'm, is Dodge City."

I couldn't believe it. Dodge City! I had heard of it all my life, how George Hoover and Jack McDonald, in 1871, stopped their wagon loaded with barrelled whiskey beside the ruts of the Santa Fé trail, set up a tent and made all thirsty travelers welcome at a dollar a drink.

By mid-afternoon we were near enough to make out the rooftops of the houses. Blaze stopped his horse and Alice rode up alongside.

"Reckon we'd better look for a hotel first, ma'm?"

"Yes," Alice said faintly. "I need rest. And a bath."

Blaze nodded sympathetically. His eyes flickered over her face. "You'll do to ride the river with, ma'm," he said lightly. "I wouldn't have believed you could stay up with us."

"Thank you, Blaze," Alice answered, and I thought I saw a tell-tale flush in her cheeks.

Blaze, the idiot, turned to me without another word. Though I was only fourteen I was sure I could teach him something about handling women. He turned to me and his leathery face was grave.

"You'll have to check that gun at the hotel, podner," he said soberly. "That's the rule in Dodge."

I patted the heavy revolver I wore at my side and nodded. Of course I didn't know then that Blaze was teasing me.

III

"THIS, podner," Blaze murmured, "is Dodge. Some town."

We had left Alice, and our guns, at the hotel, and we were walking down the street that was half-dark with the combination of swirling dust and the gathering dusk. I nodded. Blaze had seen it before and it still thrilled him. What did it do to me—a boy who had never seen any place bigger than Cotulla, a one-street town?

I've heard Dodge called a roaring town. But it seemed to me to be more of a muttering one; low, deep tones like nothing I had ever heard before, neither human nor animal, that rose and fell and sometimes died away into an instant of strange hushed silence. It was a sound that reached me in thrilling waves as we walked past the shipping pens below the railroad—the first railroad I had ever seen.

Those pens gave me some idea of what bigness to expect; acres of whitewashed corrals stretched off into the dark, enough, I was sure, to hold a million cattle. Then we had walked through a dim, ugly section of town south of the tracks and burst into an open plaza a block wide and four blocks long. Blaze had purposely selected a hotel on the edge of town for Alice. Downtown, he said, was no place for a lady.

The flood of brilliance across this plaza was a far cry from Cotulla, which had drowsed in the Texas sun by day and where, at night, shutters were put over the business house windows at nine o'clock. Light poured from every door and window over streams of men moving in a restless way like our longhorns when they refused to lie down. Each street corner had a pole with a huge, square, glassed-in coal-oil lamp on top, and around these were flashing silver clouds of moths drawn off the prairie.

While Blaze pointed out saloons and other sights, we walked slowly along. I'm afraid I was gawking and trembling in excitement. We stepped out of the dust onto a plank walk, where wooden awnings from store fronts to posts at the edge made a continuous covering. At each post was a whiskey barrel filled with water in case of fire. Every building had a long bench, broken only by doorways, all of these seats were loaded with men, and as we shouldered through the side-walk jam there were a thousand voices ringing in my eager ears.

Blaze Bush took my arm and turned me into the first barber shop we came to. Inside, the long row of chairs with an oil-lamp over each one, the barbers in shirt-sleeves and the hair ankle deep on the floor, made me think of sheep shearing—and shudder in disgust as befitted a Texas cattleman just in off the trail.

I was pushed into the first empty chair and the barber whacked away at my long hair. Then Blaze Bush stepped up in my place and ordered a "shampoo, shave and haircut—the works."

He looked downright beautiful, and smelled the same way, as we sauntered down the street again.

"Had to slick up before I called on my gal," he explained.

His gal! I couldn't believe it. Even though she treated him so meanly, I didn't want Blaze falling for anybody but Alice.

His "gal" turned out to be an attractive brunette who was waiting tables in the busiest restaurant on the square. I gasped at the menus printed on the walls; why, a man could get anything he wanted to eat here. Blaze carelessly slid an arm around the girl as she came to take our order.

"Hi ya, sweetheart?"

I wished Alice were there to see how a woman should respond to an overture. "Blaze, you darling!" exclaimed the girl. "I didn't look for you back for another year."

"Special trip," he explained. "Peaches, meet my podner from Texas, Chet Allison."

I bowed gravely and politely, but Peaches wouldn't have it so. She bent over and kissed me on the cheek. "Why, he's cute," she exclaimed.

I turned red and Blaze chuckled.

"Peaches knows where good men come from," he said.

"Going to be around long?" she asked hopefully.

"A few days anyhow," Blaze nodded. "Still get through at ten?"

"On the dot—for you."

"Bueno," he grinned. "I'll be waiting."

SHE took our order. I watched her eyes and lips and sighed. Alice didn't have a chance against a wonderful woman like this. She had beauty and charm and friendliness. And she knew how to be enthusiastic when a man like Blaze Bush came along.

We ate until I thought we would bust. Food had been scarce on the trail—cans and tinned beef and jerked venison was all we had. But we ate broiled steaks and potatoes and apple pie and drank both milk and coffee. Then we walked outside, and Blaze grinned.

"Reckon there's no harm in you seeing the inside of a Dodge saloon," he murmured. "One shot of red-eye will just about fix me up."

I nodded eagerly. Blaze pointed to a brilliantly-lit place across the street.

"Here is where Texas cattlemen spend their dough."

We walked across and stepped up onto the sidewalk. Then I caught Blaze's arm in sudden fright.

"Blaze!" I said warningly.

But too late. The man had already seen us. He came waddling across the sidewalk toward us, a gloating grin on his face.

"Well, if it ain't young Allison!"

Blaze didn't recognize him. But I knew him well. He was a cousin of the Cowleys, Moss Cowley's foreman. This Smokey Joe Burns was rumored to be a killer, the one man in the Cowley spread the Frio Valley feared even more than it did Moss Cowley himself.

"Young Allison!" sneered Burns, his narrow piggish eyes gleaming. "We rode a long way to find you, button."

Behind him pressed three other Cowley riders. I knew them also by name, and two of them were Cowley relatives. Moss Cowley had packed his ranch with cousins and nephews. And all of them tried to be as evil and as deadly as their benefactor.

I felt suddenly faint, and very much afraid. But Blaze, standing with his hand lightly on my shoulder, seemed unconcerned.

"Nice to meet some folks from down Texas way," he murmured. "Mebbe I'm a stranger to you, but . . ."

"We know you, Blaze Bush," growled Burns. "We know you're supposed to be pretty speedy with that six-gun of yours. But don't get any ideas. If you know what is good for you, this is one time you'll pull leather."

"Reckon I'll sit in until I know what the play is," Blaze drawled.

"This button goes back to Texas, him and sister," shrugged Burns. "They go back peaceable or they go back in a coffin. It don't make a damn to me. Or to Moss Cowley."

"Now, Mister Burns," drawled Blaze. "They just got here. They like this north country. They figger on looking around up here and seeing the scenery. I ain't their guardian by law, but I'm willing to step up and say that Chet and Alice ain't interested in either your proposition or your company."

"Mebbe the gal can stay—if she belongs to you," Burns conceded. "But the button goes with us, Bush. When an Allison kills a Cowley, they pay for it."

My heart leaped. Then my father had . . .!

"Particularly when the Cowley is bushwhacked," put in one of the other cousins. "The Allisons and the Cowleys fought for years like men. It took an Allison to start the bushwhacking, and a fifteen-year-old boy at that."

"Come again," said Blaze. "We don't get you."

"You don't know that Jim Cowley was bushwhacked by Frank Allison?"

"I didn't know that."

"It's a lie," I blazed out. My father shoot down young Jim Cowley from the bush! It was preposterous.

Blaze squeezed my shoulder. "Of course it's a lie, podner," he murmured. "But don't argue it with these waddies. They ain't neutral."

He looked back to Burns. "Where is Frank Allison?" he asked quietly.

"Wish to God we knew," snorted Smokey Joe. "We figger he will try to join you.

We don't mind telling you, Bush, there is another Cowley gang looking for Frank Allison. He skipped out, proving he was guilty. Moss Cowley is with that gang himself. Mebbe Allison has been fed to the coyotes by now. We Cowleys can outride you and out-shoot you."

"I see," Blaze murmured.

So my father was alive! So he was a fugitive from Cowley's grim law of an eye for an eye and an ear for an ear!

"Well, glad to have met you gents," murmured Blaze. "Always glad to see anybody from home. Look us up if you're still around town tomorrow."

IT dawned on me that the Cowley crew, like ourselves, had checked in their guns. I was grateful for it. Except for that we would have gone down beneath their bullets right on the street of Dodge City. The Cowleys were like that.

As it was, we could walk away and there was nothing they could do about it except hurl threats after us. We walked back to the hotel, past the bawling cattle in the white-washed pens, and now Blaze was striding along as fast as our high-heeled boots would permit.

It was late and Alice had gone to bed. She answered the knock finally and came to the door wrapped in a lace-covered creation that had always filled me with disgust. She actually smelled of perfume. Again I despaired of ever understanding women. On the trail she had behaved like a human being ought to, but back in town she could think about nothing but her face and her clothes. She listened to Blaze. Then there was a moment of silence. Alice hadn't said a word.

"I'll be dressed in a minute, Blaze," she said quietly. "Get the horses."

"Reckon I'd better do some trading, ma'm," he drawled. "Some quick trading. Them hosses took hell coming up from Texas. We'll get gypped as far as quality is concerned, but a fresh hoss is better than a tired hoss anytime."

"Use your own judgment, Blaze. I'll wait for you at the back door of the hotel. Stay with me, Chet."

"I'd rather go with Blaze," I pointed out.

"Nope, stay with your sister," Blaze said. He handed me the gun he had retrieved from the hotel desk. "Lock the door," he ordered. "When I come up I'll be whistling that Sam Bass tune. If anybody else tries to get in, shoot first and ask questions afterward."

I nodded, now reconciled to staying. I was entrusted with the responsibility of guarding my sister from possible harm by the Cowley gang. No doubt they had trailed Blaze and me to the hotel.

Alice packed our things swiftly. "Don't be scared, sis," I said loftily, "we'll watch out for you."

"Yes, Chet," she said with a smile. Finished packing, she sat with me facing the door. I shot her a side-wise look. She didn't seem scared at all, just calmly determined. I thought about that pretty girl down at the restaurant. Could she have lived through that long hard ride from Texas, and then sit as calm and quiet as this?

After an age we heard Blaze's whistle. We slipped down through the back hallway and out the kitchen stairs. Our horses were tethered in the alley.

"Not too good," Blaze explained.

I recognized one of the five horses. It had been father's.

"I didn't have the heart to trade her off," Blaze explained to Alice. "She's muscle-stiff but we can use her as a pack-horse a couple of days. And come daylight, when we hide out in the brush, I'll work on her legs."

Alice did not protest. I heard a noise that sounded suspiciously like a sob; then, whatever it was, it was lost in the thunder of Blaze's hoofs.

We rode an hour like that, hell-for-leather, rode like a herd of cattle was stampeding behind us. Then Blaze stopped to change mounts. We caught up with him. I was dizzy and sore from this riding and didn't see how Alice could possibly be standing it. A burst of lightning tore through the blackness and I saw her face—pale, strained, lips trembling. And then, without a word between us, we were in our spare mounts and there was the rain beating in our faces. We pulled our slickers tightly around us and kept going. Ahead was a vague flickering shape my sister and I followed—Blaze Bush. Everything else was a red sea around me.

"Follow Blaze, follow Blaze!" I said over and over to myself.

When we stopped, just before morning, I fell off my horse and lay there. Blaze picked me up. I was conscious of everything he did and said but I couldn't talk myself. Or move.

"The kid has a bad fever," he told my sister.

Now she was taking charge of me. They spread their slickers over the low bushes and made a crude shelter. I knew they were doing that and I wanted to tell them they were getting soaked without their slickers. But my lips wouldn't make a sound, only just move. Blaze slipped off and he came back with water. He scooped out a hole under the roots of a bush and built a fire. Then all was black before me and I couldn't hear another word.

The last sound I was conscious of was a little moan from Alice's lips.

IV

THAT day was a wrangle between them. I overheard snatches of their argument as I was alternately conscious and dead to the world, babbling in a high fever. Alice was for riding right back with me, Cowleys or no Cowleys; Blaze insisted upon hiding there until dark.

"It won't do any good to carry him right into a Cowley bullet," Blaze argued. "They're out after us, Alice. They picked up our trail from Dodge, don't doubt that. And Smokey Joe Burns and his crew will shoot on sight."

"There is no sense of letting him die out here with a fever either," Alice reasoned. "As it is, I don't know if the poor boy can stand the ride or not."

"I can stand it," I whispered. "Let's go on—to Wyoming."

"That's my podner," Blaze grinned, patting my shoulder. "How about a drink of water, podner?"

"Or stronger," I said, managing a smile.

"See there," Blaze said triumphantly to Alice. "A man can stand a lot. Why, Chet and me could start right now and ride to Oregon without sleeping. Couldn't we, podner?"

I knew he was making me feel good; I answered back in kind. Then, for an hour or so, I could sit up and drink a soup that Blaze made out of a rabbit killed with a forked root. And drink water that Alice boiled in one of our empty tomato cans. At dark we started back. Alice was for fixing up some kind of a litter but Blaze settled that right quick; he picked me up and sat me in front of him on the saddle, wrapping a blanket around me.

"You can't hold him there all night," my sister protested.

"Shucks, he don't weigh nothing," protested the cowboy. "Hold you breath, podner; we're gonna take off like a sage-hen."

And he touched his blue roan with his spurs. It was hard riding; I had nothing to hold on to, no support from anything except Blaze's arms. It was a weird feeling; it felt like I was dangling off in space with the roan galloping beneath me. We made a few miles and then Blaze changed horses. It was hard on a mount to carry double that distance and at that gait.

Just after dark my fever went up and Alice tore off her underskirt to make wet cloths. They tied them tightly around my forehead and the water seeped down over my face. When I tried to sleep, drops got into my mouth and made me cough. But they wouldn't remove them. And the strong arms about me didn't weaken their grasp. Finally I slept with my head on Blaze's shoulder.

I must have slept a long time. It was a refreshing sleep, for when I awoke I felt much better and could actually lift my head and look around me. Perhaps I had been awakened by Blaze lifting me off the horse, for now he had me over his shoulder and we were walking along a dark alley. Alice was right at his heels.

"I don't like this, Blaze," she was protesting. "I don't like to trust strangers."

"She ain't a stranger," Blaze said shortly. "It's the only way out. Come along."

I raised my head as we stepped out on the main plaza of Dodge. Now it was desolate and dark in the early morning hours. There were streaks of daylight in the sky but the sound of Blaze's high heels on the boardwalk was the only noise we heard. I recognized the place where he stopped. We had eaten there the night before. Here he had spoken to the dark-haired pretty girl who had waited on tables.

Blaze knocked a long time before anyone answered.

"Who's down there? We don't open until seven o'clock. Go away and come back later."

"It's me, Peaches, Blaze Bush."

"Well, for the love of—! Just one night late, that's all. Listen, cowboy, Peaches Hill don't take treatment like that from any man."

"Peaches, I got a dying boy down here. And a girl. We'll argue later. We gotta have a bed. And a doctor."

THE window slammed and almost instantly we heard the scurrying of feet down the stairs. Then the door opened in our faces and there was the beauty of the restaurant in a bathrobe that hung close to her figure. Her hair was done up funny in pigtails and there was greasy stuff all over her face. But I liked her eyes as she took in the situation with a glance and stiffly acknowledged her introduction to Alice. For the moment it seemed as if I was almost well; perhaps the excitement had momentarily conquered the fever. I saw her eyes look from Alice to Blaze and back to me, and heard her sympathetic murmur as she bent over and felt my forehead. My sister's eyes looked like that. And another pair of eyes which I barely could remember, and would never look into again.

"Don't stand there and gab all night, Blaze Bush," she said sternly. "Get that boy upstairs and into bed before he dies. And then go after a doctor."

"Reckon you'd better do that," Blaze said over his shoulder as he carried me upstairs. "I don't wanna be seen wandering around Dodge."

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, disappearing out the door.

Blaze carried me on up the stairs, Alice at his heels. He laid me down on a soft feather bed and lit a coal-oil lamp on the dresser.

Alice's aim was amazing. I could hear Cowley call out to his men: "Yuh fools. Quit tryin' to crawl up on 'em. They'll shoot you to ribbons."

"You seem to know just where to come," Alice said coldly.

"Sometimes it pays a man to know things," Blaze nodded.

I tried to sit up, I felt so good. But something hit me heavy and hard and I shrank back against the pillow.

"Guess I ain't much of a hand," I mumbled to Blaze.

He was too busy to answer. He was building a fire in a small stove. He turned and he snapped out at Alice:

"Well, don't stand there and gawk. Cut up a sheet and make hot cloths."

"I don't like to touch this woman's things," Alice shot back frigidly. She was standing stiff and motionless, an expression in her eyes that left me wondering.

"Then to hell with you," rasped Blaze. "We're trying to save a boy's life, not run a Sunday school class."

She turned red. I couldn't remember ever seeing Alice angry before. But she was mad now, and she looked at Blaze as if she could take him in her bare hands and kill him. Then the crimson wave left her face and she trembled.

"You're right, Blaze," she said in a queer voice. "I'm sorry."

And they were both working on me. They tore rags into strips and dipped them into the water that was now steaming hot. I relaxed. It felt so soothing. I couldn't believe I was sick; I was just sleepy and was resting. But everything—their voices and the sound of footsteps on the stairs—seemed a long way off.

Now a new pair of hands was feeling my pulse and my face. I forced my eyes open. A small man with friendly eyes, an owlish face and a white beard was smiling at me.

"Well, son, you are in for it," he said warningly. "No hossback riding for a long time."

This must be a doctor. A real doctor. Over his shoulder was the pretty brunette woman. Her face and hair weren't so shiny now. She looked a little tired. But she had a kind expression and I smiled at her. And then at Alice, whose eyes were red with tears. And at Blaze—standing a little apart, his lean face even leaner, his eyes hollow and his face creased like the leather of a pair of worn-out chaps.

"I'll be leaving now," I heard him say to Alice. "I'll take the hosses and I'll lead the Cowley gang a merry chase. I'll keep 'em away from here until Button gets well."

"I know you'll do what you can, Blaze," Alice answered softly.

"These are friends of mine, Peaches," the rider said to the brunette girl. I was too young at the time to realize just how awkward it must have been for him to say that. "Anything you can do for 'em—will be a personal favor to me."

"We'll do all we can," the woman promised.

Then he spoke to the doctor. "Doc, this boy has enemies around Dodge. Some pretty rough hombres who would like nothing better than to find out where he is. I'd sure appreciate it if you keep it quiet that you have a patient up here."

"I never discuss my patients, sir," the doctor answered crisply.

Blaze bent over and grasped one of my hands. "So long, podner," he murmured. "I'll ride back this way before long and pick you up and we'll mosey on toward Wyoming. We'll ride some new trails up there, podner, and run Allison cattle on the richest grazing land in the world. Till I get back, take care of things around here. Your sister and all of that. You're the man of this spread now and I figure you can handle the job."

"Yes, Blaze," I said weakly.

He pulled his hat low over his head and slipped out of the room. I tried to watch him but I couldn't raise my head from the pillow. Then the doctor slipped something into my mouth.

"Drink this, son. It will make you feel better."

It did. I drifted off to sleep right away and it was a pleasant restful sleep. I could dream about a new range with higher rimtops than even the banks of the Frio Canyon and Blaze Bush and I were galloping, galloping, galloping. . . .

MEANWHILE, Blaze was riding. He told me a long time later about the chase. He made sure that Smokey Joe Burns picked up his trail. He took all five horses and he beat a bee-line for the open country to the West, veering onto the Whisper Trail, down which wanted men fled to the border. It was rough country

but a man could live there who knew his way around. Blaze did. Cowboys who had been up the great trail more than once knew about the Whisper Trail riders. And sometimes were friendly with them. There was such a thin line between law-abiding and outlawry in those days that a man could be sympathetic with the boys who had drifted beyond the pale, and had to live the rest of a short life dodging the open campfires of the trail spreads and sleeping out in the darkness, fireless and alone.

We laughed about it more than once. With five good hosses, changing from one mount to another, Blaze could have simply gone off and left them. Nobody the Cowleys ever had could out-ride Blaze Bush. I doubt if anyone ever could. But he kept them just behind him, close enough to be out of gun-range and to sometimes grab a night's sleep in peace with maybe even the luxury of a buffalo-chip fire, but always close enough so the boys from Moss Cowley's spread in Texas wouldn't give up and turn back.

He had some of Alice's clothes and mine. He left little tatters on mesquite limbs where he camped so they would be sure that the son and daughter of Frank Allison were still in front of them. He had a pair of small high-heeled boots that Alice had worn, and he slipped those onto his hands and made tracks with them in the soft spots.

Behind him, in Dodge City, I slept. Seems like I always slept. When I was awake I was conscious of Alice bending over me. Or the doctor. Sometimes the brunette woman was there and she never looked as pretty again as she had that first night in the restaurant. But she must have been awful good to me. And awful sweet. For one night I heard Alice say to her:

"Peaches, you're one of the sweetest women I ever knew."

Peaches shrugged her shoulders. "Don't call me Peaches," she said harshly. "I don't like that—from you. With Blaze it was different."

About the next thing I can remember was the doctor bending over me and snapping shut the case of his gold watch.

"I think he's past the crisis," he told my sister. "But *you* aren't. To bed with you, young lady."

"Oh, I'm all right, Doctor," Alice protested.

But when Peaches took her hand and led her away she had nothing more to say. Peaches came back and sat on the bed and talked to me.

"It won't hurt him, will it, Doctor?"

"Good for him," the old man said promptly. He had a worn leather medicine bag; he closed it, winked at me and clomped out of the room.

Peaches asked me about Texas. I told her about the range and the Frio Canyon and our ride up to Dodge. I knew she wanted to hear about Blaze. I told her that Blaze could out-ride any man in the West and that he could whip out six-guns and shoot a man in nothing flat, that he could find a trail where no other eye could.

She took it all in. She didn't say much. She asked a question or two about Alice and then she went off, leaving me to sleep and dream.

V

I MUST have been awful sick. It took me a week after the buzzing stopped in my head to get enough strength to sit up. By then Alice was in a nervous twitch. For a couple of days she stayed in bed herself—with a fever. But by the time I was able to walk around the room, she was up and her old self, except that there was a tightness to her lips I had never seen before and a burning look in her eyes that wasn't like her. She had always seemed so cool and aloof.

The old doctor looked me over that night and said "I was out of the woods," meaning, I guess, that I was well. "No use of my wasting any more of my time on a tough cowhand like this boy," he said gruffly. When the two women looked away he slipped a couple of jars of Mellon's Food under my pillow. "Don't let the women see you eating it," he whispered. "You don't want 'em to think you're a sissy."

Then he got up to leave. "How much do we owe you, Doctor?" Alice asked.

He frowned. "Reckon that depends on how much you can pay, Miss," he said awkwardly. "I don't have to have pay at all for getting a good hand in shape to ride the trail again. So anything you

want to pay."

"That makes it hard on me, Doctor," my sister said. "We are able to pay any fee you name."

"Then, make it ten dollars," he said.

Alice reached into the bosom of her dress and pulled out a roll of greenbacks.

"I'll make it two hundred," she proposed. "And you have the gratitude of the Allisons, Doctor. Maybe, some day, somewhere, that will mean something again."

The doctor took the money. He had hardly gone before Peaches slipped upstairs bringing with her a grim-faced dark-haired man who needed a shave.

"This fella to see you. Pull down the shades."

Alice obeyed and turned to face this hard-eyed man who eyed her curiously.

"I don't like the light, ma'm," he explained with a mirthless smile. "I'm on my way to Mexico and folks at Dodge City think I ain't a gentleman."

"Yes?" My sister was a little uneasy and I couldn't blame ser. This man had all the earmarks of an outlaw.

"I ran into a friend of yours—fella named Bush. He said to tell you the Cowley gang was still after him but wouldn't catch him in a year of Sundays. And for you to go on to Wyoming. Said he would double back on his trail and pick up your trail and keep between you and the Cowleys."

"Thank you," Alice murmured. She was stroking her throat with one of her long white hands as if it hurt.

"That's all, ma'm. Excuse me if I gotta rush right off. But I shouldn't have come into Dodge at all. This ain't no place for a wanted man."

"I understand," Alice nodded.

He slipped out, not making a sound as he went down the stairs. Alice turned the lamp low and came over and sat on my bed.

"Did you hear what he said, Chet?"

"Every word of it. Blaze wants us to go on to Wyoming."

"Do you want to go?" she demanded.

I hedged the question. "Well, I wanna see Blaze again. And I guess that is what Dad wants us to do."

"I heard from Texas while you were sick," she explained. "The Cowleys haven't got Dad yet. Moss Cowley has put up a reward of five thousand dollars for him, dead or alive. Moss Cowley is hunting for him. He sent out descriptions to all Whisper Trail riders. There are plenty of hard men who will shoot Dad—on sight."

"I reckon so," I gulped.

"Jim Cowley was shot down while fixing a fence," Alice went on. "With a Winchetser. Dad has a Winchester, of course. So do half the people in Cotulla County. But Moss owns the sheriff and when Dad ran away they fixed the guilt on him."

I ripped out a man-sized cuss word. I figured Alice would give me billy-o for it as she usually did, but she just smiled faintly and patted my hand.

"I feel the same way, Chet," she said softly. "I'm glad you said it. I couldn't."

"This man I talked to," she continued, "he guessed that Dad had headed for Dodge to meet us. But nobody has heard from him. Moss Cowley had a dozen or more gun-slingers out on his trail. He has money and he doesn't mind spending it—to kill an Allison. This man said that Jim Cowley's murder had turned Moss into a maniac, that he would stop at nothing to kill Dad, and us."

"When we catch up with Blaze again," I said hotly, "we can give 'em a scrap."

"Yes, we could," Alice agreed.

She was silent a moment, looking off. She turned on me then and I was amazed at the transformation in her face. There seemed to be red vigorous blood beating in her cheeks.

"Should we let Blaze fight our battle for us, Chet?" she demanded. "We're Frank Allison's family. I kept after Dad for years to move us out of the Frio Valley because I was afraid of Cowley and what he would do to us, you and me. But I'm not afraid any more, Chet. We've ridden the trail together just like two men, and we can ride as well as any two men. You've shot a gun once or twice, I've never touched one. But, Chet, I don't want to go on to Wyoming and let Blaze Bush stand between us and the Cowleys. I want to go back to the Frio Valley, find Dad, and stand right with him against whatever we have to face."

I felt like leaping out of bed and yelling; maybe I started to do it, for she pushed me back.

"Stay in bed as long as you can," she smiled. "I've got to buy horses and saddles. And guns. I want a gun with a pearl handle, Chet. I'm wild about pearls."

My enthusiasm faded as I thought about something. "But Blaze!" I protested. "You mean we're going to ride off and leave Blaze up here. He belongs with us, Sis."

"No," she said firmly. "Blaze was taking care of us because Dad was his friend and asked him to. Blaze has a right to his own life. If he want to marry this woman—this Peaches—he has the right to do it. There is no reason why he should have to run from the Cowleys, and eventually turn and fight them."

"She's a wonderful woman, Sis," I said slowly. It didn't seem to me to be the right thing to say but I could think of nothing else.

"Yes," said Alice with a gulp in her voice, "she is."

She pushed me back against the pillows. "To sleep with you, young man," she laughed. "You've got to get well and strong in a hurry."

I AGREED with her. I turned over and closed my eyes. At first I wasn't sleepy; I couldn't understand why, all of a sudden, Alice wanted to turn her back on Blaze and head Texas way, looking for father. But I was young enough for her scheme to appeal to me. We could do our dirty work ourselves! We weren't afraid of Cowley, his murderous cousins and paid killers!

But, as far as riding a trail was concerned, I had much rather have Blaze with me than Alice.

The next night she let me out of bed awhile. I had lost weight, plenty of it, and I was a little rocky on my legs; but she told me we would start out early the next morning.

"You're tough enough to stand it," she said lightly.

I couldn't understand how a woman could change her attitude so suddenly. The day before she wouldn't let me even reach across the bed for a drink of water; now she was practically pushing me into the saddle.

She showed me the horses she had bought. "I never thought about—buying a horse," she confessed. "Are they all right, Chet?"

She seemed so eager for my praise that I didn't have the heart to tell her the truth, that she had bought five ordinary saddle horses for a price that should have provided us with top-grade stuff. But they were all right. They would stand riding and hard work if they couldn't be much speed and sabbe.

The two saddles were shiny but poor leather; she had paid too much for them, too. But the food she had laid up was well-selected for a trail.

She had been working an hour, she confessed, trying to tie-up the pack.

"You'll have to be patient with me, Chet," she murmured, "until I learn about such things."

I had never seen such a transformation in a woman. With a grin I tied-up the pack. Then she handed me my gun—a shiny pearl-handled one. For the first time I noticed that she wore a holster around her buckskin riding skirt, and that her pearl-handled gun was hanging low.

"I've noticed that is the way they wear them."

We went back upstairs. Peaches had broiled me a steak and I wolfed it down. It amused me to see the way these two women wouldn't look at each other. Both showered their attentions, and their conversation, upon me. When we pushed away from the table Peaches bent and kissed me.

Their good-byes were very formal. Alice wanted to pay her for the trouble we had been and she wouldn't have a penny; she had a pride, too, this restaurant girl, a pride as stiff and unyielding as my sister's.

"You were Blaze's friends," she said. "Otherwise I wouldn't have taken you in. I don't charge Blaze's friends."

I was already in the saddle and impatient to be off. Alice lingered a moment, insisting that Peaches take money. Then she swung into the saddle and we were thundering off into the night.

"You'll have to pick the trail, Chet," Alice said. "I can't tell one direction from the other."

I told her about the North star and pointed it out to her. "You mean that's the way riders keep their directions?" she gasped.

"Of course. How did you think?"

"I had no idea," she confessed with a silly laugh.

She could ride, however. We dipped away from the main trail and she kept her streaked paint right abreast of me. In the morning, just before dawn, she called for a halt.

"We'll sleep today," she decided. "How about breakfast?"

I shot down a young rabbit and she took the job of skinning it and cutting it up. "This is messy work," she grimaced. "I don't mind a chicken, but a rabbit."

However, I had to admit that her fried rabbit was even better than Blaze's.

"It's sweet of you to say that, Chet," she said happily.

We slept with the horses tethered in a grassy ravine and our heads on our saddle blankets. The autumn had come to this range land and the nights and early mornings were chilly, but we didn't have to shiver but for a few minutes until the sun came up, and we were grateful for the shade of the cottonwoods.

I suppose a man never sleeps enough in the day time to get completely rested, or was I still weak from the typhoid? Anyhow, Alice had to shake me roughly to get me to open my eyes that night.

She had a small fire going and, wonder of wonders, our supper cooking. I sniffed and grinned.

"Squirrel," she told me proudly. "I shot it myself, Chet. Right through the head."

"How many times did you miss?" I scoffed.

"Just five times," she answered innocently.

Squirrel and toasted hard-tack. She had a trick with the hard-tack Blaze had never thought of. She dipped it in water and then let it crisp and brown in the fying pan grease. And Blaze had never made gravy!

"This is larruping," I told her. "You'll make a hand yet."

WE did not know then that Moss Cowley himself was on our trail. We took every precaution, riding at night and sleeping in the brush by day, grazing our horses in the ravines, but it was an automatic precaution; we didn't know that Moss Cowley had ridden into Dodge City, learned we had been there and had ridden after us, picking up our trail outside of Dodge, and following it through the greasewood and sage of the Indian territory. We had the start of several days, and, though I was a sick boy and Alice new to the trail, we kept them pushing.

Oddly enough, it was our beloved Doctor Dorris who was the instrument of revealing our whereabouts to the Cowleys. Cowley rode up to Doc's door shortly after dawn and demanded, at the point of a gun, that Doc ride with him into the hills to treat a wounded man.

"Put your gun away," Doc said curtly. "That's my business—patching up wounded men."

Nor was Doc surprised that Cowley wished to be secretive about the camp where the wounded man was holed up. The Whisper Trail was far to the west but sometimes owlhooters had to cut toward Dodge for supplies and medical treatment. He rode with the black-bearded man to an old cabin about two hours ride from Dodge. There were horses in the corral and three men with Winchesters loafing in the shade of the cabin. Inside was a wounded man, Cowley's cousin, Rip Conroy. Unshaven, blood-stained, his eyes squinted up at the doctor in pain.

"Hot water!" Doc barked.

They brought it to him. He cut away the dirty, blood-soaked bandage on the shoulder and made a quick but gentle search.

"A bullet lodged there," he told Cowley. "Better bring him into town where I can take better care of him."

"No can do," bearded Moss Cowley said curtly.

When Dr. Dorris looked askance Cowley shrugged his shoulders. "We're not owlhooters, if that's what is worrying you. But we got secret business up here. We don't want folks in Dodge City to know about us. Treat him here. Town's bad medicine."

Doc shrugged his shoulders. A frontier doctor wasn't used to asking more questions than was necessary. Then Doc went to work. The sullen Cowley obeyed his orders, even helping him probe for the bullet. Two hours later Doc washed his hands in a tin basin filled with hot water, lit a cigar and helped himself to a drink of Cowley's whiskey. Moss handed him a

wad of bills and he shoved them into his pocket without counting it.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he promised Cowley.

"You better stay here tonight," Cowley growled.

"Impossible," the Doc said. "I got a sick boy from Texas in Dodge. Typhoid."

That's how innocently it slipped out. Doc didn't even realize he had said something amiss, for Cowley was shrewd enough to show only casual interest.

"That so? Coming along okay?"

"Gonna live," Doc said. "I'll see this man tomorrow."

Cowley let him go. Doc said later that he had no idea that the bearded Cowley would let him return to Dodge City; he had expected to be held a prisoner in the deserted cabin at the point of a gun until the wounded man had almost completely recovered. But, of course, Cowley *wanted* him to go. And one of Cowley's riders followed at a respectable distance behind the Doc. Unwise to the ways of such men, Doc had no idea he was being trailed. He rode to his office, gathered up more medicine in his bag and then came to Peaches' room over the restaurant to treat me. One of Cowley's men followed right behind him, and that was how Moss Cowley knew that Alice and I were in Dodge City, and that I was confined to my bed with typhoid fever.

If we hadn't slipped out on Doc Dorris, the Cowleys would have probably caught us then and there, instead of much further down the trail.

They had our hide-out spotted and even kept a guard around it. But they let Alice slip through them to buy horses and they weren't watching the back of the house that night we rode away.

The next afternoon, when Doc came out to see and found me gone, they also learned their quarry had flown. They picked up our trail after riding around the entire town of Dodge. A night rider for a trail herd had seen a girl and a boy ride by in the early dawn. That gave them our tracks, and Cowley could trail a deer over rock ledges. He was a day behind us when we left Dodge but he kept pressing closer and closer. He had better horses for one thing; he and his men could out-ride us for another.

VI

WE didn't know that, of course. We were feeling pretty good as we reached the Indian territory and left the main trail for a narrow winding road leading up into the Osmugee hills. There was an old friend of Dad's who lived up there on the Pyute reservation, a deputy agent. We decided to find him, get supplies and fresh horses, and see if he had had any word of Dad.

Now we rode in the day time. Not once had we been challenged, so we felt secure. Throughout the day we kept the horses moving fast as we could without breaking them down; we wanted to get there, and to know the thrill of at least one night's sleep in safe comfortable surroundings.

We had been on the trail all the night before and were nodding in our saddles by sundown; else, as dusk shut in on the crooked trail that twisted through the scrub pines, we would have been on the alert. I was riding ahead, the bridle of my spare horse tied to my saddle. Alice was right behind, a few steps between us.

I know I was dozing; else I would have seen my horses's ears twitched forward. I had learned all those things from Blaze.

Then my horse shied. I grabbed the bridle and fought him back to the ground. A man had leaped out of the bush and was pointing a rifle at us.

"Reach high or I'll kill yuh!" he shouted.

He was bearded, gaunt and ragged but I would have known that voice anywhere.

"Dad!" I screamed. "Don't you know me, Dad? It's Chet."

Behind, Alice had thrown herself from the saddle and she ran forward. Father's eyes were blazing like coals of fire; he seemed delirious and for a breathless moment I was afraid he was out of his head and would shoot us down. He did brandish his gun threateningly at Alice before he recognized her. Then he threw down the rifle and lurched forward to meet her. I saw how weak and wounded he was; he could hardly stagger.

I ran over to hold him up but he stumbled and fell. He lay there on the trail, his frame racked with terrible, dry sobs. We lifted him up and laid him on a needle-softened slope and he began to laugh. The laughter was grisly.

He was half-starved. One arm was in a blood-stained sling. There was a bullet-wound in one thigh. Alice ran to her saddle bag and brought out a small bottle of whiskey. She forced a few drops between his lips. It calmed him, and brought a rush of color to his face. He could look up at us and talk.

"Thank God!" he murmured. "You kids. Thank God."

Then he tried to raise up. "Where's Blaze? Don't tell me Blaze ran off."

We explained that Blaze was leading one of the Cowley gangs off on a wild chase.

"Good boy, Blaze," he murmured. He looked up at Alice: "I know, sister," he whispered, "but a colt has to run."

And then he was asleep, dead asleep. Alice and I carried him over to the slope and pitched a camp in the ravine. It was a beautiful camping spot; here in the ravine some of the scrub pines had grown to man size, and there was the sweet smell of pine cones and half-decayed needles in the air. But we didn't have time to enjoy that. I went off after squirrels. By the time I had killed two it was pitch dark and I had to find my way back to camp by the tiny beacon of light showing through the deep trees—Alice's campfire. She was feeding Father teaspoonfuls of hot coffee. His eyes were glazed, his lips thick and heavy.

Alice seized the squirrels and started dressing them. "He talked for a minute while you were gone," she explained. "The Cowleys headed him off. Somebody had the judgment to figure he would head for Jim Moseley's reservation and they jumped him in the pines about ten miles from here. They shot his horse out from under him and almost killed him. Two bullets in his shoulder and one in his hip. He rolled away in the darkness and they couldn't find him. He says he wounded one of them and killed another."

Her eyes were red as if she had been crying but she was able to talk about it calmly. "Then he knew he didn't have a chance to reach Moseley's; they would have the placed watched and shoot him down. So he started for Dodge—wounded and on foot. He heard us coming and figured on holding us up and taking our horses. That's why he hid in the brush."

"How is he now?" I asked anxiously.

"He isn't going to live, Chet."

She was right. Just before dawn my father died. He had a fleeting moment of consciousness, when he could talk. He motioned to Alice and she propped up his head and he motioned to me.

"You and Alice—together. Take care—of her. Be a good cowman, Chet. That means—more—than—making money. Be as clean—and fine—as the range—you ride."

And then he was quiet. He smiled at each of us, and then the smile disappeared in a grimace of pain. Alice clutched his hand and held him close.

And that was all.

We buried Franklin Allison there on the pine-splattered hillside. I had only the prong of a forked stick with which to dig and the grave was shallow. We banked pine needles high over it and I hauled rocks from the stream in the ravine.

"We must remember this place," Alice said tonelessly. "Some day we must come back for his body."

"Yes," I agreed.

The sun was slanting through the pine tops when we finished. We prayed a minute there in silence—for Franklin Allison, whose only crime was that he had been born an Allison, and a neighbor of Moss Crowley.

Then we rode on. We rode dry-eyed. We were tired and we didn't take the trouble to push our horses. Somehow we didn't care. We weren't even sure where we were going.

It is no wonder that, as aimlessly and as slowly as we traveled, that night the Cowley gang caught up with us.

WE had already stopped for the night and had built our fire. Neither of us felt like hunting squirrels or rabbits, though the trees along the small river were thick and full of ripe acorns and we could have knocked over a squirrel or two in no

time. We sat at our fire and munched on dried venison and hard-tack and then curled up in our blankets and lay awake, though each pretended to be asleep.

We heard their horses a long way off and I threw dirt hurriedly over the fire and we rolled off into the brush. We heard a loud cursing voice and I recognized it as Crowley's, He was spurring his horse through the undergrowth and he loomed up against the tree shadows, a black menacing shape. My gun was in my hand. I fired. Then, remembering talk I had heard from older gun fighters, I quickly rolled over.

First there was a yell of pain and more loud cursing. Then bullets thudded into the earth almost where I had lain. Cowley's men had seen my gun-flash and had fired at it.

I heard a voice against my ear. "Good boy, Chet."

I reached out and patted my sister's shoulder. "We'll get one or two of 'em, sis," I choked. "Damn 'em."

"Say it again, Chet," she whispered. "I still can't make myself curse."

"Damn 'em," I repeated.

A voice shattered the stillness. "On foot, you fools," it roared out. "The boss is already hit."

"Good," Alice said huskily. "Moss Cowley himself."

"That was Smokey Joe Burns hollering," I told her. "He was one of those following Blaze."

A voice shouted from off to our right and I heard a rustling in the trees. I threw a quick shot in that direction. I didn't expect to hit anyone, and didn't. But I came close, for a yell followed my gun-burst.

"The damned button almost hit me. You fellows be careful."

Burns again. Next to Cowley I wanted to kill him the most.

I looked around me. There wasn't much moon and the pale light of the stars wasn't any good for shooting. But I could see the lay of the land behind me. We were halfway down the slope to the river. Higher up the trees were bigger and there wasn't as much brush. If we could slip up there we might try a run for it. Down here, with the greasewood so thick we couldn't slide between the limbs, we didn't have a chance to move without making a sound.

I whispered into Alice's ear: "Let's go up the hill. Slide backward on your stomach an inch at a time. Watch for anybody behind us."

We had no idea how many of the Cowley gang there were. We didn't care. We were in the mood to fight them all to the bitter end.

We starting inching backwards. A gun flashed in the darkness a hundred yards from us. I started to fire but Alice beat me to it; her shot went whistling down the slope, tearing through the brush. And, glory be, there was another yell of pain and the crash of a body falling.

"You hit him, sis!" I said exultantly.

"Do you think I did?" she whispered. "I can't believe it."

We shouldn't have talked. They heard our whispers and a barrage tore through the brush toward us. Something nicked my arm. I groaned and then denied to Alice that anything was wrong. And it was only a slight shoulder wound; I could still use that arm.

She fired back at another flash and I gasped in amazement and happiness. Another hit! She had never touched a gun in her life until we had left Dodge City. Since then she had shot only at squirrels, and with indifferent success. But here with the blue chips on the line she was coming through.

A voice was roaring out, Moss Cowley's. "Yuh damned fools! Quit trying to crawl up on 'em; they'll shoot you to ribbons. Close around 'em and wait for daylight."

"Yuh mean we're gonna let a button and a gal hold us off?" shouted back Burns.

Cowley cursed. He could swear louder, and more profanely, than any man I have ever heard. "Their lead hurts" said the Cowley leader. "Damn me if I want 'em taking any more shots at me. I won't use this leg for a week anyhow."

"Where are yuh, boss?" roared Burns. "I want confab with you."

Cowley gave away his hiding place with a rustling in the brush; both Alice and I slung a shot in that direction. There was another roar of rage.

"Them damned kids hit me again!" complained Moss. "Got me in the arm. Damn yuh, Burns, keep your mouth shut."

Alice nudged me. "Wouldn't it be won-

derful if we could kill Moss Cowley?"

They had heard her; more bullets rained around us. But, with the first blast, we had rolled away from each other and out of their path. Blaze Bush should see us, I thought. He would be forced to admit we had learned our lesson well.

Later I learned there were eight men in that Cowley gang, all of the veteran gun-fighters, some of them who had ridden wideloop trails before casting in their lot with Cowley. Yet, for eight long hours, my sister and I held them at bay. For eight long hours we shot it out with them in the darkness, two against their superior numbers and better trained guns. We killed two. We wounded Cowley twice, a bullet in his left arm and one in his left leg. We took off a lock of Gyp Conroy's hair, Conroy who had killed a dozen men in street fighting. The only time we were touched was that bullet which nicked my shoulder. Well, it was more than a nick. I was losing blood right along after an hour or so. I couldn't stop the bleeding; every time I moved it started all over again. I could feel it hot and thick running down through my shirt. But I couldn't stop moving. We kept inching backward, backward.

Finally, toward morning, when a shadow showed up plain in the grayness, we were almost at the top of the hill.

WE were almost close enough to risk a run for it. The pine trunks were thick and there was running room between them. If we could get a start, a start of a few yards, the trunks would screen us. I whispered my scheme to Alice and she agreed.

I forced myself to my knees, getting ready to make the break.

As I did a shape showed up in front of me, only a half-dozen steps. And a grating voice chortled:

"Going somewhere, punk?"

It was Smokey Joe Burns. He had wriggled around us in the darkness, coming up behind us, getting within almost an arm's reach of us without making a sound. There he had lain, gun in his hand, just waiting for daylight.

"Drop your guns, damn yuh!" he rasped. "I gotta itchy finger."

He had the drop on us; we couldn't help it. My gun dropped to the ground first. Then Alice lowered hers. Smokey Joe swaggered up, gave me a push that sent me reeling and caught Alice's chin.

"You got spirit—for a woman," he sneered.

That was all—for the moment. He shouted to Cowley.

"Got 'em, boss. Both of 'em."

There was a roar of approval from below. Cowley came up the slope, supported by one of his men. He was bloody and dirty, and he couldn't put his weight on one leg.

"Wait a minute," Burns snapped as Cowley came close. "First, do I get the reward for this button?"

"Damn yuh, Burns," rasped the bearded man. "And yuh are a relative of mine."

"Yuh offered the reward," shrugged Smokey Joe. "Yuh didn't say nothing about not paying your relatives. We coulda died just like anybody else."

"I'll pay it," Cowley agreed. He thrust off the man helping him and limped close until he was glaring down in my face.

"The son of Frank Allison!" he gloated. "Your old man shot my kid, button. He was a kid just a year older than yuh, a kid who had never hurt anybody. Yuh will pay for it, yuh will. And her, too."

"My father never shot your son," I said staunchly.

"The hell he didn't!" snorted Cowley. He turned on Alice. Now the light was gathering and I could see the insane gleam in his piggish eyes. "His gal, too. We'll wipe out the whole damned family. We'll let the Allisons feed the buzzards up here in the Indian territory."

He whipped out his gun as if he was going to do the job then and there. I held my breath. Was this actually death? Could he shoot down in cold blood a defenseless boy and a girl? I knew the answer; I could read it in his dark gleaming eyes and the cruel smirk on his face. He could!

But Burns stopped him. "Hold your hosses, Moss," said the gunman. "Yuh ain't found Allison yet. Yuh can't kill these two until yuh find Frank Allison."

"Why not?"

"Allison was crazy about his kids. Yuh hole 'em up here somewhere—mebbe that cave back of the river. Then yuh put out

the word that yuh got the Allison button and his sister, and that you will let 'em go in return for Frank Allison. Yuh know Allison; he'll give himself up."

Alice's warning glance was unnecessary; I wasn't saying a word.

"I ain't letting 'em go," Moss growled. "I'm gonna kill the whole damned outfit. I may choke 'em to death with my own bare hands."

"But yuh can wait until yuh get Allison," Burns grinned. "He ain't too far from here. Me, I figger he got to Moseley's after all and he's holed out around here somewheres nursing them wounds of his. One of the boys can drop over to Moseley's and let him know we got the button and the gal. Moseley will get the word to Allison, yuh can be sure of that."

Cowley lowered his gun. "Yuh got sense, Burns," he conceded grudgingly. "Out of all the damned relatives I've been feeding for years, yuh got sense."

"Any time yuh get tired of feeding me, yuh can say the word," snapped Smokey Joe. "I get tired of your talk, Cowley. Some of these days I'm going to get damned tired and forget about yuh being a cousin of mine. Don't yuh let that happen."

"I don't mean it for yuh, Joe, yuh know that," Moss said soothingly.

He bellowed to the men still down the slope. "Come on, yuh lazy sheep-herders. Let's get a move on here."

"We'll do what yuh suggested, Burns," said Cowley. "If that won't bring in Allison, nothing will."

"I ain't so dumb," grinned Burns.

I didn't like his grin. For, as he smirked, his narrow eyes were looking over my sister, who was shrinking away from his glance.

VII

THEY bound us tightly, with small sympathy for my wounded shoulder. Then we were driven, like a pair of sheep, across the river and toward high blue bluffs which yawned on the other side. Halfway up the trail we saw the mouth of the cave. Many fires had been built here; evidently the Cowley gang had camped here watching the trail to Moseley's for Father. Cowley helped me from my horse and Smokey Joe Burns lifted down my sister. He held onto her longer than was absolutely necessary. Nobody seemed to notice except Alice and myself.

"Inside with yuh," roared Moss, striking me with the loose end of the rope that had been used to tie me.

Alice followed obediently at my heels. The floor of the cave was of sand; it had been worn level by the tramping of many feet. Moss stomped in and lit the fire. Then he tore off part of his shirt and bandaged his shoulder himself. His leg was stiff, he said with a curse.

"I ain't much good," he fumed. "Yuh boys go down to Moseley's. Then swing around back toward the Cree camp. Allison has gotta be in this country somewhere, unless Moseley slipped him a hoss and he got clear away. If so, he'll come running back when yuh put out the word that we got the button and the gal."

He turned to Smokey Joe. "Reckon yuh had better go with the boys, Joe."

"I'll stay here," the squint-eyed gunman said. "Somebody has to look after yuh—and the prisoners."

Cowley nodded. "That's true. Pecos, yuh take the boys and ride."

A gaunt weary-eyed man nodded. They ate breakfast first, and drank an entire pot of boiled coffee. It smelled good and my mouth watered. It was Smokey Joe who first suggested they feed us. Cowley shrugged his shoulders but did not protest. To Smokey Joe my sister said softly:

"My brother is wounded. Won't you let me bandage him? I'll promise not to run way."

"Anything yuh say," grinned Joe. "For a cute little trick like yuh, anything yuh say."

I hated the insinuation of his smile but it was a relief to be free of the tight bonds and to have my shoulder bathed and dressed. Cowley glanced our way once but made no comment; then he paid no further attention to us. After some hesiation Alice boldly walked over to the fire, picked up the coffee pot and brought me a cup. Cowley and Smokey Joe ignored her. Emboldened, she sliced several slices of bacon and put it in the pan to fry. Still no protest. The two men sat at the mouth of the cave, apparently unconcerned with our plight. And, of course, there was

no chance of escape. To leave the cave we would have to walk right over their feet.

Cowley sat nursing his rifle, his piggish eyes watching the trail winding down to the small river, as if any moment he expected to see Frank Allison riding up it.

Alice and I withdrew into the rear of the cave. She spread a blanket and we huddled together on it. Burns glanced our way several times but Cowley didn't notice us. We were grateful to be free of the bonds and to talk undisturbed.

"Well, not all of the comforts of home, Chet," my sister smiled.

I grinned back at her. My admiration for her had grown in these past twenty-four hours. "But what's the next play?" I asked. "As soon as they find out Father is dead . . .!"

"As soon as they learn he is dead, they will kill both of us. But who will find that out? As long as they think he's alive, we have a chance to live. We can pray something happens, Chet."

I nodded. That was all we could do—wait and pray.

The hours ticked by. Cowley seemed an immovable statue guarding the mouth of the cave. Finally he turned to Smokey Joe and grunted: "Better warm them beans, Joe. And fry some bacon. I'm hungry."

Burns was leaning against the wall of the cave, half-asleep. He looked up and an ugly grin came onto his unshaven face. "Let the gal do it. I ain't had such a purty trick cook for me in a long time."

Cowley shrugged his shoulders again. Burns stretched, came to his feet and clomped back to where we lay on the pallet.

"Make yourself useful, purty-eyes," he grinned at my sister. "Mebbe if yuh cook to our satisfaction we'll keep yuh around."

Alice looked at him a moment through half-closed eyes. By now I had learned the spirit behind her serenity. I expected any moment to see her lash out at the smirking villian with hot defiant words, or even a savage kick of her small high-heeled boots.

But she did neither. Without a word of protest she went to the fire and started cooking. She even dipped the hard-tack in water and toasted it in the grease of the frying pan as she had done for me on the trail. Smokey Joe tasted it and smacked his lips.

"Give me a woman to ride with any time," he chortled. "Flap your lip over that, Moss. The gal knows how to handle a frying pan."

Cowley did not seem to hear him. Burns winked at Alice and went on eating. She filled a tin plate high with beans, bacon and bread and brought it back to the blanket to eat with me. Now Smokey Joe had finished his eating. He rolled a smoke and lay back against the wall of the cave, his eyes half-closed as he studied Alice.

"If that scroundrel touches you," I whispered fiercely to my sister, "I'll kill him."

"Hush, Chet," Alice whispered.

Burns stirred. "Ain't there a shot of red-eye in your saddlebag, Moss?" he asked.

Cowley nodded. "Just what I need to wash out my throat," grinned Smokey Joe, and he swaggered toward Cowley's horse, took a bottle out of the saddlebag and returned to his comfortable perch on the sand. He took a deep swig and handed it to Cowley, who also drank. Smokey Joe fingered the bottle and looked back at Alice.

"We got a long time to wait here, Moss," he said. "Mebbe we can amuse ourselves a little with Allison's gal."

I HELD my breath. Alice's body went tense and her hand gripped mine tightly.

"What's that?" Cowley asked, realizing after a moment that Joe was speaking to him.

"I said we might as well play a few games with that blond trick back there."

Cowley cast a glance toward Alice and me. Then he studied a moment.

"Reckon not, Joe," he said firmly. "That ain't in the cards. The Cowleys and the Allisons have fought a long time, but they ain't ever bothered each other's womenfolks."

"To hell with that stuff," rasped Burns. "Who is gonna know about it?"

"That ain't the point," Moss snapped. "It ain't in the cards."

I felt like hugging the black-bearded villain. He had some honor at least. Burns grumbled.

"Some day, Moss," he muttered as he

took another drink, "I'm gonna get tired of your lording it over me."

Cowley didn't seem to hear his arguments. The man sat stiff and unmoving, his vigilance at the mouth of the cave unrelaxed.

I slept most of the afternoon. Fever set in with my wound and I was grateful for the coolness of the cave and the softness of the sand, and for the water Alice gave me to sip and kept trickling over my forehead. I never lost consciousness and once I heard Joe's voice. I forced myself to sit up. He was standing right over me.

"Button hurt bad?" he asked Alice, and there seemed to be a hint of genuine sympathy in his voice.

"Pretty bad," she answered. "Fever, too. He wasn't well when we left Dodge."

"Yuh sure gave us the slip there," grinned Joe. "Yuh and that damned Blaze Bush."

"Where is Blaze?" asked Alice. She forced her voice to be calm and casual but I could sense the fluttering of her throat and the heaving of her breast.

"Somewhere on the trail," shrugged Joe. "I got tired of chasing him and left Skip Madison and Juke Elliott after him. The last time I saw him he was high-tailing it for Wyoming."

Then he stalked back to the mouth of the cave and took another drink. I drifted back to sleep. This time I slept soundly. It must have been near midnight when I woke up. My fever had gone down but I was weak; I didn't want to raise up or turn over. I just wanted to lay there.

I could see the shadows at the mouth of the cave. Cowley was sleeping on his back and snoring loudly. Alice had gone to the fire and was sitting by Burns. They were talking calmly, and seemed very friendly.

"Reckon it's all right for yuh to sit up here," Joe was saying. "Yuh ain't making a break without your brother and yuh can't move him."

"Poor thing," Alice murmured.

Then I heard her say: "Besides, where else can I go? My family is wiped out. We don't have a spread any more."

"Yeah, it's tough," murmured Joe.

A moment later I heard Alice remind him that there was a bottle of whiskey in our saddlebags. He clomped off into the darkness for our horse and came back. It dawned on me that Alice could have gotten away at that moment. Joe was gone several minutes. But she didn't run. Naturally she wouldn't go off and leave me. I wanted to shout to her to use her head, not to be a fool. But I couldn't force the words to my lips. All I could do was to lie there and listen.

"Yuh sure are a cute trick," Joe was saying after a moment. Their voices were low and I couldn't make out the rest of their conversation. I went back to sleep. But it was a troubled sleep. I couldn't understand my sister playing up to Smokey Joe Burns.

Morning came and my shoulder was so stiff I could hardly move. But my fever was down. Alice bathed my face and held me and fed me. Her eyes were strained and worried and her blond hair all over her face.

"Chet, pretend to be very sick," she whispered. "Just lie here and don't make a sound."

"What's up?"

"I can't tell you. Just lie here. Act even like you are dead."

Through one eye I watched what went on at the mouth of the cave. Cowley was as silent and grim as ever. He ate his food and drank his coffee and rolled his smokes and those were the only motions he made. Burns walked in and out of the cave and seemed to be in a high humor. Alice hovered near me. But once or twice she looked foward Joe, and it seemed to me I saw her throw a fleeting smile in that direction.

I slept through the afternoon. Our fare was frugal—beans and bacon and white onions. But my sister brewed a soup that was clear and delicious and I ate all of it.

"Don't let them see you eat so much," she smiled. "I'm telling them you're dying. And you're back here eating like a horse."

Which was true. I was sleepy, I couldn't get enough sleep. I was famished, I couldn't get enough food. But otherwise I felt better. I told her so.

"You're all right," she said with another smile. "But don't forget to act like you're dying. Or dead."

By the time it was dark Cowley was snoring again. And Alice was sitting at the fire with Smokey Joe. I could over-

hear only snatches of her conversation.

"But I can't," I heard her say. "I can't leave my brother."

He had his arm around her and was talking in low guttural tones.

"Yuh wouldn't be making such a bad deal, baby. I would take good care of yuh."

"It's not that, Joe. But I can't leave my brother. And I have a little score of my own to settle with Moss Cowley."

"Mebbe I could settle that score for yuh," the villian suggested.

THEIR voices faded off for a while. Smokey Joe drank more of the whiskey Alice had brought from Dodge. Then I heard him mutter: "Yuh knew I get old Cowley's spread, didn't yuh?"

"No."

"Shore. When he dies. I tell yuh, baby, yuh could string along with me. Old Moss has done made his will. Everything he had was to go to to his kid first. Then to me. And, of course, his kid is dead."

"Yes."

More words I could not hear. I gave up trying to listen and went back to sleep. It was a troubled sleep. I didn't like this. It didn't make sense that Alice was falling for Smokey Joe. I didn't hate him with the fierce hate that I hated Moss Cowley, but still he was a Cowley, and still he was one of the men who had shot down my father.

Along toward midnight I awoke again. They were still shoulder to shoulder at the fire, talking earnestly. Smokey Joe seemed to a little drunk.

"Moss wouldn't care if I married yuh," Joe was arguing. "That wouldn't change his will any. Women don't mean nuthing to Moss."

"But Moss won't die soon," Alice pointed out. "What do you have until he does? You're just a line-rider. He talks rough to you and beefs about feeding his relatives. Do you think I would live off him like that?"

Joe's voice was thick and tense. "What if there ain't no Moss Cowley?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't hafta tell yuh," he shrugged. "But if something happened to Moss . . .?"

"You wouldn't."

"Yuh got me going, baby. No telling what I would do. Besides, I get tired of Moss. And yuh are right, his kind live forever."

"No," Alice said firmly after a moment's hesitation.

He insisted. She finally said: "I won't do it, Joe, and that's that."

But still she sat close to him at the fire. I couldn't understand her game. But for an exciting moment there I decided she had played Joe Burns for a sucker and had him eating out of her hand, that she was going to make him kill Cowley. But he had made the offer, and she had refused. I slept again, but only for a few minutes. I waited Alice to come back and talk to me. But she didn't. She sat at the fire with Burns, and shafts of light began to streak through the mouth of the cave. I wouldn't let myself go back to sleep.

Their voices rose again. "With your spread and the Cowley outfit, we would have that country on a down-hill pull," Burns was arguing. "I ain't dumb, baby; you know that. We could run stock all over the Frio Valley."

"But there's still my brother," Alice protested.

"Forget about your brother," Joe rasped. "If I'm willing to kill Moss yuh oughta be willing to forget about the button. Mebbe it's hard, baby, but that's the way it is."

"I can't do it, Joe," she said again.

Then, after a long moment, she came back and bent over me. She felt my pulse. I whispered up at her:

"Alice, what in the . . .?"

"Shut up!" she whispered fiercely. "Lay back down there and do what I tell you."

Then she gave a little cry. I didn't have any idea what she was crying about. Then she whipped the blanket up over my face.

"What's the trouble, baby?" asked Joe, leaving his seat by the fire and waddling toward her.

"He's dead. Joe, he's dead!"

"Wal, mebbe it's for the best," Smokey Joe murmured.

I raised the tip of my blanket. Alice flung herself into his arms and sobbed on his shoulder.

"My brother's dead, Joe. That beast killed him."

Joe pushed her back until she was at arm's length. He stared down into her

face and his eyes were gloating and gleaming.

"Now yuh ain't gotta worry about the button. Say the word, baby, and I can fix Cowley."

"But they'll know—back in the valley!"

"We can say the button killed him," shrugged Burns. "Who is going to say different? I tell yuh, baby, this is our chance."

She gave him a push. "All right, Joe," she gulped. "I'll do it. But I wanna see it. I wanna see it right now."

"Lemme have a drink first. This ain't easy, baby."

Then I heard Alice say, and I couldn't keep quiet when she said it; I gasped in astonishment and for an awful second I was afraid he had heard me: *"You didn't mind shooting down Jim Cowley. What's the difference?"*

"The kid was a long way off," Burns grated. "He wasn't looking me right in the eyes."

"Then don't wake him up!" cried Alice. "Go ahead. What are you waiting on?"

I peeped over the corner of my blanket. Burns was standing there uncertainly. Light was now streaming through the mouth of the cave. Cowley was stirring.

"Go ahead!" screamed Alice.

"I can't," Burns confessed. "So help me, baby, I can't."

COWLEY was awake now and glaring at Burns. "What the hell, Joe?" rasped the black-bearded man.

"He's going to kill you!" screamed Alice. "He's going to kill you like he killed your son, Cowley. He hates you like I do. You've willed your ranch to him, Moss Cowley. He's going to marry me and we're going to live on it. How do you like that, Moss Cowley? An Allison is going to live on *your* ranch!"

Cowley cursed and moved toward his gun. Burns had him covered. Joe was shaking like a leaf.

"Don't do it, Moss!" he begged. "Don't go for your gun. Don't make me shoot. I dont wanna do it, Moss. Don't make me. I don't . . ."

"Yuh are yellow, Joe," sneered Moss. "Yuh ain't got the guts to shoot me."

His gun was across the campfire from him. He reached for it slowly—his pig-gish eyes glaring at Burns.

"Don't, Moss! Dammit, don't make another move. Dammit, I don't wanna but . . ."

Cowley's fingers closed on the gun. There was a burst of flame, and a shattering explosion. Cowley fell backward. He spoke once—and his voice was gentler than I had ever heard it.

"I'll be damned, Joe," he murmured. "I didn't think yuh had the guts."

Smokey Joe's nerve flamed higher. "Damn yuh," he rasped. "Damn yuh, Moss Cowley. Yuh lorded over us all. Remember the night yuh slapped my face. That for yuh, Moss Cowley. And this."

Another orange streak flashed toward the black-bearded man. And still another.

Then Joe Burns laughed. His laughter rang throughout the cave, echoing against the rocks. It was an eerie laughter. Alice's shrill voice rang in mirthful accompaniment.

"I did it, baby," chortled Burns. "I told yuh I would do it. Now let's ride."

Before I could say a word—if I had dared to say a word—they were gone. One moment they were standing there laughing over the body of Moss Cowley, the next minute the mouth of the cave was empty.

I was too stunned to move for a long moment. Then I lurched to my feet. My shoulder was stiff but I could walk upright. I felt I could even ride a horse.

Never had I felt so empty, so young, so helpless. I couldn't believe Alice had ridden away with Burns. But now I could understand why she had done what she did. For, in buttoning my shirt against the early morning chill, I felt a heavy wad of paper. It was the money my father had given Alice.

My horse was tethered just outside the cave. I had a wound that had never been as serious as she had pretended. Cowley lay dying at my feet and, stretching out below the mouth of the cave were the beginnings of a thousand trails, any of which I could ride in peace. For me there was the bundle of cash in my shirt, and a life free of the dreaded Cowleys. For her there was only Smokey Joe Burns—I shuddered.

I heard Cowley murmur and I bent over him. He was dying. Blood formed on his

lips in pools of froth. His eyes were sightless.

"Who's there?" he whispered.

"It's me—Chet Allison."

"The Allison button. Good."

Then, every word torturing his wounded chest: "Did yuh hear him, Button. He shot down my kid. And . . . I trailed . . . your dad . . . up here."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that he had killed my father. In death Moss Cowley was repentful of the life he had led.

"Your father, kid . . . was all right. . . . I was crazy."

Then, with a shudder and a gasp, he died right before my very eyes.

I pulled a blanket over his face. Some of his men would be back in time to bury him. Then I loaded all of the remaining food in my saddlebags and fastened Cowley's gun around my hip.

For me the trail wasn't over. There were hoofprints leading away from the cave, fresh hoofprints. I could see them far below, two small specks in the distance.

That was my trail. At the end of it I would find Smokey Joe Burns—and my sister.

Then, as I swung into the saddle, favoring my injured shoulder but still able to hold the reins, I saw two other riders climbing up the slope from the opposite direction. I slipped down from my horse, tethered him again to the bushes, and hid behind a cranny not twenty paces from the mouth of the cave. The rest of the Cowley gang were coming back. I gripped the gun-handle tightly, so tightly I could look down and see that the muscles in my hand were white from the strain of my grip. I would kill the rest of them . . . with Cowley's own gun.

I would let them come close, right up to the mouth of the cave. I would let them come so close that there was no chance of my missing.

I was glad in the next minute that I smothered the impulse to start shooting as they rode up the top crest of the slope.

For, as the first rider poked his head over the ledge, I let out a yell. I could see his hat before I could see his face. It was a black hat strung with heavy silver conchas.

And then a lean face underneath that flopping brim.

"Blaze!" I yelled, running toward him.

Behind him was the gaunt weary-eyed Pecos. He was tied tightly to his saddle with a coil of rope and Blaze was leading his horse.

Blaze grinned down at me. "Wal, if it ain't my podner from Texas," he chuckled.

He swung from his saddle and I ran into his arms. I had been a man so long; it was swell to be a little boy, and to sob on the shoulder of a man who smelled like my father—all sweaty and dirty.

"There now, podner," Blaze murmured. "There now."

FINALLY I conquered my tears and told him the story. He listened, and the grin left his thin lips. He jerked a hand toward Pecos. "I got some of it from him," he said slowly. "I picked up your trail in Dodge and slipped up on these two punks riding toward Moseley's. The other one argued with me; he won't be around any more. This one talked."

He walked into the cave, took one look at Moss Cowley, then walked back. He tightened his belt and pulled his black hat low over his face.

"Come on, podner," he said harshly. "We got some riding to do."

He cut the rope that held Pecos prisoner. "Git," he snapped. "If I ever lay eyes on yuh again, I'll twist your neck."

Pecos needed no second invitation. Blaze swung into the saddle of his roan. I was fifty yards behind him when I had untethered my horse and was also in the saddle.

I could never catch up with him. I have told you that Blaze Bush could out-ride any man I have ever seen. I'm not ashamed that it was all I could do to keep him in sight down the slope, and that finally I was following a trail with no more than the hoofprints of the roan to guide me. There wasn't a man in the West, much less a fourteen-year-old with a wounded shoulder, who could have stayed on the heels of that blue roan.

Ahead Joe Burns and Alice must be riding, too. For it was a long chase. It lasted until the afternoon sun had softened and the perspiration that had soaked my

shirt, irritating my shoulder wound, had dried.

Then, bursting through greasewood which had overgrown the trail, I came suddenly upon them. I had to jerk the paint I was riding backward to keep from running Blaze down.

For he was on foot right in front of me, his back to me, his hat over his brow, his hands loose at his side. He was walking across a small clearing with slow steps.

And fifty yards from him, also walking forward, was Smokey Joe Burns!

Burns went for his gun first. As he started to draw Alice rushed forward and caught his arm and went rolling to the ground with him.

"Shoot, Blaze!" she yelled.

Blaze's gun didn't leave its holster. He stood looking, looking. By then I had edged around until I could see his face. It was even polished leather like the seat of a saddle.

"Let him up, Alice," he ordered. "Let him have a fighting chance."

Burns rolled to his feet and pushed Alice away. She didn't protest; she lay on the ground and looked up with frightened eyes. There was a whimper from her, and then nothing more.

"Thanks, Bush," Burns said with a crooked mirthless grin.

He had been afraid when he shot down helpless Moss Cowley. Then he had needed whiskey and Alice's screams in his ears to make him shoot. But now he walked toward Blaze, matching the lean man in the black hat step for step, and he walked unafraid. Perhaps he was sure of the speed of his own guns; perhaps, in his coarse ignorant way, he was living up to the only code of honor that his narrow warped soul knew.

"For God's sake, Blaze!" I shouted.

But they walked closer and closer, and neither men made a gesture toward his gun. Now they were only ten steps apart, eyes burning into each other's. I saw a shift of Joe's right leg. Blaze saw it, too. Where both men had been motionless statues for a moment, now both were moving swiftly. Neither was frantic. Neither made a wasted motion. Two guns leaped out and two shots sounded almost simultaneously.

That was all—two shots. One from each gun.

For a moment I couldn't tell what had happened. Both of them wer standing there as if both shots had missed. Then I saw Burns drop his gun. It fell to the ground with a clatter right at the toes of his boots. He looked down at it and then up at Blaze. He seemed honestly surprised. He seemed to realize for the first time that he was hit.

His lips moved but I couldn't hear what he said. His hat dropped from his head but still he wavered there, unwilling to fall.

Then he was rocking back and forth from head to toe. Then he slumped to his knees and finally to the ground. He lay there twitching for a moment, a grin on his coarse lips. It was frozen there a few moments later when Blaze Bush bent over him and made sure that he was dead.

Blaze pushed the black hat back on his head. He seemed tired now. His eyes were dull and his mouth was drawn into a single tight line. Alice came forward hesitantly, step after step, reluctant, like she was pulling a heavy weight behind her. Then a look from him, a change of the expression in his grim face, and she fairly flew forward the remaining few steps, seeming to leap right off the ground into his arms.

Blaze looked over his shoulder at me and there was a grin on his lips, a happy boyish grin. "Better see about the hosses, podner," he said gently. "And the fire."

I understood, and I made tracks until there was enough brush between us. When men are partners on the trail, they understand each other.

THIS SIDE OF HELL

By M. HOWARD LANE

Batt Barrigan had made a name and money with his guns, and garnered his share of scars in the bargain. Now the peaceful life looked good . . . till he heard about Ft. Purgatory and the Devil's gunman.

THERE were buffalo, big as haywagons, cavorting across the shimmering sky, and antelope and deer twice their normal size racing right along after them. The sight was enough to make old Batt Barrigan wipe his black eyes and wonder if that white lightnin' snake-head Jensen had sold him was responsible, and then he chuckled.

"Nothin' but a danged mirage."

This was Indian Summer and the rutting season for deer and antelope, and their chasing was mirrored in the sky. Batt was riding through Toro Canyon toward the plains beyond, and the grassy floor of it was littered with the bleaching bones of horses General MacKenzie had slaughtered in '74 to keep the Comanches and Kiowas from regaining possession of them. Silent, save for the sound of his horse's hoofs, the canyon seemed filled with the presence of death.

Riding on to the openness of the plains he was still surrounded by death, or the next thing to it. There were a few lame, scraggy buffalo here, mixed with the running herds of antelope and deer.

Barrigan gentled Papoose, his big black stallion, and took a count on the buffalo. "Mebbe fifty, coverin' five square miles," he guess aloud. "And that ain't a day's kill for any hunter worth his salt. It's just about the way I had it figured."

Batt reloaded, snapped the gates, tipped the barrels toward the batwings, and twelve shots roared out in a sudden blur of sound.

He shifted irritably in his saddle, and paper crackled against his hip. Batt reached back, and the letter he pulled out of his pocket was dog-eared from much reading.

"Dear Batt:

I'm bringing a herd of five thousand longhorns into your Panhandle country to establish a ranch on range that I understand is free for the taking. Hope there is some open land near your Iron-Bar B. I'd like right well to have you for a neighbor.

We're planning on crossing the Canadian at Fort Purgatory, and I'll be looking forward to seeing you soon after that.

Always your friend, Tom Felder."

The post-rider who brought mail once a month to isolated Panhandle ranches had given Barrigan all the news.

"Fort Purgatory," he'd said, "looks almost like old times. Cain't spit to windward without hittin' some shag-haired old coot with a skinnin' knife in his belt and a .50 Sharps under his arm. Scrapin's of the border. Most of 'em claim to be with that old blister, Ginger Drew, a-aimin' to make a last buffer round-up. But Hell, I ain't seen over a hundred head since I crossed the Canadian, so I dunno how that old—"

"Drew, eh?" Batt's gray head had tipped back like an old firehorse hearing the clang of an engine bell. "They breed 'em no meaner. Talk usta be that he killed off his crews at the end of the season and took the hides they'd collected 'stead of divvyin' up fair and square. Last I heard of him he was down on the Rio stealin' cattle and hosses for a livin'. So he ain't come to Fort Purgatory to hunt buffers, I'll tell you that."

And after the post-rider had gone on, Batt read his letter, and felt his spine prickle. "Five thousand Texas longhorns," he'd muttered, and in a louder tone yelled for his wrangler, Jose, who was usually asleep in the kitchen.

"Get out and round-up Papoose," he'd ordered. "Throw some grub in a blanket and tie it on behind my saddle. I'm takin' a little ride."

"Where you go, boss?" the mozo had asked.

"Fort Purgatory," Batt had told him grimly. "Ginger Drew is settin' over thar with a crew of thievin' buffer hunters, claimin' they're going to make a last round-up. I got a hunch they're aimin' to make a round-up all right, but not of buffalo. Yuh see, Tom Felder is headin' this way with five thousand Texas longhorns—"

"Senor Felder?" the mozo had exclaimed. *"Si,* I remember heem. We ride to Caldwell, no, with a beeg herd and he help us sell it when other drovers they can find no markets."

"Yes," Batt had nodded. "That's Tom. A right likely youngster, and he's probably sunk every centavo he could beg, borrow, or steal into a herd that'll set him up in a man's business in a man's country."

"So you ride to Fort Purgatory to keep an eye on thees Drew, and give Senor Felder a hand, eh?" Jose had said. *"Seguro,* that is good. It is said that Senor Batt Barrigan, has never forgotten a friend or a favor. Eef there is trouble you will call for Jose, no?"

"No!" Batt had grinned. "I got a pair of Betsys that are a heap more convincin' than you!"

THOSE Betsys were on his lobo-lean thighs now. Two scarred old .45's that had seen service with the Texas Rangers and in more than a score of Texas cowtowns. But the time had come when buffalo hunters and cavalry cleared the Panhandle of bison and Indians, and free land and fat cattle grazing it had beckoned old Batt Barrigan. He'd made his name and his money with his guns, garnered his share of scars, and nearing fifty the peaceful life had looked good.

It had stayed good until the letter came and he'd listened to the post-rider's talk about Fort Purgatory and Ginger Drew. It had quit being good right then.

"And I won't be breathin' another peaceful breath," Batt grunted, "until I see Tom's longhorns safe on a spread of his choosin'."

The gun-master was riding toward Palo Duro canyon now, and once through that deep gash in the prairie floor he'd hit the south bank of the Canadian. Pushing Papoose, he bedded down for the night at the only water hole in the Palo Duro and after a frying-pan supper stretched in his soogans with his saddle for a pillow. It had been a long time since he'd used the prairie for a mattress, Batt thought sleepily, and he was enjoying it again.

"Man gets old too fast just settin' in the sun watchin' his cattle grow fat," he mumbled.

By noon the next day he was in sight of Fort Purgatory, and pausing on the bank of the Canadian, Batt studied the small community across the river.

From this distance it looked like any peaceful frontier settlement grouped about the protecting walls of the old fort itself, and once it had been he thought grimly. This was '78, and twelve years before that the fort had been established as an outpost for Indian hordes to break against. But one big fight had been enough to convince the Comanches and Kiowas and Texas Tonkawas that white soldiers, sabers and carbines were better weapons than tomahawks and arrows and they had retired to the west. The buffalo hunters had come then, and with them the backwash of the border. Brothel keepers, tinhorns, saloon-men, whiskey peddlers, gunrunners and outlaws to feast on the gold that eastern buyers were ready to pay out for prime buffalo hides.

Fort Purgatory had grown and festered under the hot sun, and laughed proudly when some adventuresome journalist had named it a place "Just this side of Hell." Ever since, Batt knew, the fort had tried to live up to its name.

And here Tom Felder was bringing five thousand prime Texas longhorns. Batt shook his head. A herd that size was one that even an honest man might covet. "And there ain't an honest man in the town!" he grunted. "Less'n it'll be me when I git there!"

The size of the odds facing him in case trouble came brought a wry smile to the old gun-master's wide lips, as Papoose stepped into the shallow crossing. He'd lived by one creed for fifty years and he wasn't going to turn his back on it now. "Ain't a cow-thief or bad man livin' that can shoot straight as an honest man," he'd always said. But there are some Batt had to admit that could come danged close.

Ginger Drew was one of them, and Batt thought again that the buffalo hunter had returned to Fort Purgatory for no good reason. A man couldn't make an honest dollar in the town. The only source of income for permanent residents came from the pay-roll of the cavalry company stationed in the fort, and from the infrequent trail-drovers like Tom Felder who chose this last outpost as a goal before crossing the Canadian into the vastness of the Texas Panhandle. Right now there probably weren't a dozen ranches in all that great area.

The Panhandle was an empire all by itself. If one man ruled it he'd be king of the west.

Papoose stepped along, and Batt hummed, "They're up to somethin'," but he couldn't foresee the vastness of the scheme that was developing here in Fort Purgatory, growing in the minds of men, like a mushroom sprouting from a bed of filth.

Icy water that jumped clear to his shoulders brought Batt from his thoughts. Papoose had stepped into a midstream hole, and Batt's first thought was for his soaked guns.

"You damned fool," he cussed himself, "you must be gettin' old and dee-crepit, crossin' a river without hanging your cutters around your neck. Serve you right if you get the misery in every joint and gunshot, too."

Papoose lurched from the hole, wading on toward the yonder shore, and Batt looked down at his dripping six-foot length. His head was tipped forward when he heard the waspish whine of lead just inches above his old black flat-crowned Stetson. A second bullet and a third whipped by on either side of him as he ducked low in his saddle and kneed the black left into the depths of an ancient buffalo wallow.

Peering cautiously over the rim of the depression, he could make out the shapes of men in the main street that fronted the fort. Guns were in their hands, and they were apparently shooting at a target placed between them and the river.

"Shootin' at a target, or me," Batt hummed. "Mebbe the buscados in this town don't like to see men come ridin' in from the Panhandle."

It was something to remember, and then a chill that started at his heels and traveled right to the top of his gray head shook the gun-master and diverted his thoughts. That water had been cold, and even with the sun shining the air had a winter nip in it.

"If you don't git outa these wet duds,"

Batt told himself disgustedly, "you'll end up with pneumony, and be no use to yourself or Tom either."

Angling out of the buffalo wallow he studied the street again and saw the group that had been shooting straggle toward one of the deadfalls across from the big log gate that opened into the adobe-walled fort.

Batt put Papoose into a lope, and his eyes stayed on Red Mike's Whiskey Barrel Saloon, where the men had gone. "Might be a good place to get the chill outa my bones," he thought, "and mebbe find out whether them hombres were shootin' at me on purpose or accidental."

A man, he'd always figured, got no place beating about the bush, and time was something that might be precious. Tom Felder would be here almost any day with five thousand Texas longhorns.

COLD to the bone, Batt still slowed Papoose to a walk as he reached the street for he was seeing far more than he'd anticipated. That post-rider hadn't exaggerated the number of men who were suddenly making Fort Purgatory their headquarters. Buffalo hunters in stained, dirty buckskins with big .50 Sharps in the hollows of their arms were strolling the dirt sidewalks, entering and leaving the few stores, the numerous saloons, and flagrantly obvious brothels.

A woman looked down at him from a second-story window, and yelled: "Hi, pop!"

Batt touched his hat. Good, bad, or indifferent, women were still women, and deserved a man's respect.

Other eyes touched him from either side, and Batt's glance roved over them in turn without appearing to do so. Fifty years of Texas living, trail-driving, ranching, and rodding the law had taught him to size up men at a glance. Figure whether they were good or bad, and likely where they'd come from. This single ride along the street would tell him much. There were tramp hunters here from everywhere. He could spot the Wyoming stamp on some, others were gangly backwoodsmen from Arkansas and Missouri. There were tough Kansas crackers mixed in with Rio Grande outlaws the Rangers had chased out of the river brakes. Most of them, Batt knew grimly, would kill a man for a dollar or his horse. He saw some of them eyeing the sleep black length of Papoose and grinned to himself. The big stallion was mighty gentle with the right man in the saddle, but he'd never seen another bronc-peeler who could ride the black for ten seconds.

The eyes were many and they were sly and stealthy, measuring the gaunt old Texan as he rode past them with a horseman's unconscious grace. Strangers might not be very welcome in Fort Purgatory, but there seemed to be more to it than that. There was a queer sense of waiting in the air. A tenseness that seemed to fill everybody, like a fever slowly heating the blood. Batt sensed it as a scarred lobo scents the smell of danger.

"Danged place is jest like a stew comin' to a boil," he muttered. "Top of the pot still looks smooth, but stick your finger in it, and you'll git burned. Which is jest perzackly what I'll likely do!"

A whitened buffalo skull, riddled with revolver and rifle bullets lay in the center of the rutty street not far from the Whiskey Barrel. It had been the target that bunch had been shooting at, Batt guessed, and he wondered a little grimly how men who could shoot a fly off a wall at ten paces could miss the buffalo head by a margin wide enough to send their lead streaking across the Canadian.

"Still don't look like it makes 'em happy to see hombres ridin' in from the Panhandle," he hummed. "But we'll find out—"

Tossing the reins over the hitch-rail in front of the Whiskey Barrel, Batt swung down and crossed the dirt walk. Spur chains jingling, he parted the batwings and stepped inside. The duskiness of the place and the smells hit him like a blanket thrown in his face, and he caught the vague movement of men about the room dropping hands toward holstered Colts.

One or a dozen had likely recognized him. The long gaunt face, and the white moustache that drooped on either side of his wide, thin mouth had been a familiar sight in Texas from the Gulf to the Red. Batt felt the old warm excitement stir his blood. He'd felt it a hundred times in border cantinas and cow-town saloons. It warmed him like a dram of good whiskey,

and his step was springy as he stepped to the rough pine bar that crossed the eastern end of the room.

His eyes were used to the dusk of the deadfall now. He counted a good two-dozen men scattered about the big room, but Ginger Drew was not among them, and he was grimly glad of that. When they met he wanted dry shells in his Colts. The buffalo hunter was one Texas regegade he'd never crossed, but Drew would know him. One inside and one outside the law, they'd both written their names in gun-smoke for all men to read.

"Gents, howdy," Batt drawled to the room at large. "Belly up to the bar and have one on me. I'm cold and tired, and I hate to git shot at when I got wet guns and cain't return the compliment. How come you gents spend bullets so careless-like?"

Somebody in the crowd that was coming forward to accept his invitation chuckled, and drawled ironically. "Shall we tell him, boys?"

A brawny red-head moved in alongside Brannigan. "I'm Red Mike," he introduced himself, "and I'm sure sorry the boys nearly plugged you. Hell, look at the business I'd a lost if they'd filled you full of holes!"

There was a general laugh, but there was watchfulness here, too. That same sense of waiting, of tension that he'd noticed out on the street. Batt couldn't understand it. Without turning his head he knew that Red Mike was measuring him, trying to fit him like a square peg into a round hole, and not quite succeeding.

When they made up their minds about me mebbe I'll start learnin' things, Batt thought.

Bottles and glasses were on the bar. He poured a healthy drink, and tossed a fifty-dollar gold piece on the counter.

"Nuff?" he asked.

"For two rounds," the barkeep nodded.

Batt chuckled and drew his long old Colts. Men watched him draw the shells, pick up a bar towel, and wipe the guns dry. Batt reloaded, snapped the gates, tipped the barrels toward the heavy log lintel above the batwings, and twelve shots roared out in a sudden quick blur of sound.

Red Mike pushed himself slowly from the bar. His shoulders were wide as the chest of a bull buffalo, and his red hair was just as curly. He squinted through roiling gun-smoke, said, "Lord, that's shootin'. B over B," he read the initials Batt had drilled into the log. "Only one man I ever heerd of could do that neater'n most men with a runnin' iron, and his name was Batt Barrigan."

"Folks have been known to call me by that handle," Batt drawled.

He reloaded calmly, murmured, "Time for me to find a room, and get out of these wet duds."

But the time wasn't ripe for him to leave yet. His guns were just back in leather when the batwings spread again, and against the background of the sunny street the man who filled the aperture was quite a sight to see. Batt stiffened involuntarily. Nobody had to tell him that he was looking at Ginger Drew, but not the Ginger Drew he had anticipated. Once the buffalo hunter had worn the greasy buckskins of his trade. Now he was resplendent in black broadcloth, and brocaded vest. Stiff boiled shirt, and string tie. Shiny gunbelts crossed his thick middle. He was an ox of a man six feet and over with gray-streaked black hair that hung to his shoulders. A handsome man in the full prime of life, and Batt guessed he probably had every women in Fort Purgatory chasing him.

Eyes black as the gun-master's own swept the room and his wide, loose lips moved as he boomed: "What's all the racket?"

"Jest me," Batt said mildly. "Got my guns a leetle wet crossin' the river and I had to see if they'd still do their duty. Target practicin' seems to be a right popular past-time around these parts."

"Depends whose doin' it!" Ginger Drew rumbled. He stopped three feet from Batt, and their eyes were on a level, but it looked like a toothpick facing a fence post, there was that much difference in their breadth. "Ain't I seen you before?" Drew demanded.

Batt shrugged. "Mebbe. I been around Texas quite some time."

"He's Barrigan," Red Mike said in a voice that whiskey had turned permanently husky.

"Got a law badge in your boot?" Drew sneered.

Batt shook his gray head. "Out here most men carry their own law," he said mildly. "I'm just in town to meet a friend," he added, and he watched Ginger Drew's taut body seem to relax. The buffalo hunter was afraid, Batt realized, and that seemed odd. He was like a nervous gambler drawing cards that would win or lose him the biggest pot of his life.

"Mebbe you're waiting for Tom Felder," Drew challenged.

IN the years long gone Batt had played his hunches, and figured he'd lived longer by doing it. He followed one now with a shrug of square shoulders. "Felder? Dunno as I've ever heer'd the name," and he saw hands that had slipped down to gun-butts slowly drop. Death had been that close and he had learned one thing at least. Ginger Drew was waiting for five thousand Texas longhorns to show up at Fort Purgatory. But there was more to it than that, he realized in the same instant. There were fifty or a hundred men in Fort Purgatory who didn't belong here, and Ginger Drew was not the man to split the profits on stolen longhorns with a crew that big.

He lifted one boot and shook it slowly. "Danged things are goin' to freeze right on my laigs if I don't git 'em off and dried out purty soon. Gents, its been nice meetin' you all. Mebbe we'll have another drink come night."

He took a step forward and Drew moved in front of him. His heavy, handsome face was not satisfied. "Yuh ain't named the man you've come to meet," he said flatly.

Batt hooked his thumbs in his belt, and he leaned a little forward. His black eyes were rapier-bright as they challenged the buffalo hunter.

"That," he drawled, "comes under the headin' of my business. Now get out of my way or make your draw!"

Ginger Drew hesitated, and Batt watched emotions whip across the man's face. Drew was not afraid of him. Drew was ready to match his draw with the gunmaster's. It was something else that held his hand, something that was like a voice that only he could hear.

He shrugged and moved aside. "No hard feelin's, Barrigan," he mumbled. "Guess mebbe I do get a little nosey now and then."

"Get huffy myself, sometimes," Batt agreed, and his spur chains were a loud jangle in the silence that filled the Whiskey Barrel. He stepped toward the door with the feeling of a man treading a narrow path above a measureless abyss.

Batt climbed Papoose, and turned him down-street, and he saw one of the buckskin men who had been in the Whiskey Barrel stroll through the batwings. He turned and moved along the walk, apparently idle, but his eyes never strayed from the black stallion and the gaunt old Texan riding him.

The man was only a couple of doors away when Batt reined down in front of the fort's only General Store. Batt watched him build a cigarette, and cursed under his breath. He'd make no move in this town that Drew didn't know about.

"Leastways not before dark," he muttered, and moved into the store.

A couple of the Post's soldiers lounged against a back counter looking at guns racked behind a dusty showcase. A dirty Tonkawa with a moth-eaten blanket about his shoulders nodded sleepily on a bench beside the big-bellied stove against the back wall. Two women in many-flounced skirts were arguing over some brazenly red material that was spread on a counter before them.

Seeing everything at a glance, Batt noticed the Indian's eyes flicker open, and they were bright as an animal's, no sleep in them. The Tonkawa was posted to see and hear everything that went on in the store, Batt realized. But why? That was the question he'd have to answer.

An' five thousand longhorns ain't but a part of it! he thought.

The owner of the store was a withered little man with a perpetually harassed look on his face. He blinked at Barrigan like a sparrow, seemed to sense that this man was better than most that entered his store. "Now you take that Indian," he complained. "He sets in here all day. Never buys a thing but gum drops! Spoils my trade. Folks don't like Tonkawas. What can I do for you, sir?"

"Jest take a look at these duds," Batt drawled, "and haul me out a new outfit from under-britches to boots. If you got

a back-room where I can make a change I'd be much obliged."

"My rooms are in back," the storekeeper was pleased with the sale. "Go right on in, poke up the fire and get warm. Be right back with the things you want." He bustled away to pull levis and flannel shirt from dusty shelves, and Batt watched the Indian stir and look after him as he moved through a door at the end of the counter. A grin moved his moustache. The Tonkawa couldn't follow him, and couldn't hear the storekeeper's talk when he came back with his clothes.

Batt was warming his naked body beside the stove when the storekeeper came in. He stood by while Batt put on the new clothes, and he kept wetting his lips and looking like he wanted to say something.

Batt eyed him. "Spit out," he invited.

"Ain't you, ain't you," the storekeeper stammered, "that famous ex-Ranger, Batt Barrigan?"

"I'm Batt Barrigan, but I ain't famous."

The storekeeper's face took on a relieved look. "So they ain't blind as I figured 'em to be," he sighed. "Callin' *you* in—"

"I allus like to be called to supper," Batt drawled, "but nobody ain't invited me to visit this hell-hole."

The store-keeper's mouth sagged. "Then the Army's still blind," he said waspishly. "Things goin' on right under their noses and they don't see it!"

"What things?" Batt asked with apparent carelessness.

"Everything!" the store-keeper complained. "All these horse-thieves, and buffalo hunters and Tonkawas. The Indians ain't bad as the rest of 'em. Those hunters, and fellers who call 'emselves hunters, come in my store and demand things on credit. Guns and ammunition mostly. They'll never pay me, I know they never will, but what can I do? They'll kill me and take everything if I don't let 'em have what they want. They've carted off all my picks and shovels, and farm tools now."

Batt lifted his head and he couldn't hide his interest. *"Farm tools?"*

"Funny gear for buffalo hunters to be wantin'!" the store-keeper nodded. "Funnier yet when you know they're puttin' the stuff into wagons down-river in that grove of trees a half mile south. Guns too, and powder. That Ginger Drew claims they're going out to round-up the last of the buffalo in this territory, but did you ever see hunters and skinners start out carryin' no salt to cure the hides they take? I got barrels of it in my storeroom, but they don't want it. Powder and ball and farm tools, runnin' irons, blacksmith stuff. Somethin's afoot, I can tell you that, but that leetle shave-tail lieutenant in charge of the Fort, what does he do about it? Jest nothin,' that's what! Sez he ain't seen where these men have been breakin' laws."

"Folks close to things," Batt said slowly, "sometimes never see what is right under their noses. Cain't blame the soldiers and their officers. Life gits mighty boresome a-tween paydays. Mebbe I better go see that lieutenant. What do folks call him?"

"Akers is his name. Jim Akers, and he won't listen to me. Mebbe he will to you."

"Mebbe," Batt said briefly.

THIRTY minutes later he was in the Post Commandante's office, seated across from the young West Point man who was very conscious of his importance in this, his first command.

"Yes sir," he was saying patronizingly, "I have heard of you, sir. Ranger, lawman, etc. And now you have retired to the, ah, Panhandle. Great country that. I, ah, haven't seen it yet, but that famous buffalo hunter, Mr. Drew, has told me much about it. Fine man, Mr. Drew. Going out to clear the plains of the last buffalo. Open up the range for you cattlemen."

"We got lots of range now," Batt said mildly. "What we need is more cattle and decent men to keep an eye on 'em. Speakin' of cattle, a young friend of mine is bringin' a herd of five thousand longhorns this way, and I've come along to sorta guide him back to the Panhandle. Might be you could spare us a few soldiers to kinda act as extry guards when they get here."

The lieutenant flushed. His hair was corn yellow, and his skin was fair. Give him a little time, Batt thought, and he'd make a good man, but right now he was a big frog in a mightly little, mighty stinking puddle.

"My men are fully occupied, sir," he said stiffly. "In case of obvious danger, you can, of course, call on us for assistance."

"Danger sometimes ain't so obvious," Batt observed. "You ever stopped to won-

der why Drew ain't got no salt in his wagons, and why he needs barr'l's and barr'l's of powder and ball to kill a couple of hundred mangy old buffers?"

The lieutenant rose. Plainly the interview was at an end. "I never," he looked down his nose at Barrigan, "poke into other people's private affairs. Good afternoon, sir!"

"An' that's that," Batt thought. He hobbled back out to the street. The new boots were tight. He cursed them and the river and Fort Purgatory, and Tom Felder for ever picking this point to cross. He even cussed himself.

"You must be gittin' old. Things don't come to you quick as they usta. Somethin' plain as the long nose on your face is brewin' right here, and when she breaks Fort Purgatory is goin' to really live up to her name!"

He had his supper in the town's only restaurant, and idled afterwards over a cigar, glowering at the glowing tip. Across the street another buckskin man had taken the place of the first one to watch him.

"They're goin' to have lots to tell Drew" Batt muttered. "Damn these boots, they weren't made for walkin'—"

And he was going to have plenty of that to do come night-fall. Those wagons in the grove down-river interested him. It would be worth a man's time to look them over before retiring to the bed the storekeeper had offered his famous customer.

He was facing the open door, sitting all alone at one of the restaurant's tables, fingering a cup of coffee he didn't want. A dusty window also faced the street, and it suddenly shattered with a sharp crackle. So did the coffee cup, spattering brown fluid over the gun-master's new blue shirt. The rifle's report came from across the street, but it was drowned by the sudden clatter of target practice in front of Red Mike's deadfall.

BATT went sidewise out of his chair, and both of his Colts were in his hands as he moved in a crouch to the window and ruthlessly swept the rest of the glass from the frame. Black powder smoke drifted lazily from behind the second story falsefront of a vacant store building across the street, and he eyed it disgustedly. There was no use trying to locate the dry-gulcher who had fired at him. The man would be off the roof and gone before he could even reach the street.

He straightened and turned back to find other restaurant patrons crawling out from beneath their tables. "Hell," Batt told them, "he wasn't shootin' at you!"

One customer was bold enough to ask: "Why was he tryin' to plug you?

Batt gave the man a sour glance. "I'd give a nickel to know, mister!"

He went back to his table and sat down, and signaled the big-eyed waitress. "Coffee," he said. "Black. And you tell George out there in the kitchen to put a horn of whiskey in the cup first."

The coffee came back, well-spiked. Batt sipped it and grunted. "Ginger didn't like me goin' to see that lieutenant. Evidently he don't want folks knowin' he's got that young shave-tail hoodwinked." But why Drew had gone to so much trouble to gain the commandante's confidence was another question, like all the others he couldn't answer.

Night was deepening, and a big Indian Summer moon was rising out of the east, looking down on Fort Purgatory and the Panhandle, and the herd Tom Felder was bringing here.

The thought stirred Barrigan and he rose, pressing a gold piece into the hands of the waitress. "I'm goin' out through the kitchen," he murmured.

The girl looked at the double eagle in her hand and sighed. "I don't blame you. Come back again—"

Hobbling along in the new boots, Batt stayed behind the row of buildings facing the street until he reached the Canadian. Crouched in the shelter of the buffalo wallow that had sheltered him that afternoon, he searched the moon-bright street. Men moved about it. Too many, he thought again, but none of them seemed interested in the river. The guard assigned to watch him was going to have some explaining to do, he thought wickedly.

A single fire flamed in the grove downstream, like a candle in a dark room. Batt used the flame as his guide. East and south stretched the plains, and as he made his slow way toward the trees, sound that he first thought was the murmur of the river came to him from that direction. But gradually the rhythm changed. It was not

the peaceful mumble of water he was hearing.

Cattle were running out there on the sounding board of the prairie. Stampeding cattle. Thousands of them, coming toward Fort Purgatory!

"Tom's herd," Batt murmured. "God-a-mighty, they couldn't be gettin' here at a wuss time."

HE increased his pace as best he could, staying in the shadow of the river bank until he was alongside the grove of hickory and walnut that had been an Indian camp-site long before white men had ever heard of the Canadian and these vast plains that stretched away to meet the horizon.

"Times I wish we'd left the Indians keep this damned country!" Batt panted.

Pressed against the bank, he stared into the grove. Moonlight splotched the ground almost bright as morning sun. Shadows stood out sharply. He could see the single fire, and the vast canvas-topped shapes of wagons circling it. They were Conestogas and Pittsburghs, prairie schooners such as settlers had used to travel the Oregon Trail.

"Never saw buffer hunters set out for the Plains in them kind of rigs," Batt thought.

The rumble of that distant herd was growing like thunder now, filling the air with waves of sound, and Batt saw men start up from about the fire, and head for the edge of the grove.

"First good thing that cussed Tom has done for me yet," Batt grunted under his breath, and he eased up the bank. Doubled over in a low run he forgot his tight boots. Those strange wagons were enough to make a man forget anything. They were well-guarded, too. With all the deadfalls and brothels to fill the evening with pleasure, Ginger Drew had an iron control over his band, otherwise six of them would never be staying here. Sound of that approaching herd had drawn them from their duty.

Batt slid in alongside the closest wagon. He went up over the front wheel like a monkey climbing a pole. The flap behind the driver's seat was closed but not tied. He stepped through and into the runway down the center of the big Conestoga. Boxes and bales of goods that had never been purchased in Fort Purgatory filled the wagon to the tent-roof.

Snap-blade hunting knife open, Batt ruthlessly slashed into some of the burlap wrapped bales. His fingers told him he had found blankets, many blankets.

"Indians like 'em," he thought. " 'Ticularly squaws."

A packing case gave off a tinny rattle as his foot touched it. He pried open the lid, and his fingers told him he's found a case of trinkets. Cheap jewelry. Necklaces. Combs. The kind of stuff traders had used in the days of the Santa Fe Trail to win the trust of the Comanches.

Another case was filled with straw, and in it he felt the smooth sheen of something lethal. Rifles. Touch was enough to tell him they were better guns than the carbines the Fort soldiery possessed.

A man had to respect anyone with the audacity of Ginger Drew. That buffalo hunter had dreamed a great, evil dream and he was well-prepared to execute it.

"The Panhandle," Batt said to himself as he moved back to the front of the wagon. "That's his aim. He's goin' to roll in there with all his wagons and a hundred men, killin' and pillaging as he goes. He'll claim the whole danged thing, set up a Rebel Empire. All the Tonkawas in Texas will slip in to join him. So'll the Comanches and Kiowas and Arapahoes from the Territory. That's why he's carryin the geegaws. It'll pay 'em off a heap sight better'n gold, and if he can last thirty days he'll have an Army to back him that'll fight all-comers, including Cavalry!"

THE plan was magnificent, wickedly vast in scope. Batt could see as he clambered down over the wheel again why Drew had waited this long to put his scheme into execution. Tom Felder's cattle were the key. Somehow he'd learned they were coming this way, and there was no better cover for men racing to claim an empire than a herd the size of Tom's. If the lieutenant's Company tried to trail them and close in for a battle the herd could be turned back, stampeded, and no column could keep order against them.

His feet were just about numb inside the tight boots, and he stumbled as he struck the hard sod. That stumble saved

his life for a voice cried from over near the fire, "What's there?"

"T'ain't one of us!" another answered, and flame lanced from the muzzle of a .50 Sharps.

The half ounce slug passed with a banshee wail over Batt's head and he heard it thunk solidly into the wheel behind him, then he had his own Colts out of leather.

The song of lead was familiar music. "Come on, you yellow-bellies!" Batt roared. "There ain't a shirt-tail crook livin' can shoot straight as an honest man."

But one had had more presence of mind than the rest. Batt heard the sudden drum of hoofs racing upstream, and he knew that Ginger Drew would soon know that an enemy had visited their camp.

"He'll know who 'tis, too," Batt thought grimly, and he let his Colts buck again. They were hot in his hands, and there were five dead men in the clearing about the fire.

Methodically, Batt punched spent shells from his smoking guns, and slammed home fresh loads. His ears had already told him where the cavvy was located. He headed toward the snorting broncs disturbed by the sound of gun-fire. A bridle hung on a tree that was one post in the crude rope corral Drew's men had fashioned here in the grove. Batt snatched it, tossed it over the head of the closest horse. There was no time to waste in hunting a saddle somewhere in the shadows.

One leap put him aboard the stolen animal, and bending low he slashed the ropes that formed the corral. The rest of the horses streamed through the break as he led the way.

Batt grinned. Men without mounts beneath them wouldn't get very far with their empire building. But there were still plenty of horses in Fort Purgatory, and the smile faded from his lips as he headed down the same avenue that other rider had used to leave the grove. Once in the open the rumble of the herd filled the night, and swinging eastward, Batt could make out a vague blur that was like the crest of a dark wave engulfing the prairie.

Cursing, he kicked the mount under him into a full gallop as he saw a pinprick of light stab out in front of the running cattle. Tom and his crew were trying to turn the herd, start it milling.

"And that ain't the right answer to hand Mr. Ginger Drew," Batt growled. "Him and his plan to take over the Panhandle. The cuss wanted Tom's cattle. By God, we'll give 'em to him, but not the way he expects!'

TEN minutes later he was telling his plan to Tom Felder, riding a lathered bronc at the point of his herd.

"Keep the critters runnin'," he ordered. "Ain't much time now to be givin' you why-for's and where-for's, but there's a hundred buckskin devils in Fort Purgatory aimin' to take over your herd, salivate your crew and haid for the Panhandle to set up a rebel empire. I've jest finished turnin' nigh on fifty of their broncs loose, but there's probably another fifty or more cayuses hitched along the street frontin' the Fort.

"P'int this herd straight through town! They'll skin it clean as a whistle, and I'm bettin' some of Ginger Drew's men will be so put out about it that they'll start throwin' lead at yuh and your crew. Once that happens the shave-tail lootenant in charge of the garrison will be ready to bring out his men to give yuh the protection you'll need. Fact is I'll be right in thar to prod him a little if he needs it."

"Bueno!" Tom Felder had lost his hat in the wild run of his herd, and his blond hair streamed back from his square-cut young face as he nodded. "A pesky wild cayuse runnin' through the herd set it off just after we bedded down for the night, and long as they were pointed in the right direction we let 'em run. But I figgered the time had come to turn 'em until you showed up. Now I'll pass the word to let 'em go, but there ain't goin' to be much left of that town after these longhorns get through with it!"

"There'll be too much," Batt yelled grimly. "Tell your vaqueros to cut down on airy cuss who raises a hand ag'in ye. We're playin' this game for keeps, amigo. Keep your own eyes peeled and six loads in your guns. I'll see the Army is set to back yuh up—"

He was kicking his mount into a run toward the lights of Fort Purgatory as he spoke, cursing the lack of spurs and saddle. He wasn't going to have a minute to waste. "Drew's devils are probably

honin' to get a shot at me right now. I'll be lucky if I ever see that lootenant."

But the townsmen immersed in its nights debauchery, seemed unaware of the devastation roaring down upon them. The street was lined with horses and a few buckboards. They'd be kindling inside the next thirty minutes, Batt thought grimly, but he doubted if a single honest owner would complain if he knew the loss would be a sacrifice to a free Texas.

No bullets came searching for him as he ran his stolen mount down the main street. Where was Drew? The hunter should know by now that he'd visited their camp.

He learned the answer to that as he reached the big fort gate and the bored sentry there. Swinging down from his bareback mount, Batt snapped: "Where's Lieutenant Akers! I've got to see him at once. This is urgent, corporal."

"Ye do look a bit in a hurry," the Irish corporal agreed, "a-ridin' off your saddle. So I guess it'll be all right for you to go to his quarters. They're right across the compound. Ye'll see the light. He's entertainin' company right now. That Ginger Drew come bustin' in here ten minutes ago, sayin' he was in a hurry, too."

"Did he now?" Batt drawled, and a smile lifted one corner of his moustache. "Remind me to buy you a dram the next night you get leave!"

"That I will, sir!" the corporal answered, but he spoke to thin air for the gun-master was already past him, pacing across the compound light as a cat in boots he had no time to think about now.

There were other things on his mind. Ginger Drew as paying the lieutenant no social call. He'd had word from the camp of their visitor and come straight here.

"Interestin'," Batt murmured, and he brought a revolver from its holster as he moved to the door of the lieutenant's adobe quarters. "Might be a good idee if I didn't bother knockin'—"

The pound of cloven hoofs nearing the fort town was plainly audible now. Those cattle would be hitting the street and flimsy sheds and outhouses like an avenging tide, within the space of minutes. Drew knew it, and Drew had come here instead of staying with his men.

"Up to somethin'," Batt thought, and he lifted the door-latch and kicked the plank panel inward.

But he had made one mistake. He had stayed in the square of lamplight that rushed out as the door opened, and Ginger Drew with a Colt already in his own hand recognized the gun-master's gaunt shape. He was standing behind Lieutenant Akers seated at a book-covered table with the lamp at his elbow. The lieutenant's face looked thin and sick, but as his eyes touched Barrigan he flung his arm and body sidewise using himself as a flail to take the lamp to the floor.

They fired almost together as light faded, and Batt flung himself forward and down across the threshold, hearing lead pass just above his head. He shot once, then again methodically at the gun-flash across the room, and he heard the table break apart with a splintering crash as the weight of the hunter's body struck it.

"Damn you, Barrigan," his fading words were like an epitaph. "My plans were made, there was glory ahead—"

"No glory," Batt said to dead ears, "for men who try to break up Texas—"

He was climbing tiredly to his feet when the lieutenant's voice reached him. "You were right in everything you told me this afternoon, sir," he said in shaken tones. "Drew came to see me with a gun in his hand awhile ago. He came to kill me before I could issue any orders to aid you. His men are planning on taking over your friend's herd when it quits stampeding—"

Batt chuckled. "It ain't goin' to quit runnin' till it's across the Canadian," he said dryly. "Likely it'll take a good part of your town right along. Stampedin' longhorns do things like that. Listen—"

There were wild yells sounding out on the street, the sudden, rough crackle of gunfire, and Lieutenant Jim Akers was past the gun-master yelling for his adjutant. Batt listened, and he was still smiling. Soon it would be "Boots and Saddles," and buckskin men cooling their heels in boothill or the fort's guardhouse.

"While Tom and me keep ridin' for the Panhandle," he said to himself, "toward land that's free for the right kind of men—"

RIDE HOME TO DIE

By H. A. DEROSSO

The ex-con might have settled down smooth and calm if eager townsfolk hadn't read death into his eyes . . . and revenge in the black handled six-shooter riding his hip.

THE little Eight-Wheeler gave out one long, sobbing wail of its whistle and then the train began slowing down for the stop at Bend. Jody McGinnis got up from his seat and made his way down the lurching aisle of the coach until he passed through the door and stood on the open platform, watching the first few buildings of Bend passing him by one by one and thinking kind of bitterly that here he was home after two and a half years.

He was coming home in a somewhat different manner than he had left. Two and a half years ago he had been handcuffed to Sheriff Masters who was taking young Jody McGinnis to the state penitentiary...

The conductor pushed ahead of Jody, dropping first to the depot platform as the train squealed to a halt, and Jody was right on the conductor's heels, stepping out across the platform and looking about him with a mixture of longing and bitterness.

Bend hadn't changed much in thirty months. A little bit drier, a little bit more warped and drab, but still the same old Bend that he had known since he'd been a little boy. He had not thought it would be so but there was something good in the sight of the weathered buildings with their peeling coats of paint and the few vagrant white clouds hanging up above the Tetons. But the good of it did not last long for the old bitterness and anger came sweeping down over him and all welcome went out of sight of his town . . .

He turned to start up Ferris Street and found Sheriff Ben Masters quartering across the street to intercept him. Jody McGinnis stopped and placed his thumbs in his shell belt and waited with a little dry smile on his lips.

Sheriff Ben Masters stepped up on the boardwalk and stamped the dust from his boots with a quick, sharp motion that set his spurs to jingling.

"Hello, Jody," Masters said. "So you've come back to Bend?"

"Yeah," Jody said, sweeping his eyes up the street and then back to the thick, squat body of the sheriff.

"I thought maybe you weren't coming back any more," the sheriff went on. "You were let out six months ago . . ."

"I hired out," Jody said. "Herding sheep . . . No one else would hire an ex-con." He ran his fingers over his cheeks, smiling faintly. "I had to get my complexion back and save enough to buy—an outfit . . ."

The sheriff looked Jody McGinnis' lean length up and down, dwelling mostly on the sight of the black-handled sixshooter riding Jody's right hip.

Lifting his eyes from the gun to Jody's thin, hard face, Masters said, "We want no trouble from you, Jody."

"Trouble? Who said I'd give you trouble?"

"When I took you to the pen you said you'd come back when you got out and get even with Pete Brackett. You said Pete framed you into the pen but that you'd square things with him someday . . . I haven't forgotten, Jody . . ."

Jody's lips thinned. "Maybe you've forgotten that this is my home, Ben. I've got a little place here that used to belong to my pa. It's mine and it's my home . . . Remember, Ben?"

"Yeah. I remember . . . I remember, too, that there was a different look in your eyes before you went to the pen. You're hard now, Jody, and on the prod. It's written all over you . . . So just take it easy, won't you?"

"You mean that, Ben?"

"I do . . ."

"Then just don't get in my way. I won't be pushed around. Get that? I won't be pushed around . . ."

HE went into the lobby of the Laramie Hotel and asked for a room. The girl behind the desk looked at him with recognition in her eyes and he knew her, too, but he gave no greeting and neither did she. Jody McGinnis was in no mood for talk.

The girl said quietly, "I'll show you to your room . . ."

He followed her up the stairs, noting that her step was so soft as to make no sound while the stairs creaked and whined under him. Her hair, done up in a knot on the back of her head, was a golden brown, the same color as her eyes, he recalled . . .

They walked down the hall and she stopped in front of a door, unlocking it and pushing it open. He stepped across the threshold and glanced briefly over the room, at the brass bedstead and its Navaho blanket and the chest of drawers and the porcelain pitcher and basin.

His eyes came back to the girl to find her studying him. "You're Laura Lee," he said.

She nodded.

"Where's your brother, Jim?"

"He died last winter. Pneumonia. I'm

Laura was like a tigress as she threw herself in front of Jody and dared Masters to shoot.

running the hotel now . . ."

"I'm sorry about Jim. He was the only one in Bend who believed in me . . ."

He walked over to the window that looked out on all the rooftops of Bend and in the distance he could see the Tetons with the white clouds still hanging over them. Somewhere out there was his little rundown ranch but he had no desire to see it. He'd wait here in Bend until he'd done what he wanted to do and then he'd ride away, and let his ranch lie there and the buildings crumble and rot . . .

He turned his head and Laura Lee was still in the doorway watching him. His lips curved bitterly. "Am I the first ex-con you've ever seen, Laura?"

Color swept over his face but her eyes did not waver and she ignored his sarcasm. She said, "Why did you come back, Jody?"

"Do I have to go into that with you, too?"

Color was still in her face. "Why didn't you stay away?"

Anger swept through him like the heat of wine. In three long strides he was across the room, standing before her with clenched fists.

"I belong here," he said savagely. "I own a ranch here. This is my home. Why shouldn't I come back? I've done my time. Must I be an outcast from now on?"

She turned to go, her face pale and shaken, but he reached out, catching her arm. "I'm sorry," he said. "I had a little run-in with Ben Masters. He jumped me soon as I got off the train and told me I should have stayed away from Bend and now that I was back anyhow to keep out of trouble . . . That got me mad, Laura. I'm sorry I took it out on you . . ."

She smiled up at him. "That's all right, Jody. I understand."

"I've had a tough time of it, Laura. Pete Brackett planted one of his cow hides under my hay stack and told how I'd been butchering and selling his cows. Only Jim Lee believed me when I said I was innocent. Jim hired a lawyer for me because he knew I was broke. Jim knew I wasn't guilty. But he was the only one . . .

"Because my pa was hanged for a horse thief, everybody reckoned I was taking after him and that a stretch in the pen would do me good. So they believed Pete Brackett's story and gave me two years in the pen. Then right after I'd gone, Brackett married my girl . . ."

"That's why you should have stayed away, Jody," the girl said gently. "Everybody has been expecting you to come back and square things with Pete Brackett. And they've been saying that if you so much as try it, this time they'll put you away for good . . . Can't you see how it is, Jody? Why don't you go away somewhere and start all over. You've got your whole life ahead of you. Why throw it away just to fulfill a grudge?"

"Who says I want to fill a grudge?"

"I can see it in you, Jody. In the way you talk, the way you walk. You're cold and bitter, Jody. I remember when you were just an easy-going kid, always laughing. You don't laugh any more, Jody, and that's because of what you want to do . . ."

He shook his head. "It's no good, Laura. I'm here and I'm staying."

"You're your own boss, Jody . . ."

THE man was standing in front of the Texas bar and when he saw Jody McGinnis coming down Ferris Street the fellow struck out briskly on the walk to meet Jody.

He wrung Jody's hand and clapped his back and cried, "How are you, Jody? Gee, it's good to see you, kid . . ."

Jody said quietly, "Hello, Yancey . . ."

Yancey Johnson pushed his hat back on his head and looked Jody up and down. Yancey's face sobered. "They didn't put any weight on you, did they?"

"I didn't serve my time braiding bridles . . ."

"Well, you're out, kid, and that's good. I heard you came in on the train and I've been hanging around here waiting to meet you. Come on in Tex's place and have a drink on me . . ."

Yancey Johnson kept saying how good it was to have Jody home and how good it was to see him again and Jody just walked along beside Yancey, thinking that he must be doing pretty good with his wearing fancy hand-stitched boots and a cream-colored stetson that must have set him back plenty and sporting a fancy pearl-handled sixshooter . . .

But Yancey would be doing good. He was that kind. He had no scruples and no conscience and he didn't like hard work.

They were of an age, Jody McGinnis and Yancey Johnson, and they had grown up together and Jody remembered now how Yancey had always derided Jody's efforts to make a go of his sorry little ranch and Jody began to wonder if maybe Yancey hadn't been right all the time.

They went into the Texas Bar and took their drinks and sat down at a table in a back corner of the barroom. Yancey Johnson traced circles on the table top with the wet bottom of his shot glass.

He murmured, "So you've come back to Bend. I thought maybe you'd decided never to return when you didn't show up right after they let you out . . ."

"I had to work," Jody said. "I had to get a little stake first . . ."

"So you came back," Yancey murmured. He looked up quickly, sharply, staring with squinted eyes at Jody. "To settle with Pete Brackett?"

"What makes you think I want to settle with Brackett?"

Yancey looked down at the table and began tracing wet circles again. He said quietly, "He framed you into the pen. He took your girl away from you. What more reason could any man have for killing another?"

Jody tensed, lips twitching as that old, hot anger pulsed through him again.

"What makes you think I want to kill Pete Brackett, Yancey?"

Yancey Johnson shrugged. "That's what you came back to Bend for, isn't it, Jody? Quit trying to kid me. I know that. Everybody in Bend knows that. They've been expecting you to show up here with a tied-down gun and death in your eyes for the past six months. You could use a little help, kid. Come on and let me in on your plans. I'll side you."

"The way you sided me two and a half years ago?" Jody said acidly.

Yancey flushed a little but asked quietly, "What do you mean by that, kid?"

"Where were you when I was on trial? Why weren't you siding me then?"

"What could I have done, Jody? How could I have helped you?"

"I don't know. Maybe you couldn't have helped me at all. But you didn't even offer to help. You could have done that at least . . ."

"Aw, forget it, Jody. They had the goods on you . . . Let's get back to this. What are you gonna do about Pete Brackett?"

Jody brought his hand down hard on the table, rocking the glasses. "Why are you so anxious to have me kill Brackett, Yancey? What's in it for you?"

"I don't get you, Jody . . ."

"You get me all right. You've never backed anybody unless there was something in it for you . . . What has Pete Brackett got on you? Has he finally caught you butchering his cows? That's what you were doing two and a half years ago. That's what I took a rap for. For somebody else. Likely you.

"You were too smart to be caught. Somebody planted a couple hides off Brackett's butchered cows under one of my haystacks. I don't know who did the planting. Maybe Brackett himself. He wanted to get rid of me so he'd have the inside track with my girl. So he had me sent to the pen . . .

"Where do you fit in, Yancey? Why do you want me to kill Brackett for you?"

Yancey had risen to his feet. His smile was somewhat half-hearted and artificial. "Take it easy, Jody," he said. "Take it easy, kid. You're all upset. I'm sorry, kid. I didn't mean it that way a-tall. Just forget it, Jody, huh? Come on and have another drink and let's forget all about it . . . Huh?"

Jody got to his feet, turning his back on Yancey. "I'm going to my room," Jody said wearily, "and sleep. I haven't slept in a decent bed for two and a half years. I'm gonna lie down and sleep way into the middle of tomorrow . . . No, Yancey. I won't have another drink with you. And the next time we meet, watch your talk . . . All right?"

THE sound worked into his consciousness, slowly, and he lay there on the bed a moment, trying to place it in his memory. Then the sleep wore out of his mind and he realized that someone had been knocking on his door. He pushed up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, aware now that he had lain down on the bed fully clothed this afternoon and dropped off into a heavy sleep.

The room was dark but he could make out that his door was open and he was fumbling for his sixshooter and shell belt

that he had hung over the bedstead when he heard the whisper:

"Jody! Jody! Are you awake?"

His fingers had found the handle of his gun and he slopped it quickly out of holster and asked, "Who is it?" But the faint scent of her perfume reached him then and he knew . . .

"It's me. Laura . . ."

"Why the hush-hush?" he asked. "Have you run out of lamps and candles?"

He rose to his feet and struck a match, intending to light the lamp on the chest of drawers but Laura bent her head quickly, blowing out his match.

"You've got to get out of here, Jody," she whispered urgently. "Ben Masters is looking for you. Pete Brackett was shot in the back this evening as he was riding to Bend. Masters will be here any time to pick you up. They figure you did the shooting . . ."

Jody sucked in his breath sharply. "So that's how it is," he said bitterly. "I've got to take the rap a second time for something I didn't do . . ."

"You've got to get out of here, Jody. Masters will check up here first of all . . ."

"Where will I go?"

"Come," she said taking his hand and he hurriedly grabbed his shell belt off the bedstead and went with her. She led him down the corridor and on the landing they could hear Ben Masters' heavy voice addressing the clerk:

"You seen Jody McGinnis around here lately, Joe?"

The clerk mumbled a reply and Jody quickly strapped his shell belt on, saying, "Ben will have the back stairs covered. He's a thorough man. I'll have to wait here until he comes up the stairs and throw down on him and use him as a shield to get me out of town . . ."

"You can hide in here," Laura said, indicating a room. "This is my room. Masters won't look in here."

The stairs began to whine and creak and mingled with the sounds was the jingling of the sheriff's spurs.

"Quick, Jody," Laura whispered.

He slipped into the room and Laura stood in the half open door until Ben Masters popped into view and then she stepped out to meet him, closing the door. Jody's gun was in his hand and he pressed his ear against the door.

"Why, hello, Sheriff Masters," Laura said. "What brings you here?"

"I want Jody McGinnis. Is he here?"

"I don't know, sheriff. I've been in my room. I was going to go to bed and then I heard you downstairs . . ."

There was a pause and then Laura's hasty voice, "The walls are very thin, sheriff—and my door was open so I heard you talking to, Joe . . ."

Jody heard the footsteps proceeding down the hall and a door open and a minute later the footsteps again, receding, and Ben Masters' muffled call:

"Anybody come down these back stairs, Sam?"

Then the footsteps up the hall and the opening of many doors and Jody waited with his teeth set and the gun handle wet with the sweat of his palm.

Now it was his door's turn to be opened and Laura said, laughing a little, "This is my room, sheriff. I can assure you Jody McGinnis isn't in there . . ."

A pause and then Ben Masters said, "I reckon you're right. Come on, Sam. Jody wouldn't come back to town after shooting Pete. We'll get a few of the boys together and ride the hills. Damn Jody anyhow . . ."

THE stairs squealed again and then the door opened and Laura entered. Jody watched her as she lit the lamp and turned to face him. He caught her eyes and held them and she did not look away.

"Why did you do it?" he asked quietly.

"Because you didn't shoot Pete Brackett."

"Everyone else seems to think so."

"You were in your room, sleeping. You couldn't have shot Brackett."

"I could have shot him and then sneaked back and just pretended I'd been sleeping since this afternoon."

She lowered her eyes now and there was a catch in her voice. "Don't talk like that, Jody. If it had been you, you'd have faced Pete Brackett and given him a square chance. You never would have shot him in the back."

"Thanks," he said, smiling gently at her, the first genuine smile since the day he'd been sentenced to the pen.

She smiled back at him and he saw a trace of moisture in her eyes. She said,

"What are you going to do now, Jody?"

"Get the man who really shot Pete Brackett."

"Do you know who he is?"

'Sure. Yancey Johnson. It can't be anyone else. Everything ties in. He planted those hides in my haystack, figuring if I'd be sent to the pen the pressure would be off him. Ben Masters had started to watch Yancey pretty close and he must have figured if someone else took the rap, they'd ease up on him.

"Besides, he was kind of sweet on Susan Eberhart, too. But she never gave him a tumble. I reckon he wanted me out of the way but then Susan married Pete Brackett instead . . .

"Tell me, Laura. Has there been any open trouble between Yancey and Pete Brackett?"

"Why, yes! Brackett has been losing cows right along and has ordered Yancey to keep far away from the Rafter B. They tangled in a card game argument about a year ago and Brackett gave Yancey quite a going over . . ."

Jody grinned faintly. "Yancey never was much with his fists . . . Well, that's that, Laura. Yancey shot Pete Brackett, knowing I'd get the blame for it. He never forgets a grudge. He shot Brackett all right. Now to get him to admit it . . ."

"But he'll never admit it, Jody."

"He'll admit it," Jody said quietly. "I'll make him admit it. . . ."

He put his hand on the door knob and she was beside him. He looked down at her, the scent in her hair and her nearness doing strange things to him.

He said slowly, "I'm not much good, Laura. I'll tell you now that I really came back to Bend to kill Pete Brackett. I really believed he framed me just to get Susan Eberhart and the only comfort I ever got in the pen was thinking of the day I'd come back to Bend and face Pete Brackett in the middle of Ferris Street and shoot him down.

"That's the kind of man I am, Laura," he said, pulling her close to him, expecting her to struggle and protest but instead her arms were around him and her lips unhesitatingly on his.

He released her after a while and she whispered, "Be careful, Jody. Please be careful. . . ."

Exuberance flowed through him like wine. "You bet I'll be careful, Laura . . . I've got something to be careful for now. . . ."

YANCEY JOHNSON lived in a back room of the Texas Bar. Jody McGinnis stole down the dark alley until he came to the rear of the Texas Bar and then he sidled along the wall of the place until he could peer through a side window and he saw Yancey dealing stud, his hat pushed back on his blond hair and the lamplight flashing from the pearl handle of his six-shooter.

Jody made his way back to the rear and pried open the window of Yancey's room, pulling himself over the sill and he was inside and now all there was to do was sit down on the bed and wait for Yancey. . . .

It was close to midnight when the door knob rattled and Jody quickly rose to his feet, curving his fingers about the handle of his gun as the door pushed in, briefly framing Yancey Johnson against the dim light in the corridor.

Yancey struck a match and lit the lamp, his back to Jody and then Yancey turned, seeing Jody, and Yancey gasped a little and brushed his fingers against the pearl handle of his gun. Jody half-drew his six-shooter, saying softly:

"You wouldn't pull a gun on me, would you, Yancey? Or would you?"

Yancey held his right hand far away from his holster. He laughed shakily. "Why, Jody, you gave me a scare.... What are you doing here? The whole town's on the lookout for you. Pete Brackett was shot and they don't expect him to live. They're saying you did it. You better get out of Bend and get fast, Jody, kid. . . ."

Jody circled to the door, never turning his back on Yancey, and took a chair and wedged it under the door knob, blocking entry into the room. Yancey's lips twitched . . .

"What you up to, Jody?"

"I want you to talk."

"Talk? . . . Talk?"

"You shot Pete Brackett. You framed me into the pen. I want you to write that down and sign it and then I'm giving the paper to Ben Masters."

"Why, Jody, kid, where did you get such crazy ideas?"

Jody clenched his fists and stepped forward. "Start writing, Yancey, or I'll pound that pretty face of yours until it looks like a piece of raw beef."

Yancey stared at Jody's face and color went out of Yancey's countenance and he licked his lips and said, "Sure, Jody. Sure. . . ."

He turned to the chest of drawers, pulling the top drawer open, revealing several sheets of paper and a pen and bottle of ink. He placed a sheet of paper on top of the chest and the ink bottle beside it and picked up the pen in his left hand.

He started to turn, saying, "What do you want me to write, Jody?" but even as he was moving and talking he raked out suddenly with one spurred boot, stabbing the sharp rowel into Jody's leg. Pain stabbed to Jody's brain and he reeled sideways and back, grabbing desperately for his six-shooter as he saw Yancey crouch and whip out his pearl-handled gun.

Yancey's hat had fallen from his head and his features were twisted in a savage snarl. He poked out with his gun, flicking back the hammer and smashing out a shot that whined past Jody's ear.

Jody's gun was out and he held it low and sent out two quick shots as Yancey's second bullet plucked at Jody's hat brim. Yancey groaned, dropping his pearl-handled gun. His knees began to sag and he folded both arms over his stomach and began sinking to the floor.

Jody's lips drew back over his teeth. "You never did learn not to shoot at a man's head, Yancey. . . ."

Yancey slid to the floor and rolled over on his back, still doubled up. His glazing eyes sought Jody's tense face and Yancey laughed between pain-clenched teeth.

"You'll hang now, Jody. You'll hang sure . . . Yeh, Jody, kid, I shot Pete Brackett. I planted those hides under your haystack to give me a clear shot at Susan . . . But who's gonna write all that on that pretty white sheet of paper and sign my name to it? . . . Damn you, Jody . . . You'll hang this time sure . . . You poor fool . . . You poor . . . damn fool. . . ."

Jody stood there numbly, staring at the leering smile frozen on Yancey Johnson's dead face, and Jody's ears kept hearing Yancey's dying taunt and now the whole world seemed to be crashing about him.

The crashing was the splintering of wood and Jody turned his head to see the door half-broken down and Sheriff Ben Masters lunging at it again. Jody thought of the window and wheeled but Masters came plowing into the room and Jody rammed his back against the wall and threw his gun down on Masters.

Masters got up from his knees. His gun was in his hand but his arm hung loosely at his side.

Jody said, "Don't you raise that gun, Ben."

OTHERS filed into the room behind the sheriff. Masters said, "I reckoned it was no use trying to run you down tonight, Jody. So I hung around town, waiting for morning to pick up sign. I sent Sam and a couple of boys out to your old ranch just in case. It's gonna be a wild-goose chase and when he learns you were in town all the while, Sam's not gonna like it. . . ."

"Quit trying to be funny, Ben," Jody said. "Yancey, here just admitted to shooting Pete Brackett and framing me into the pen."

"Yancey, here," the sheriff pointed out, "is dead."

There was a commotion in the doorway and Laura Lee pushed through and ran over beside Jody. She looked at Yancey Johnson's body and shuddered and asked: "Did he talk, Jody?"

Jody nodded, never taking his eyes off Masters.

"Then everything's all right," Laura cried. "Why are you holding your gun on Masters?"

"I was the only one who heard Yancey talk," Jody said bitterly.

Ben Masters said grimly, "Move away, Laura. I'm taking Jody."

"He's innocent, Sheriff. He didn't do anything."

"I said move aside, Laura."

"I won't," she cried. "I'll get in front of you, Jody. Go out the window. I'll stay in front of you. They won't dare shoot. Go, Jody, and I'll protect you."

"Laura," Masters said heavily, "you mix up in this and I'll shoot anyhow. I've got to take Jody. I'll take him at any cost."

"Beat it, Laura," Jody said, keeping his

eyes on the sheriff. "You'll get hurt. Run along."

"I won't. I—"

Jody grabbed her by the shoulder, pushing her halfway across the room and one of the men grabbed her. Masters' gun began to rise.

"Don't you lift that gun, Ben," Jody said.

"I'm taking you, Jody. I'm taking you. . . ."

The gun kept rising slowly and Jody racked back the hammer of his six-shooter and tightened his finger on the trigger. Laura was struggling in her captor's arms.

"Jody! Jody!" she kept screaming.

Masters' gun was almost level. The muscles bunched along the angle of Jody's jaw. As soon as his gun's level, Jody thought, I'm letting Ben have it. I don't want to do it but I won't be taken to serve another man's rap a second time. I'll let Ben have it and then hit for the window. . . .

There, Masters' gun was level and the message was already traveling from Jody's brain to his trigger finger when the hoarse cry came from the doorway:

"Hold it, you two! For God's sake, hold it!"

Masters' gun lowered a trifle and he turned his head and Jody eased up on the trigger just in time. Doc Store was there, mopping his brow and breathing heavily.

"Pete Brackett just came to, Ben. It was Yancey Johnson who shot Pete. Pete pretended to be dead and Yancey rode up and looked Pete over as he lay on the road and then rode off and Pete looked up and saw him. Then, before Pete could get up he passed out and just came to now. Jody's innocent, Ben. . . ."

After that, Jody just held Laura in his arms, feeling her quiver and her tears wetting his neck and he buried his face in her hair, just barely aware of Ben Masters sitting weakly on the bed and of every one saying how they'd done wrong by Jody but they'd make up for that. . . .

Then Ben Masters walked up to Jody who was still holding Laura close and said, "You two will have plenty of time for that in the future. Right now, I'd like to clear this room. . . ."

Laura pulled away, her face red, and Jody took her hand and led her outside, both of them laughing together, to a world where the wind had never felt any cleaner and the stars had never shone any brighter. . . .

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933 of LARIAT STORY MAGAZINE, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1945.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Jack Byrne, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the LARIAT STORY MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Real Adventures Publishing Company, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Jack Byrne, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Real Adventures Publishing Company, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the cicumstances and conditions under which stokholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . . . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

(Signed) JACK BYRNE,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 26th day of September, 1945.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1946.)

BENT WHEEL'S MELODY MAKER

By RICHARD ALBERT

The run-down stranger with the musical fingers was for sale. Would he play the Rev. Sam's church organ for a pittance—or strum the ivories at Big George's Golden Spur saloon? Bent Wheel's townsfolk anxiously eyed the choice-maker

REVEREND SAM TITUS could scarcely believe his ears when he entered the doorway of his little church and heard the deep, rich notes of a hymn. The old organ seemed suddenly to have lost its wheezy, creaky sound and the music which resounded and echoed between the bare wooden walls had a quality which, to Sam Titus, sounded singularly beautiful.

He paused in the vestibule and his gaze swept down across the rows of seats and he watched an awkward-looking scarecrow of a man whose long, slim fingers swept over the keys and who was held in the trance of his melody.

A scant half-hour ago, Reverend Titus had happened along just in time to see this same person being bounced from the Golden Spur saloon. The man was a stranger to Bent Wheel and he was in a dazed and half-drunken condition. He was grimy and unshaven, his clothes were soiled and untidy. He looked like a bum but Sam took pity on him and led him to the church as it afforded the nearest place for rest and quiet. The parson left him there and went to look after some urgent business. Now the uncouth stranger was giving out with music far different from the sing-song, monotonous hymns which the local churchgoers ordinarily knew.

When the organ stopped the parson walked forward. The man on the bench turned. He was tall and slightly stoop-shouldered and his blue eyes were bloodshot.

"I hope you don't mind, Reverend," he said. "Just saw the old organ settin' there and decided to take a try at it. It's been a long time."

"It's the best that's ever been heard in Bent Wheel," said Sam Titus. "Go ahead. I'd like to hear more."

The stranger whirled without another word. He had an eagerness like that of a child getting the consent of a parent. He turned the pages of the hymnal, then his fingers stretched out over the keys.

Reverend Titus sat and listened. He closed his eyes and in his imagination he heard the massive pipe organ of a great cathedral suddenly transferred to this small frontier cattle town. Again he had dreams of giving Bent Wheel a large and beautiful church.

Sam Titus had the dream often. He worked hard and lived thriftily. He never gave up hope although at times things seemed almost hopeless. Bent Wheel was a new and young town. It held the exhuberance of the frontier and its citizens craved the excitement of youth. The glittering Golden Spur offered far more allure than a rustic church and a struggling minister. Big George Ogden, owner of the Golden Spur, gave the folks what they wanted. He ran straight games and disallowed excessive drunkenness and there were none who feared for their safety in the place. It was a good business policy and paid dividends so while money poured into the coffers of the Golden Spur, Reverend Sam Titus preached each Sunday morning and evening to a handful of Bent Wheel's more devoted souls and saw his dreams slither away.

The stranger played on the organ for an hour and Sam never interrupted. When finally the man was finished he turned again on the bench and there was a softness in his eyes which the parson hadn't noticed before. He smiled weakly through the stubble beard.

"I guess I've bothered you long enough," he said half apologetically. "I sort of forgot myself. It's good to play again."

"You've done a lot for me, sir," said Sam. "It's given me new hope. Sometimes a man almost loses sight of the better things out here."

They were quiet for a few moments and then Sam spoke again.

"Planning to stay in Bent Wheel?"

The stranger replied.

"I'm afraid not, Reverend," he said. "I don't stay any place very long. Just sort of a drifter, I guess."

"The old organ is going to miss you after this," said Sam. "I could get you a joy if you wanted to stay."

He watched hopefully for the stranger's reaction to the offer. The man let his gaze slide across the battered instrument.

"Josuah Thayer settling down to the life of a respectable citizen," he said sarcastically. "That would be a joke. But what have I got to lose."

JOSUAH was on hand early the following Sunday morning. He was dressed in clean clothes and he was smooth shaven. The members of Reverend Titus' congregation wondered when they saw the stranger seated at the organ.

After they were all seated and the services were ready to begin, Josuah turned

As the first of the mob plunged through the swinging doors, the strains of a favorite hymn rose from the piano. It had a stunning effect.

and his stooped form was bent over the keys. From the first notes, a hush settled over the little group. Sam sat quietly in his chair behind the pulpit and studied the reaction of his parishioners. It was a drama of mixed emotions. The first response was surprise for they all doubted the stranger's ability to play a note. But as the music rolled out in its deep, rich tones, it wove a cloth of melodic enchantment and held them spellbound. There were tears and there was joy. The music satisfied a hunger which had long been denied. It filled an emptiness in their hearts and bridged a deep chasm of years which linked them with the past.

When the prelude was finished they went into the opening hymn and sang with an enthusiasm unprecedented in the little church. The song swelled up and rolled back and forth in echo between the board walls. Reverend Sam Titus preached his sermon with renewed hope.

At the conclusion of the services the folks filed up to shake hands with the new organist. When finally they had all gone, Sam Titus and Josuah Thayer stood alone.

"That was the greatest thing that ever happened in Bent Wheel," said the pastor huskily. "You gave those people something which I couldn't have given them in a lifetime."

He suddenly noticed a great change in the man. Josuah carried himself a little straighter. The blue eyes were clear and the hang-dog look had been replaced with a sparkle.

"Maybe we can start a crusade," he said. "Convert the whole town."

"I doubt that, Josuah," said Sam grinning. "The Golden Spur offers too much competition."

That evening under the flickering yellow light of the kerosene lamps, Sam Titus preached to a crowded church. The seats were filled and some people were standing at the rear. As he let his gaze travel out over the crowd he saw many townspeople whom he knew but had never seen in church before. There were cowpunchers and folks from the neighboring ranches.

He preached a masterful sermon and when Josuah played there was even more inspiration in his music than there had been in the morning service. Sam was still a little dazed by it all at the finish. Even in his wildest flights of fancy he had never dreamed of preaching to such an audience in Bent Wheel.

Both Sam and Josuah were tired from handshaking when the service was finished. The folks offered congratulations and gave their praise. One old cowpuncher by the name of Joe Lynch stated the general sentiment of the gathering.

"It was a fine service, Reverend," he said. "I used to go to church a long time ago before I came to this country but I kind of forgot what it was like. When the folks told me about it this morning I decided to come. I'm comin' again."

The collection plate was filled that evening and when Reverend Titus walked downtown afterward, he went by the Golden Spur. There were the usual sounds of gayety issuing from the place but it was lacking in volume ad spirit. Sam looked over the low doors as he went past. The saloon was half empty.

Josuah stayed on in Bent Wheel and overnight became a popular figure. He got a job as night clerk in the hotel and for this he received his board and room and a small salary. For the first time in almost a decade he could honestly claim a feeling of happiness and the spectre of those wasted years was fast fading into a dim memory. To him this was the reincarnation of a once proud and talented man and the restoration of a great church and its mammoth organ where he had once thrilled hundreds each Sunday with his music.

The crowds continued to come to the church and Sam made plans for an addition. But while the Reverend rejoiced in his good luck at having found Josuah, the Golden Spur suffered badly from a sudden decline in Sunday night trade. Since Sunday had been a lucrative night for the saloon, it was only logical that in time Big George Ogden would take steps to correct the condition.

Big George called on Josuah two weeks after the stranger's arrival in Bent Wheel. The big man almost filled the door when he entered the hotel room and he was in a genial mood. He was cordial when he greeted the organist.

"Mister Thayer," he said. "My name's George Ogden. Folks call me Big George. I guess you see why."

Josuah returned the greeting and Big George went on. "I might as well get down to business. That's a mighty fine job of organ-playing you're doing at the church. I heard you last Sunday night."

Josuah held himself on guard. Big George's words sounded sincere but it was unlikely that he was here purely for the purpose of giving praise.

"I suppose then," the saloon owner went on. "You also play a piano."

Josuah answered affirmatively.

"I can give you a job," said Big George. "Playing in the Golden Spur. A hundred and fifty dollars a month."

Josuah's mouth dropped open. That much money was a fortune compared to what he was making now. In a flash he considered the offer. Surely Reverend Titus wouldn't object to his taking this opportunity. He could still give the folks music at the church.

Big George Ogden's smile faded. "There's only one condition," he said. "You'll have to play all day Sunday."

Josuah had a sudden feeling of deflation. In the moment of the saloon owner's golden offer he had lost sight of the fact that the big man had a motive more far-reaching than the mere desire for a piano player. Now he saw clearly that George Ogden was only trying to get him from the church.

His mouth drew into a tight line. "I'm sorry, sir," he refused flatly. "I can't accept."

"Dammit, man," protested Big George. "It's the chance of a lifetime. You're practically a pauper now."

"The answer is still no," said Josuah. "Leave out the Sunday work and I'll take it. Otherwise it's no use."

BIG GEORGE was generally agreeable but he now became unpleasant for the first time since his entrance into the room. All the laughter was gone from his big round face. His eyes drew into slits and his jaw was set.

"I'd advise you to take the job, Thayer," he said evenly. "You can have until next Sunday morning to think it over and I'll expect to see you in the Golden Spur then. And while you're thinking about it just bear in mind that I could make Bent Wheel a mighty unpleasant place for you if I wanted to."

Afterward Josuah sat quietly for a long time mulling over Big George's threats and he thought a good deal about them during the rest of the week. He said nothing about it, though, to Reverend Titus and the next Sunday he was seated at the organ when the morning church services were ready to begin.

The church session went off without a hitch and Josuah played as usual. He did notice when he turned around during the sermon that Big George Ogden and a bartender from the Golden Spur were seated in the back row. He doubted seriously if they were there to receive the inspiration of the service.

On his way back to the hotel his thoughts were on the big owner of the Golden Spur. Big George wasn't a bad sort, or at least that had been Josuah's impression during his short residence in town. At no time had he heard of any fixed gambling or any double dealing in connection with the Golden Spur. Actually the saloon was probably a benefit to Bent Wheel for it discouraged competition from similar establishments which might be run by men less scrupulous.

Nevertheless it was plain that the big man was not one to be crossed. The large crowds at the church were cutting into his revenue. It was possible, therefore, that his threats against Josuah weren't empty. Ogden was capable of taking harsh measures if necessary.

Josuah came into the main street and a plan took shape in his mind. It was a gambler's chance. He might make himself an object of ridicule in Bent Wheel and thus render his position untenable. It was just as possible that the plan might work. Josuah Thayer had been a gambler with fate all his life. He could stand one more throw of the dice.

He sought out and found Joe Lynch, the old cowpuncher who had been so greatly impressed by his music during that first night. The old man had taken to Josuah and the two had struck up a friendship.

He invited Joe to his hotel room and they talked for a considerable length of time. After the oldster left Josuah went to bed and slept, for his job as night clerk at the hotel had kept him up since the preceding afternoon.

He awoke a quarter of an hour before

church services were to begin, dressed leisurely and when he left the hotel he went unseen by the back door. He walked down the alley and a few minutes later entered the Golden Spur, also by the back door.

Josuah found Big George in his office and while the big man was surprised at the sudden appearance of the organist, he was nevertheless pleased. His big round face creased in a grin.

He extended a beefy hand. "Decided to take my offer, huh, Thayer?" he said.

Josuah nodded. "Yes, I did, sir," he replied. "It was just too good a job to turn down. I gave the people at the church one last chance to listen to my playing this morning. I hope you didn't mind."

"Not at all," said the big man genially. "I'm glad you did. Now when are you ready to start here?"

"Anytime you say," Josuah replied.

SAM TITUS was plainly worried when the time for beginning of church services came and passed and Josuah failed to show up. He descended from the pulpit and walked down the aisle to the door. He looked up and down the street but there was no sign of his organ player.

It was strange that Josuah hadn't arrived. Always before he had been early and he was far too interested in his work to deliberately fail to meet his appointments.

The small building was filled and the folks in the congregation were becoming nervous and impatient. There was a low buzz of conversation and necks were constantly being craned toward the door.

Sam was just ready to turn back into the church when the fading light revealed the figure of a man hurrying down the street. The pastor waited for a hopeful moment but presently he recognized the approaching person as Joe Lynch and the oldster was coming as fast as his shuffling gait would carry him. His iron-grey moustache was bristling in the wind and he waved a gnarled hand when he caught the minister's eye.

"Hey, Reverend," he shouted. "Wait a minute."

He came shuffling up the steps and drew to a halt when he reached the top. He talked in low, hurried tones for a few moments. Sam's face showed surprise and concern at first and then it creased in a smile.

"All right, Joe," he said when the oldster had finished. "You go in and tell them."

Joe Lynch entered the door of the church and all eyes were turned toward him at his entrance. He hurried down the aisle and mounted the one step behind the pulpit. He faced the congregation and raised one hand for silence.

"Folks," he began, "I suppose you've all been wondering what happened to your organist. Well, I just found out. He's down at the Golden Spur."

A low rumble of comment rolled through the crowd and Joe again lifted his gnarled hand.

"But don't get the wrong idea," he continued. "He didn't go there because he wanted to. Big George Ogden made him do it."

This time there was a touch of anger in the low overtones which echoed in the building and Joe Lynch raised his voice to drown out the noise.

"Josuah put the fixin' on the Golden Spur's Sunday night business when he started playing at the church. Big George didn't like it so he got hold of Josuah and has threatened to run him out of town. I know Big George has always been fair with us, but this time it looks like he has gone too far. Josuah has done something for this town and he belongs to us."

He paused and the voices of the congregation broke into angry, excited shouts.

"We can get back here if we get down there in time," barked Lynch. "I say let's go get him. Are you with me?"

There was a wild clamor of assent to the old man's words. The congregation arose to the last person. Lynch shuffled down the aisle and the excited crowd followed him out of the door, shouting as they went.

Sam hadn't waited for the crowd. As soon as Lynch had begun his speech, Sam hurried down the street and a couple of minutes later he walked into the Golden Spur.

Josuah was sitting at the piano pounding out a ragtime tune. He looked up and winked when he saw Sam approach and then went on with his playing. The Reverend kept a stern face.

Big George Ogden walked forward to

meet the pastor of the church.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Reverend," he said grinning. "I never expected to welcome you to the Golden Spur."

Reverend Titus ignored the greeting. "I came to find out why you stole my organist, Mister Ogden," he said stiffly.

"I didn't steal him, Reverend," said Big George. "He came of his own free will. It was just a case of me giving him a better deal. It's too bad, I know, but business is business."

"That story might go with me," stated Sam. "But I'm afraid you can't get the people of the church to swallow it. They have the idea that you did it deliberately to get him out of the church. They're pretty mad about it. So mad, in fact that they're on their way here now to take your place apart."

Big George's brow lowered and his eyes became hard. "I don't believe you, Sam Titus," he said. "People in Bent Wheel like me."

Sam strode toward the door of the saloon. "If you don't believe me, come here," he said.

George Ogden followed the parson to the door with a heavy tread. Josuah had stopped playing the piano and the patrons of the saloon were quiet. Big George listened and he heard the sound of the shouting, vengeful throng, not two blocks away.

"This is some of your work, sky-pilot," he roared. "But I'm damned if you're going to get away with it. If they come in here, I'll gun them out."

"And ruin yourself in Bent Wheel," said Sam Titus in a low, grisp voice. "You have a good thing here. People like you and you do a good business. If you make enemies of these folks, that's all ended. I can stop them."

"On what condition?" he asked evenly.

"On the condition that you let me have Sunday and you can have the rest of the week," said Sam.

"It's a shakedown."

"It's not a shakedown, George. Only a square deal. Something you've always been noted for. Only you better decide quick. There isn't much time left."

They were quiet again. The sounds of the marching congregation were closer. The echoes rolled back and forth between the false-fronted buildings. Their angry shouts could be clearly heard.

Ogden's face became grim.

"All right, Reverend. You win. You can stop them now. That's your part of the bargain."

Sam turned abruptly to Josuah. "Are you ready Josuah?"

"Ready, Reverend," Josuah replied and there was a smile in his blue eyes. He sat up to the piano and made ready to play.

There was a loud sound of trampling feet on the board sidewalk in front of the saloon. A moment later the swinging doors burst open and as the first person entered the room, the strains of one of the favorite hymns in the church services rose from the piano.

It had a stunning effect. The people in the vanguard of the throng became quiet and pushed silently into the barroom. They kept coming in and the shouting died by degrees. The folks from the parson's congregation fanned out on either side of the room and soon the only sound was that of the hymn which Josuah delivered from the old piano.

One by one the patrons of the saloon left the bar where they had been drinking. They bared their heads and listened. The gambling games stopped and the dealers put away the cards. When Josuah stopped, a dead silence fell over the room.

Sam stepped forward.

"Folks," he began. "We played a little trick on you this evening. We did it to celebrate something which just took place. Mister Ogden and I have made a bargain. Hereafter the Golden Spur will be open all week. You'll get the same square deal here that you've always gotten. But the Sundays belong to the church and the Golden Spur will be closed. I think it's fine. One more thing. Our good friend, Josuah Thayer will continue to be the organist of the church but I rather think that during the week he will be playing here. So if you don't get enough of him on Sunday, you know where you can hear him. Now I think we all ought to give a cheer for Big George Ogden."

A great shout of acclamation arose. Reverend Sam Titus turned to Big George Ogden and when the two shook hands the big man was ginning heartily.

NO MORE HIDES AND TALLOW

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Lobo riders had euchered his father out of ranch and cattle. There was nothing left for the ex-soldier but to go back to the job of the last four years . . . back to the work of killing.

Benton felt the buckskin jerk under the impact of the bullet. Then he was touching ground, hand swinging for his six-gun.

LIEUTENANT NED BENTON pulled the buckskin to a halt, sat a little straighter in the saddle, as if by sitting thus he might push the horizon back, see a little farther.

For here was a thing that he had hungered for, a thing that he had dreamed about through four years of blood and sweat, fears and hunger, cold and heat. Dreamed it in the dust of Gettysburg and the early morning mists of Mississippi camps, through the eternity of march and counter-march, of seeming victory and defeat that at last was deadly certain. A thing that had been with him always through the years of misery and toil and bitterness he had served with the Army of the South.

For this at last was Benton land . . . Benton acres stretching far beneath the setting sun of Texas. Benton land and Benton cattle . . . and no more hides and tallow. For there were wonderful things astir in the new towns to the north, towns with strange names that had sprung up beyond the Missouri's northward bend. Towns that wanted Texas cattle, not for hides and tallow, but for meat. Meat for the hungry east, meat that was worth good money.

He had heard about it before he crossed the Mississippi . . . about the great herds streaming northward, braving wind and storm and blizzards, crossing rivers, moving with a trail of dust that mounted in the sky like a marching banner. And it was no more than the start . . . for Texas was full of cattle. Half wild cattle that no one had paid much attention to except to kill for hides and tallow when there was need of money. Not much money . . . just enough to scrape by on, to maintain a half dignified poverty.

But that was changed now, for the herds were going north. Herds that spelled

riches. Riches that would give the old folks the comforts they had always wanted, but had never talked about. Money for the house that he and Jennie had planned when he came home from the war. Money for the horses and the painted fence around the house. . . .

He clucked to the buckskin and the animal moved forward, down the faint trail that ran through the knee high grass running like a moving sea, stirred by the wind across the swales.

Only a little while now, Benton told himself. Only a little while until I ride in on the ranch buildings. He shut his eyes, remembering them, as he had shut his eyes many times before in those long four years . . . seeing once again the great grey squared timber house beneath the cottonwoods, hearing the excited barking of old Rover, the frightened scuttering of the chickens that his mother kept.

He opened his eyes, saw the horseman coming down the trail . . . a horseman who had topped the swale while he had been day dreaming of the house and cottonwoods.

Squinting his eyes against the sun, Benton recognized the man. Jake Rollins, who rode for Dan Watson's Anchor brand. And remembered, even as he recognized him, that he did not like Jake Rollins.

Rollins urged his big black horse to one side of the trail and stopped. Benton pulled in the buckskin.

"Howdy, Jake," he said.

Rollins stared, eyes narrowing.

"You spooked me for a minute, Ned," said Rollins. Didn't look for you . . ."

"The war's over, Benton told him. "You must have heard."

"Sure. Sure I heard, all right, but . . ." He hesitated, then blurted it out. "But we heard that you was dead."

Benton shook his head. "Close to it a dozen times, but they never did quite get me."

Rollins laughed, a nasty laugh that dribbled through his teeth. "Them Yanks are damn poor shots."

It isn't funny, Benton thought. Nothing to make a joke of. Not after a man has seen some of the things I have.

"They aren't poor shots," Benton told him. "They're plain damn fools for fighting. Hard to lick."

He hesitated, staring across the miles of waving grass. "In fact, we didn't lick them."

"Folks will be glad to see you home," Rollins told him, fidgeting in the saddle.

"I'll be glad to see them, too," Benton replied soberly.

And he was thinking: I don't like this man. Never liked him for his dirty mouth and the squinted, squeezed look about him. But it's good to see him. Good to see someone from home. Good to hear him talk familiarly about the folks one knows.

Rollins lifted the reins as a signal and the horse started forward.

"I'll be seeing you," said Rollins.

Benton touched the buckskin with a spur and even as he did the warning hit him straight between the shoulder blades . . . the little dancing feet that tapped out danger. The signal that he'd known in battle, as if there were something beyond eyes and ears to guard a man and warn him.

Twisting swiftly in the saddle, he was half out of it even before he saw the gun clutched in Rollins' hand and the hard, blank face that had turned to ice and granite beneath Rollins' broad-brimmed hat.

The spur on Benton's left boot raked viciously across the buckskin's flank as he pulled it from the stirrup and the horse reared in fright and anger, hoofs clawing empty air, bit chains rattling as he shook his head.

The gun in Rollins' hand spoke with sudden hate and Benton felt the buckskin jerk under the impact of the bullet. Then his feet were touching ground and he was dancing away to give the horse room to fall while his hands swung for his sixguns.

Rollins' gun hammered again, but his horse was dancing and the slug went wild, hissing ankle high through the waving grass.

For an instant the ice-hard face of the mounted man melted into fear and within that instant Benton's right gun bucked against his wrist.

Rollins' horse leaped in sudden fright and Rollins was a rag doll tied to the saddle, flapping and jerking to the movement of the horse . . . a wobbling, beaten, spineless rag doll that clawed feebly at the saddle horn while crimson stained his bright blue shirt.

Rollins slumped and slid and the horse went mad. Leaping forward, Benton seized the dragging reins, swung his weight against its head while it fought and shied and kicked at the dragging, bumping thing that clung to the off-side stirrup.

Still hanging tightly to the reins, Benton worked his way around until he could seize the stirrup and free the boot that was wedged within it. The horse calmed down, stood nervously, snorting and suspicious.

Rollins lay sprawled grotesquely in the trampled grass. Benton knew he was dead. Death, he told himself, staring at the body, has a limpness all its own, a certain impersonality about it that is unmistakable.

Slowly, he led Rollins' horse back to the trail. His own horse lay there, dead, shot squarely through the throat where it had caught the bullet when it reared.

Benton stood staring at it.

A hell of a way, he thought, a hell of a way to be welcomed home.

BENTON pulled up the big black horse on top of the rise that dipped down to the ranch buildings and sat looking at them, saw that they were old and dingy and very quiet. Once they had seemed large and bright and full of life, but that might have been, he told himself, because then he had not seen anything with which he might compare them. Like the plantations along the Mississippi or the neat, trim farms of the Pennsylvania countryside or the mansions that looked across Virginia rivers.

A thin trickle of smoke came up from the kitchen chimney and that was the only sign of life. No one stirred in the little yard, no one moved about the barn. There was no sound, no movement. Only the lazy smoke against the setting sun.

Benton urged the black horse forward, moved slowly down the hill.

No one came out on the porch to greet him. There was no Rover bounding around a corner to warn him off the place. There was no call from the bunkhouse, no whooping from the barn.

Once Benton tried to yell himself, but the sound dried in his throat and his tongue rebelled and he rode on silently.

One dreary rooster looked up from his scratching as he reached the hitching post, stared at him for a moment with a jaundiced eye that glared from a tilted head, then went back to scratching.

Slowly, Benton climbed the rickety steps that led to the porch, reached for the front door knob, then hesitated. For a moment he stood, unmoving . . . at last lifted his fist to knock.

The knocking echoed hollowly in the house beyond the door and he knocked again. Slow footsteps came across the floor inside and the door swung open.

A man stood there . . . an old man, older than Benton had remembered him, older than he had ever thought he'd look.

"Pa!" said Benton.

For a long instant the old man stood there in the door, staring at him, as if he might not recognize him. Then one hand came out and clutched Benton's arm, clutched it with a bony, firm and possessive grip.

"Ned!" the old man said. "My boy! My boy!"

He pulled him in across the threshold, shut the door behind them, shutting out the empty yard and silent barn, the scratching rooster and the rickety steps that led up the slumping porch.

Benton reached out an arm across the old man's shoulders, hugged him close for a fleeting moment. How small, he thought, how stringy and how boney . . . like an old cow pony, all whanghide and guts.

His father's voice was small, just this side of a whisper.

"We heard that you got killed, Ned."

"Didn't touch me," Benton told him. "Where's Ma?"

"Your ma is sick, Ned."

"And Rover? He didn't come to meet me."

"Rover's dead," said his father. "Rattler got him. Wasn't so spry no more and he couldn't jump so quick."

Silently, side by side, walking softly in the darkening house, they made their way to the bedroom door, where the old man stepped aside to let his son go ahead.

Benton halted just inside the door, staring with eyes that suddenly were dim at the white-haired woman propped up on the pillows.

Her voice came to him across the room, small and quavery, but with some of the old sweetness that he remembered.

"Ned! We heard . . ."

He strode swiftly forward, dropped on his knees beside the bed.

"Yes, I know," he told her. "But it was wrong. Lots of stories like that and a lot of them are wrong."

"Safe," said his mother, as if it were something that defied belief. "Safe and alive and home again. My boy! My darling!"

He held her close while one thin hand reached up and stroked his hair.

"I prayed," his mother said. "I prayed and prayed and . . ."

She was sobbing quietly in the coming darkness and her hand kept on stroking his hair and for a moment he recaptured the battle baby feeling and the security and warmth and love that lay within it.

A board creaked beneath his father's footsteps and Benton looked up, seeing the room for the first time since he had entered it. Plain and simple almost to severity. Clean poverty that had a breath of home. The lamp with the painted chimney sitting on the battered dresser. The faded print of the sheep grazing beside a stream. The cracked mirror that hung from a nail pounded in the wall.

"I have been sick," his mother told him, "but now I'm going to get well. You're all the medicine that I need."

Across the bed his father was nodding vigorously.

"She will, too, son," he said. "She grieved a lot about you."

"How is everyone else?" asked Benton. "I'll go out and see them in the morning, but tonight I just want to . . ."

His father shook his head again. "There ain't no one else, Ned."

"No one else! But the hands . . ."

"There ain't no hands."

SILENCE came across the room, a chill and brittle silence. In the last rays of sunlight coming through the western window his father suddenly was beaten and defeated, an old man with stooped shoulders, lines upon his face.

"Jingo Charley left this morning," his father told him. "He was the last. Tried to fire him months ago, but he wouldn't leave. Said things would come out all right. But this morning he just up and left."

"But no hands," said Benton. "The ranch . . ."

"There ain't no ranch."

Slowly, Benton got to his feet. His mother reached out for one of his hands, held it between the two of hers.

"Don't take on, now," she said. "We still got the house and a little land."

"The bank sold us out," his father said. "We had a little mortgage, your mother sick and all. Bank went broke and they sold us out. Watson bought the place."

"But he was right good about it all," his mother said. "Old Dan Watson, he let us keep the house and ten acres of land. Said he couldn't take everything that a neighbor had."

"Watson didn't have the mortgage?"

His father shook his head. "No, the bank had it. But the bank went broke and had to sell its holdings. Watson bought it from the bank."

"Then Watson foreclosed?"

"No the bank foreclosed and sold the land to Watson."

"I see," said Benton. "And the bank?"

"It started up again."

Benton closed his eyes, felt the weariness of four long, bitter years closing in on him, smelled the dust of broken hopes and dreams. His mind stirred muddily. There was yet another thing. Another question.

He opened his eyes. "What about Jennie Lathrop?" he asked.

His mother answered. "Why, Jennie, when she heard that you were . . ."

Her voice broke off, hanging in the silence.

"When she heard that I was dead," said Benton, brutally, "she married someone else."

His mother nodded up at him from the pillows. "She thought you weren't coming back, son."

"Who?" asked Benton.

"Why, you know him, Ned. Bill Watson."

"Old Dan Watson's son."

"That's right," said his mother. "Poor girl. He's an awful drinker."

II

THE TOWN of Calamity had not changed in the last four years. It still huddled, wind-blown and dusty, on the

barren stretch of plain that swept westward from the foot of Greasewood hills. The old wooden sign in front of the general store still hung lopsided as it had since six years before when a wind had ripped it loose. The hitching posts still leaned crazily, like a row of drunken men wobbling down the street. The mudhole, scarcely drying up from one rainstorm till the next, still bubbled in the street before the bank.

Benton, riding down the street, saw all these things and knew that it was almost as if he'd never been away. Towns like Calamity, he told himself, never change. They simply get dirtier and dingier and each year the buildings slump just a little more and a board falls out here and a shingle blows off there and never are replaced.

"Some day," he thought, "the place will up and blow away."

There was one horse tied to the hitching rack in front of the bank and several horses in front of the Lone Star saloon. A buckboard, with a big gay team, was wheeling away from the general store and heading down the street.

As it approached, Benton pulled the black to one side to make way. A man and a girl rode behind the bays, he saw. An old man with bushy, untrimmed salt and pepper beard, a great burly man who sat four-square behind the team with the reins in one hand and a long whip in the other. The girl wore a sunbonnet that shadowed her face.

That man, thought Benton. I know him from somewhere.

And then he knew. Madox. Old Bob Madox from the Tumbling A. Almost his next door neighbor.

He pulled the black to a halt and waited, wheeling in close to the buckboard when it stopped.

Madox looked up at him and Benton sensed the power that was in the man. Huge barreled chest and hands like hams and blue eyes that crinkled in the noonday sun.

Benton reached down his hand. "You remember me?" he asked. "Ned Benton."

"Sure I do," said Madox. "Sure, boy, I remember you. So you are home again."

"Last night," Benton told him.

"You must recall my daughter," said Madox. "Name of Ellen. Take off that damn sunbonnet, Ellen, so a man can see your face."

She slipped the sunbonnet off her head and it hung behind her by the ties. Blue eyes laughed at Benton.

"It's nice," she said, "to have a neighbor back."

Benton raised a hand to his hat. "Last time I saw you, Ellen," he said, "you were just a kid with freckles and your hair in pigtails."

"Hell," said old Madox, "she wears it in pigtails mostly now. Just puts it up when she comes to town. About drives her mother mad, she does. Dressing up in her brother's pants and acting like a boy all the blessed time."

"Father!" said Ellen, sharply.

"Ought to been a boy," her father said. "Can lick her weight in wildcats."

"My father," Ellen told Benton, "is getting old and he has lost his manners."

"Come out and see us sometime," said Madox. "Make it downright soon. We got a few things to talk over."

"Like this foreclosure business?"

Madox spat across the wheel. "Damn right," he said. "Figure we all got taken in."

"How do the Lee boys feel?" asked Benton.

"Same as the rest of us," said Madox.

He squinted at the black. "Riding an Anchor horse," he said and the tone he used was matter-of-fact.

"Traded," said Benton.

"Some of the Anchor boys are down at the Lone Star," said Madox.

"Thanks," said Benton.

Madox snapped his whip and the team moved on. Ellen waved to Benton and he waved back.

For a moment he sat in the street, watching the buckboard clatter away, then swung the horse around and headed for the Lone Star.

Except for the Anchor men and the bartender the place was empty. The bartender dozed, leaning on the bar. The others were gathered around a table, intent upon their cards.

Benton flicked his eyes from one to another of them. Jim Vest, the foreman, and Indian Joe and Snake McAfee across the table, facing toward him. Frank Hall and Earl Andrews and the one who had looked

around. That one had changed, but not so much that Benton didn't know him. Bill Watson was a younger portrait of his florid father.

AS if someone had tapped him on the shoulder, Bill Watson looked around again, staring for a moment, then was rising from his chair, dropping his hand of cards face down upon the table.

"Hello, Bill," said Benton.

Watson didn't answer. Around him, back of him, the others were stirring, scraping back their chairs, throwing down their hands.

"I'm riding an Anchor horse," said Benton. "I trust there's no one who objects."

Young Watson wet his lips. "What are you doing with an Anchor horse?"

"Got him off of Rollins."

Vest, the foreman rose from his chair.

"Rollins didn't show up last night," he said.

"You'll find him on the old cutoff trail straight north of where you live," said Benton.

Bill Watson took a slow step forward.

"What happened, Ned?" he asked.

"He tried to shoot me in the back."

"You must have give him cause," charged Vest.

"Looks to me like someone might have given out the word I wasn't to get back," said Benton. "Got the idea that maybe the cutoff trail was watched."

None of them stirred. There was no sound within the room. Benton ticked off the faces. Watson, scared. Vest, angry but afraid to go for his gun. Indian Joe was a face that one couldn't read.

"I'll buy the drinks," said Watson, finally.

But no one stirred. No one started for the bar.

"I'm not drinking," Benton told him sharply.

The silence held. The silence and the motionless group that stood around the table.

"I'm giving you coyotes a chance to shoot it out," said Benton.

Watson stood so still that the rest of his face was stony when his lips moved to make the words he spoke.

"We ain't got no call to go gunning for you, Benton."

"If you feel a call to later on," said Benton, "don't blame me for anything that happens."

For a long moment he stood there, just inside the door, and watched them. No one moved. The cards lay on the table, the men stood where they were.

Deliberately, Benton swung around, took a swift step toward the swinging door, shoulders crawling against the bullet that he knew might come.

Then he was on the street again, standing in the wash of sunlight. And there had been no bullet. The Anchor had backed down.

He untied the black, walked slowly up the street, leading the animal. In front of the bank he tied the horse again and went inside.

There were no customers and Coleman Gray was at his desk beyond the teller's wicket.

The man looked up and saw him, slow recognition coming across his face.

"Young Benton," he exclaimed. "Glad to see you, Ned. Didn't know you were back."

"I came to talk," he said.

"Come on in," said Gray. "Come in and have a chair."

"What I have to say," Benton told him, "I'll say standing up."

"If it's about your father's ranch," said Gray, smoothly, "I'm afraid you don't understand."

"You and the Watsons engineered it."

"Now don't get your back up at the Watsons, son," Gray advised. "Maybe it seems hard, but it was all pure business. After all, the Crazy H wasn't the only one. There was the Madox place and the Lees. They lost their ranches, too."

"Seems downright queer," said Benton, "that all of this should happen just when beef began to amount to something besides hides and tallow."

Gray blustered: "You're accusing me of . . ."

"I'm accusing you of going broke," snapped Benton, "and ruining a lot of folks, then starting up again."

"It's easily explained," protested Gray, "once you understand the circumstances. We had so many loans out that we couldn't meet our obligations. So we had to call

them in and that gave us new capital."

"So you're standing pat," he said.

Gray nodded. "If that's what you want to call it," he said, "I am standing pat."

Benton's hand snaked across the railing, caught the banker's shirt and vest, twisting the fabric tightly around Gray's chest, pulling him toward him.

"You stole those ranches, Gray," he rasped, "and I'm getting them back. I'm serving notice on you now. I'm getting them back."

Benton spotted the man running . . . a tiny, furtive, rabbity shadow that scuttled across the painted landscape.

Words bubbled from the banker's lip, but fright turned them into gibberish.

With a snort of disgust, Benton hurled the banker backward, sent him crashing and tripping over a waste paper basket to smash against the wall.

Benton turned on his heel, headed for the door.

In front of the Lone Star the Anchor riders were swinging out into the street, heading out of town. Benton stood watching them.

"Ned," said a quiet voice, almost at his elbow.

Benton spun around.

Sheriff Johnny Pike lounged against the bank front, nickel-plated star shining in the sun.

"Hello, Johnny," said Benton.

"Ned," said the sheriff, "you been raising too much hell."

"Not half as much as I'm going to raise," said Benton. "I come back from the war and I find a bunch of buzzards have euchered the old man out of the ranch. I'm getting that ranch . . ."

The sheriff interrupted. "Sorry about the ranch, Ned, but that ain't no reason to raise all the ruckus that you have. I was looking through the window and I saw you heave that banker heels over teakettle."

"He was damn lucky," snarled Benton, "that I didn't break his neck."

"Then there was that business," said the sheriff, patiently, "of busting up the card game down at the Lone Star. You ain't got no call to walk in and do a thing like that. You hombres come back from the war and you figure you can run things. You figure that all the rest of us citizens have to knuckle down to you. You figure just because you're heroes that we got to . . ."

Benton took a quick step forward. "What are you going to do about it, Johnny?"

The sheriff scrubbed his mustache. "Guess I got to haul you in and put you under a peace bond. Only thing I can do."

Footsteps shambled down the sidewalk and a cracked voice yelled at Benton:

"Got some trouble, kid?"

Benton swung around, saw the scarecrow of a man hobbling toward him, bowed legs twinkling down the walk, white mustaches drooping almost to his chin, hat pushed back to display the worried wrinkle that twisted his face.

"Jingo!" yelled Benton. "Jingo, Pa said you left the place."

"Your Pa is batty as a bedbug," Jingo Charley told him. "Couldn't run me off the place. Just come into town to get liquored up."

He squinted at the sheriff.

"This tin star talking law to you?"

"Says he's got to put me under a peace bond," Benton told him.

Jingo Charley spat at the sheriff's feet.

"Ah, hell, don't pay no attention to him. He's just a Watson hand that rides range in town. Come on, we're going home."

The sheriff stepped forward, hands dropping to his guns.

"Now, just a minute, you two . . ."

Jingo Charley moved swiftly, one bowed leg lashing out. His toe caught the sheriff's heel and heaved. The sheriff's feet went out from under him and the sheriff came crashing down, flat upon the sidewalk.

Jingo Charley stooped swiftly, snatching at the sheriff's belt.

"Danged nice guns," he said, straightening. "Engraved and everything. Wonder if they shoot."

"Give them back," the sheriff roared. "Give them back or . . ."

Deliberately Jingo Charley tossed them, one after the other, into the mudhole that lay in the street. They splashed and disappeared.

"Guess that'll hold the old goat for a little while," said Jingo Charley.

He shook his head, sadly. "Shame to muddy up them pretty guns. Engraved and everything.

III

THE tangle of the Greasewood hills lay across the trail, soaring heights that shimmered in the heat of afternoon and short abrupt canyons that were black slashes of shadow upon a sunlit land.

Jingo Charley jogged his horse abreast of Benton. "Want to keep an eye peeled, kid," he warned.

Benton nodded. "I was thinking that, myself."

"Just because them Anchor hombres folded up back in that saloon," said Jingo,

"ain't no sign they won't get brave as hell with a tree to hide behind."

"Can't figure out that backing down," said Benton. "Went in figuring on a shoot-out."

"The Watson bunch will do anything to duck trouble now," the old man told him. "Getting together a bunch of cattle to drive north. Some of their own cattle, I suppose. But likewise a lot of other stuff."

"They'll be starting soon?" asked Benton.

Jingo spat. "Few days. That is, unless something happens."

"Like what?"

"Like if them cows got spooked and hightailed it back into the brush."

"Someone's up there," said Benton quietly. "Someone riding hard."

They pulled their horses to a halt, watched the horse and rider plunging down the tangled hill. The rider sat the horse straight as an Indian and the sun caught the ash of calico fluttering in the wind.

"It's that gal," yelled Jingo. "Old Madox's daughter."

Benton whirled his horse off the trail, touched spurs and tore up the hill. She saw him coming and raised an arm in a swift gesture.

She rode without a saddle, with her dress tucked beneath her, legs flashing in the sun. She had lost her sunbonnet and as she came opposite Benton, he saw the red welts across her cheeks where whipping brush had raked her face.

Benton leaned down and grasped the bridle of the blowing horse, pulled it close, asked sharply: "What's the matter, Ellen?"

"They're waiting for you at the Forks," she gasped.

"Watson?"

She nodded, went on breathlessly. "They passed us on the road and Dad spotted them when we were driving through. But we made out as if we didn't see them. Then when we got out of sight, we pulled up and unhitched."

"You took a big chance," Benton told her, solemnly.

She shook her head. "One of us had to ride back and warn you. And Dad can't ride worth shucks without a saddle. Getting too fat. Me, I can ride any way at all."

Benton scowled. "Sure they didn't see you riding back?"

"No, they couldn't have. I came a roundabout way. Through the hills."

Jingo Charley looked at the heaving horse. "You must have done some riding."

She nodded. "I had to. There wasn't much time. I didn't know how soon you'd be leaving town."

Thinking of it, Benton felt shivers walking on his spine. There at the Forks the trail split three ways, the left hand one going to the Anchor spread, the right hand to Lathrop's Heart ranch, the center one to the Crazy H and Tumbling A. The trail went steeply up a gorge to the high plateau where the trail divided. He and Jingo would have been walking their horses up the gorge, taking it easy. They would have been picked off like sitting birds by the hidden gunmen.

"They've got their horses down in the mouth of Cow Canyon," Ellen was telling them. "One man guarding them. I saw them when I went past."

Jingo Charley grinned wickedly. "Plumb shame," he said, "to set them boys afoot."

Benton said gravely: "Maybe you'd ought to go back, Ellen. The way you came. That way you'd be in the clear before anything could happen."

"I thought maybe you would want to go with me," said Ellen. "There isn't any reason why you have to tangle with them."

"Can't pass up a chance like this," Jingo Charley declared, with finality.

Benton considered. "We can't duck out on a thing like this," he said. "We got to fight them sooner or later and it might as well be now. There's only two things to do. Fight or run."

Jingo spat viciously. "I ain't worth a damn at running," he declared.

"Neither am I," said Benton.

The girl slowly gathered up the reins.

"Be careful," cautioned Benton. "Don't let them see you. "We'll wait a while so that you can get through."

She wheeled her horse.

"I don't know how to thank you, Ellen," Benton said.

"We have to stick together," Ellen told him, simply.

Then she was pounding away, back up the tangled hill.

Jingo Charley stared after. "Saved our

hair, that's what she did," he said. "Lots of spunk for a gal."

They waited, watching the heights above them. Nothing stirred. The day droned on in sun and and sound of insects.

Finally they moved on, skirting the trail, heading for the mouth of Cow canyon.

Jingo Charley hissed at Benton. "Almost there, kid. Take it easy."

"What's that?" Benton suddenly demanded. Something had gleamed on the heights above them, something dancing like a sunbeam all at once gone crazy. And even as he asked it, he knew what it was.

"Look out!" he shouted at Jingo Charley. With tightened rein and raking spur, he plunged his horse around.

A rifle cracked where the sunbeam danced and smoke plumed on the hillside. Another gun belched at them from just below the first.

Benton spurred his horse and the animal, leaping in fright went tearing through a clump of whipping brush, skidded over a cutbank, went clattering up a rise.

AHEAD of him, Benton saw the old cowhand, urging his horse into a dead run; behind him he heard the thunder of galloping horses, the hacking cough of handguns.

Bullets whispered through the brush around him, some of them so close he heard the whining whisper in the air.

Jingo Charley lurched in the saddle, swayed for a moment and then was riding on. Benton saw a bright red stain spring out upon his sleeve, just above the elbow.

Benton snaked a quick look behind him. Riders with smoking guns were spread out in the brush. A branch caught him across the face with stinging force as he clawed one gun out of the holster.

The horse stumbled, caught itself and then went on. A bullet droned like a lazy bumblebee above Benton's head.

Twisting in his saddle, he pumped his gun, feeling the jerking jumpiness of it in his hand. The leading Anchor man sailed out of his saddle, flying over the horse's head, a whirling tangle of flying arms and legs. The horse whirled swiftly, frightened by the sight of a man in mid-air in front of him, crashed into the second rider, upsetting the plunging horse to send it rolling down the hill.

A yell of triumph was wrenched out of Benton's lungs. The other Anchor riders shied off and Benton's horse reached the ridge top, was plunging down the slope, stiffened forefeet plowing great furrows in the ground.

Jingo Charley was far ahead, almost at the bottom of the slope, swinging his horse to head for a canyon mouth. Benton hauled at the reins, brought the black around to angle down the hill in an effort to catch up with Jingo.

From the ridgetop came a single shot.

Benton looked back. Two or three horses were milling around up there.

Don't want to push us too close, thought Benton, exultantly, after what happened back on the other side of the ridge.

At the bottom of the slope, he was only a few yards behind Jingo Charley. Looking back, he saw the Anchor riders, plunging down the slope.

Got their nerve back, he told himself.

The canyon walls closed in around them, dark and foreboding. Boulders choked the tiny trickle of water that meandered down the stream bed. Brush grew thick against the banks.

Ahead of him Jingo Charley was dismounting, slapping the pony's rump with his hat. Startled, the horse charged up the stream bed.

Jingo yelled at him. "Get off. We can hole up and hold them off."

Benton jumped from his horse and the black went tearing after Jingo's mount.

"You take that side," Jingo yelled at him. "I'll take this."

"But you're hit," Benton told him. "Are you . . ."

"Fit as a fiddle," Jingo told him. "Bullet went through my arm slick as a whistle. Nothing to it."

Below them, down near the canyon's mouth, came the clatter of hoofs on stones, the excited yell of riders.

Turning, Benton plunged into the brush, clambered up the talus slope beneath the grim wall of the canyon.

Behind a boulder he squatted down, gun held across his knee. Below him the canyon spread out like a detailed map.

Looking at it, he grinned. With him here and Charley over on the other side, not even a rabbit could stir down there that they couldn't see. And with the canyon

walls rearing straight above them, no one could get at them from any other direction. Anything or anyone that came into that canyon were dead meat to their guns.

The sun slanted down the canyon's narrow notch and squatting by the boulder, Benton felt the warmth of it against his shoulders.

It made him think of other times. Of the tensed hush when a Yankee column was trotting down the road straight into a gun trap. Of the moments when he crouched beneath a ridge, waiting the word that would send him . . . and others . . . charging up the hill into the mouths of flaming guns.

This was it again, but in a different way. This was home without the peace that he had dreamed about in the nights of bivouac.

Far below a horse's hoof clicked restlessly from a bush somewhere nearby, a rasping sound that filled the afternoon.

Something went wrong, Benton told himself. Some of them must have seen Ellen riding back to warn us and they set a new trap for us. Or it may have been the same trap all along. Maybe they meant for old man Madox and Ellen to see them. . . .

But that was too complicated, he knew. He shook his head. It would have been simpler for them just to have waited at the Fork.

The minutes slipped along and the sun slid across the sky.

Benton fidgeted behind his boulder. There was no sign of the riders, no sound to betray their presence.

"Jingo," he called softly.

"Yes, kid, what do you want?"

"I'm coming over."

"O.K. Take it easy."

Cautiously, Benton slid down the hillside. At the trickle of water in the streambed, he wet his handkerchief, clawed his way up the opposite bank.

"Jingo?"

"Right over here. What you got?"

"Going to fix up that arm of yours," said Benton.

HE slipped into the bushes beside the old man, rolled up his sleeve, baring the bloody arm. A bullet had ripped through a muscle. Not a bad wound, Benton declared.

Jingo chuckled. "Got them stopped, kid. They set a trap for us and now we got one set for them. And they ain't having none of it."

"What about our horses?"

"Blind canyon," said Jingo. "Can't get out less they grow wings."

Swiftly, efficiently, Benton washed and bound the arm. It was not the first wound he had tied up and taken care of in the last few years.

"We better be getting out of here," he said.

Jingo hissed softly. "Something moving down there." He pointed with a finger and Benton saw the slight waving of a bush, just a bit more than the wind would stir it.

They waited. Another bush stirred. A stick crunched.

"It's Indian Joe," Jingo whispered. "Figuring to sneak up on us. Only one in the whole bunch that could of got this far."

Squinting his eyes, Benton would make out the dark face of a crawling man on the opposite bank . . . a dark, evil face that almost blended with the foliage . . . almost, not quite.

"Flip you for him," said Jingo softly.

Benton shook his head. "I got mine today. You go ahead and take him."

Suddenly he felt calm, calm and sure. Back at the old business again. Back at the job of the last four years. Back at the work of killing.

Slowly Jingo raised his gun, the hammer snicked back with a soft metallic sound.

Then the gun roared, deafening in the bush-shrouded canyon, the sound caught up and buffeted about, flung back and forth by the towering walls of stone.

"Got him!" yelled Jingo. "Got him . . . no, by Lord, just nicked him."

The bushes had come to life.

Jingo's gun blasted smoke and flame again.

"Look at him go!" yelled Jingo. "Look at that feller leg it!"

Whipping bushes advancing swiftly down the bank marked Indian Joe's going.

"Damn it," said Jingo, ruefully, "I must be getting old. Should of let you have him."

The silence came again, silence broken only by a tiny wind that moaned now and

then high up the cliff, broken by the shrilling of an insect in the sun-drenched land.

They waited, hunched in the bushes, studying the canyon banks. No bush moved. Nothing happened. The sun sank lower and the shadows lengthened.

"Guess they must of give up," Jingo decided.

"I'll scout down the canyon," said Benton. "You catch up the horses."

Moving cautiously, Benton set out down the canyon, eyes studying every angle of the terrain before advancing.

But there was no sign of the Anchor riders, no sign or sound.

At the mouth of the canyon he found the hoof trampled spot where they had milled their horses and leading out from it were tracks, heading back into the hills.

Something white fluttered in the wind and he strode toward it.

It was a piece of paper, wedged in the cleft of a stick that had been left between two rocks.

Angrily, Benton jerked the paper loose, read the pencil scrawled message:

Benton, we let you off this time. You got 24 hours to git out. After that we shoot you on sight.

IV

BENTON'S father was out in the yard, chopping wood, when they rode in. At the sight of them, he slapped the axe into the chopping block, left it sticking there, hobbled toward the gate to meet them. Benton saw there was worry on his face.

"I come back again," said Jingo.

"Glad to have you," Bentons father said.

To Benton, he said: "There's someone in the house to see you, son."

"You go ahead," Jingo told the younger man. "I'll put up the horses."

Benton vaulted off the black.

"How's mother?"

"Some better," said his father. "She's sleeping now."

The sun was slanting through the windows of the living room, making bars of golden light across the worn carpeting.

In the dusk of one corner, a woman rose from a chair, moved out into the slash of sunlight.

"Jennie!" said Benton. "Jennie . . ."

"I heard that you were back," she told him.

He stood unmoving, staring at her, at the golden halo that the sunlight flung around her head, at the straightness of her, and wished that her face were not in the shadow.

"You came for something?" he asked and hated himself for it. It was not the way, he knew, to talk to a woman that he had intended to marry. Not the sharp, hard way to speak to a woman whose memory h ehad carried through four long and bloody years.

"I came to ask you to take care of yourself . . . to stay out of trouble."

"Trouble?" he asked. "What do you mean, trouble?"

She flushed angrily. "You know what I mean, Ned. Trouble with the Anchor. Why don't you leave, there's nothing for you here."

"Nothing but the land that was stolen from me."

"You'll be killed. You can't fight them, all alone."

"Did Bill Watson send you here to ask me this?"

Her voice rose until it was almost shrill. "You know he didn't, Ned. You know I wouldn't do a thing like that. He doesn't even know I'm here."

He gave a short, hard laugh.

"You're a bitter man," she told him.

"I have a right to be," he said.

She moved toward him, two hesitant steps, then stopped.

"Ned," she said softly. "Ned."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I didn't wait."

"You thought that I was dead," Benton said, heavily. "There was no use of waiting then."

"Bill was the one who told me," she said. "He was the one that started the story. Said he heard it from a man who had been with you."

"So you married him," said Benton. "He told you I was dead and then he married you."

She flared at Benton. "I hate him. Do you hear? I hate him. He's a beast . . . a dirty, drunken beast."

For a moment Benton saw this very room as he remembered it. A shining

place with a warm glow to it. A shining room and a laughing girl. But the room was dingy now, dingy with the shafts of sunlight only adding to its dreariness.

A room with a laughing ghost. And the ghost, he knew, didn't square with the woman who stood before him.

The room was cold and empty . . . like his heart and brain. Nothing matters, he thought, watching her. Nothing matters now. A cause broken on a bloody battlefield that stretched across four years, a dream shattered by a woman who wouldn't wait, land that one had thought of as a home stolen by those who stayed at home while he went out to fight.

"I'm sorry," he finally said. "I'm sorry that I said anything about it."

"You won't make trouble then? You will leave?"

A dull rage shook him for a moment and then flickered out, leaving dull gray ash that was bitter on his tongue.

"You shouldn't have come here at all," he said.

Standing without moving, he heard her walk toward the door. For a moment she stopped and he thought she was going to speak, but she didn't. She stood there for a few long seconds and then moved on.

The door creaked open and his father's voice was speaking.

"Leaving so soon, Jennie?"

"Yes, it's getting late. They will wonder where I've been."

"Jingo will get your horse for you."

"No thanks. I can get him myself. He's in the stall next to the door."

The door closed and his father's heavy feet tramped along the porch. Voices sounded for a moment and then he came back in again. Benton walked out into the hall.

"Jingo tells me he got hit in the arm," his father said.

Benton nodded. "Ran into some trouble. The Anchor gang jumped us at the Forks."

The old man stood silent for a moment. "Your mother's feeling lots better today." he finally said. "Happy about you being back. If anything happened now, Ned, I think that it would kill her."

"I'll be careful," Benton promised.

Out in the kitchen he could hear Jingo rattling pans and poking up the fire.

He tiptoed to the door of his mother's room and looked in. She was asleep, with a smile upon her face. Quietly he tiptoed back again, out to the kitchen.

"Slow down a bit," he said to Jingo. "Mother is asleep."

Jingo looked at him quizically. "What you aiming to do, kid?"

"That herd the Anchor's gathering," said Benton, quietly. "We can't let them start. Some of them are our cattle they're figuring to drive north."

"Ain't no trick at all to spook a cow," Jingo told him.

Benton's father spoke quietly from the doorway. "Some of the others would help."

"Might need some help," Jingo admitted. "Probably quite a crowd of Anchor hombres out watching them cows."

"Madox and his boy would give us a hand," said Benton's father. "And the two Lee Brothers over at the Quarter Circle D."

"You're going, too?' asked Jingo.

The elder Benton nodded. "I'll get Mrs. Madox to come over and stay with Ma."

He looked at his son. "Sound all right to you, Ned?"

"You'll have plenty without me," said Benton. "I'm going to ride over and have a talk with Old Dan Watson."

BENTON sat his horse on the windy ridge top, staring down at the chuck wagon fire a mile or so away. Vague, ghostly forms were moving about it and at times he caught the snatch of bellowed words, carried by the wind, mauled by the whipping breeze until they made no sense, but were only sounds of human voice.

Out beyond the fire a dark lake was massed on the prairie . . . a dark lake that was the trail herd gathered for the north. Occasionally Benton heard the click of horns, a subdued moo, but that was all. The herd had settled for the night, was being watched, no doubt, by circling riders.

In the east the sky was lighting, signaling the moon that was about to rise. Starlight glittered in the sky and the wind talked with silken voices in the grass.

Benton whirled his black, headed south.

Half an hour later the Anchor ranch buildings came in sight.

The bunk house, he saw, was dark, but

lights blazed in the front room of the big ranch house.

Benton pulled the black to a walk, went in slowly, half prepared for the challenge or the bullet that might come out of the dark.

The plopping of the horse's hoof against the earth sounded loud in Benton's ears, but there was no stir around the buildings, no signs of life at all except the lighted windows.

One horse was tied at the hitching post and before he dismounted, Benton sat there for a moment, watching and listening. The sound of voices came through the window that opened on the porch. But that was all.

He tied his horse, walked softly up the porch steps, crossed to the door.

Then, with knuckles lifted to knock, the sound of a voice stopped him. A loud, arrogant voice that boomed through the window. A voice that he had heard that day.

". . . He's on the prod, Dan. We can't have him stirring up a fuss. I'd never agreed to the deal if I hadn't thought you'd take care of things."

Benton froze. The voice of Coleman Gray, the banker, coming from the window!

Old Dan Watson's growl came: "Don't worry. We'll take care of Ned Benton . . . and any of the others that start raising hell."

Slowly, Benton let his hand drop to his side, shuffled softly from the door, pressed his body tight against the house.

"You got me into this," Gray whined. "You were the ones that figured it all out."

"You were damn quick to jump at it," growled Dan Watson's voice, "when you figured there wasn't any chance of being caught. But now that young Benton's come back, you got cold feet."

"But you said he wouldn't come back," Gray yelled. "You said you'd see to it that he never did."

Quick steps sounded on the porch and Benton whirled, but he was too slow. A hard finger of metal jammed into his back and a mocking voice spoke.

"Damned if it ain't the hero, come back from the war."

Benton choked with rage.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Your old friend," said the voice back of him. "Snake McAfee."

"Look, Snake. I was just coming over to see Dan."

"Just a friendly visit," snarled Snake. "Damn funny way to go about it, listening at a window."

He jabbed the gun into Benton's back. "In you go. The boss will want to see you."

Urged by the gun, Benton turned toward the door. Snake McAfee yelled and the door swung open. Bill Watson stood on the threshold, wonder on his face at the sight of Benton.

"Good evening, Bill," said Benton.

Behind him McAfee jabbed with the gun and growled. "Get on in, damn you."

Bill Watson stood to one side, triumph flaming across his face. His lips parted in a flabby, oily smile.

Benton stepped across the threshold, on into the living room. McAfee, gun still in his hand, slid along the wall, stood with his back against it.

Old Dan Watson sat stolid, red face turning purple, strong, pudgy hands gripping the arms of the rocking chair in which he rested. The banker's jaw dropped, then snapped shut again, like a steel trap closing. Behind his back, Benton heard young Watson snickering.

"Found him listening just outside the window," Snake McAfee told the room.

"What did you hear?" Old Dan Watson asked and his words were slow and ponderous, as if he had all the time in the world to deal with this situation and would not be hurried.

Benton flicked a look at Gray and saw the man was sweating, literally sweating in terror.

"No use of talking about what I heard," said Benton. "Let's talk about what we're going to do."

"Sensible," Watson grunted and rocked a lick or two in the rocking chair.

"The two of you fixed it up between you to rob your neighbors," said Benton, bluntly.

Gray half sprang from his chair, then settled back again.

"You can't prove that," he snapped.

Old Dan grumbled derisively. "He don't need to prove it, Coleman. He won't even have a chance."

He twisted his massive head around to Benton.

"What did you come here for, anyway?"

"I came to make a deal."

Old Dan rumbled at him. "Let's hear your proposition."

"You got the Crazy H for a couple thousand measly dollars," said Benton. "You got cattle that were worth twice that or more, let alone the land."

Old Watson nodded, eyes cold and hard.

"You got cattle in your trail herd out there that don't wear your brand," said Benton. "Take the ones you need to pay what the ranches around here cost and hand the ranchers back their deeds."

Gray wiped sweat from his brow with a nervous hand.

"That's fair," he burst out. "That's fair. After all, we can't take advantage of a man who went out and fought for us."

WATSON shook his head. "No, the deal was legal. When I took over those cattle weren't worth a dime because there was no place to market them. It's not my fault that the cattle market changed."

"Except," said Benton, quietly, "that you knew it was going to change. You had word of what was going on up north. So you moved fast to take over everytthing that you could grab."

Feet shuffled over by the window and Benton looked toward it. Snake McAfee leered back at him, gun half raised.

"I have just one thing to say to you," said Watson, slowly. "Get out of the country. You're a trouble-maker and you've had your warning. If you stay we'll gun you down on sight like a lobo wolf."

His hands pounded the arms of the rocking chair, his voice rising in old-man querulousness.

"You've been back just a bit more than a day, Benton, and you've already killed two of my men. I won't stand for anything like that."

"I killed them," said Benton, coldly, "because I was faster on the gun than they were. And if you stay pig-headed, a lot more of them will die."

Watson's eyes narrowed in his monstrous face. "You mean that, don't you, Benton?"

Benton stared straight at him. "You know I do, Dan. And what's more, you'll not move a single cow. . . ."

Watson leaned forward, bellowing. "What's that . . ."

Hoofs suddenly hammered in the yard outside the house, hoofs that skidded to a stop. Feet thumped across the porch and the door slammed open.

A disheveled rider blinked in the lamplight.

"The herd!" he yelled. "They stampeded it! It's headed for the hills! Gang of riders . . ."

Dan Watson heaved himself upward with a grunt of sudden, violent rage. Snake McAfee was standing with gun arm hanging, staring at the rider.

Benton whirled, took one quick step, fist swinging to explode on Snake's jaw. Snake crashed into the window as Benton leaped for the door, hands clawing for his guns. Behind him glass tinkled, smashing on the floor.

Benton saw the rider leaping at him, chopped down viciously with his gun barrel, but too late to stop the man. The gun smacked with a leaden thud across the hunched down shoulder, then the shoulder hit him in the stomach and sent him reeling back so violently that his hat blew off.

Stars exploded in Benton's head. Stars and a bursting pain and a roaring wind that whistled at the edges. He felt himself falling forward, like a great tree falls, falling through a darkness that was speared with jagged streaks of pain.

And through the roaring of the wind that whistled through his brain, he heard the high, shrill, excited voice of Young Bill Watson:

"That's the way to kill the dirty son . . ."

Awareness came back. Awareness of the seep of light that ran along the boards, awareness of the hard lump that the gun made beneath his chest, where his arm had doubled and he had fallen on it, awareness of the rumble of voices that droned above him . . . voices that at first were misty sounds and then became words and finally had meaning.

". . . You better put a bullet through him."

That was the banker's voice, hard and suspicious, but with a whine within it.

The elder Watson's voice rumbled at him. "Hell, there ain't no use. He's deader than a fence post, as it is. Look at that head of his . . . split wide open."

Young Bill Watson snickered, nastily.

"When I hit 'em, they stay hit."

"Still, just to be safe . . ."

The puncher's frantic voice broke in. "Boss! The cattle!"

Old Watson's voice bellowed. "Yes, damn it, I almost forgot."

Feet tramped across the floor, jarring it.

"You riding with us, Gray?" Bill Watson asked.

The banker's voice was hesitant. "No. Think I'll head back for town. Got some business . . ."

The slamming door cut off his words.

Silence stalked across the room, a deathly, terrible silence.

A dark drop dripped down on the floor no more than an inch from Benton's left eye. A drop that hit and spattered . . . and was followed by another.

Blood, thought Benton. Blood! Dripping from my head. From where Bill Watson's gun butt got me.

His hand twitched beneath him and he gritted his teeth to keep it where it was, to keep it from reaching up and feeling of his head, feeling to see just how bad the head wound was.

A wave of giddiness swept over him and beneath him the floor weaved just a little. The blood went on, dripping on the boards before his eye, forming a little puddle on the floor.

A glancing blow, he thought. A glancing blow that ripped my scalp half off. Head must be in one hell of a mess to make them think I'm dead.

Only the banker isn't sure I'm dead. He was the one that wanted to put a bullet into me to be sure and finish it. And he's still in the room here with me.

PAIN lanced through his brain and across his neck, a livid finger of pain that etched an acid path along his jangled nerves. A groan came bubbling in his throat and he caught and held it back, held it with teeth that bit into his lip.

Feet shuffled slowly across the floor and in his mind Benton could imagine the slouching form of the banker stalking him, walking softly, warily, watching for some sign of life.

Play dead. That was it. Lie still. Be careful with your breathing, just sucking in enough air to keep your lungs alive. The way he'd done it on the night when the Yank patrol was hunting for him down in Tennessee.

The ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece hammered through the room . . . a fateful sound. A sound that measured time, that sat and watched and didn't care what happened. A sound that ticked men's lives away and never even hurried.

The boots walked past and then turned back, came close. Benton felt his body tensing, fought it back to limpness.

A toe reached out and prodded him . . . prodded harder. Benton let his body roll with the prodding toe.

An inner door squeaked open softly and someone gasped, a hissing gasp of indrawn breath that could only come with terror.

The boots swung around and Benton knew that in the little silence the two of them were looking at one another . . . Gray and the person who had come into the room.

"I'm sorry, madam," said the banker, "that you happened in."

A woman's voice came from across the room . . . a remembered voice.

"It's . . . it's . . . who is it?"

Gray's voice was at once brutal and triumphant. "It's young Benton."

"But it can't be!" There was a note of rising horror in the words. "It simply can't be. Why, only this afternoon he promised me . . ."

The outer door slammed open and boots tramped harshly across the floor, passed close to Benton's head.

"So you talked to him," said young Bill Watson's voice. "That's where you were today."

"Bill!" screamed the girl. "Bill, it's not . . ."

Watson's voice shrieked at her, lashed with blinding fury. "Just as soon as my back is turned, you go crawling back to him."

"Listen, Bill," said Jennie Watson. "Listen to me. Yes, I did talk to him . . . and I'm leaving you. I'm not living with a man like you . . ."

Something in his face wrenched a shriek from her, something in his face, something in the way he walked toward her.

"So you're leaving me! Why, you damned little tramp, I'll . . ."

She screamed again.

Benton heaved himself upward from the

floor, gun clutched in his hand.

Watson was wheeling around, wheeling at the sound behind him, hands blurring for his guns.

"Bill," yelled Benton, "don't do it! Don't try . . ."

But Watson's guns were already out, were swinging up.

Benton chopped his own wrist down, pressing the trigger. The gun bucked and shook the room with thunder. Through the puff of powder-smoke, he saw Watson going down.

Another shot blasted in the room and Benton felt the gust of wind that went past his cheek, heard the chug of a bullet crunching through the wall beyond.

He swung on his toes and swept his gun around. The banker stood before him, smoking gun half raised.

"So it's you," said Benton.

He twitched his gun up and Gray stared at him in white-faced terror. The gun dropped from the banker's hand and he backed away, backed until the wall stopped him and he stood pinned by the muzzle of Benton's gun. The man's mouth worked but no words came out and he looked like he was strangling.

Benton snarled at him in disgust. "Quit blubbering. I won't kill you."

Blood trickled from his right eyebrow and half blinded him. He raised his free hand to wipe it off and the hand came away smeared a sticky red.

"Lord," he thought, "I must be a sight."

At a sound behind him, he swung around.

Watson was sitting up and Jennie was on her knees beside him. Both of them were staring at him.

"I'm sorry," Benton told the girl. "I tried to stop him. I didn't want to shoot him. I didn't shoot until I had to."

The girl spoke quietly. "You used to be kind and considerate. Before you went off to war and learned to kill . . ."

Watson bent from his sitting position, reaching out his hand, clawing for a gun that lay on the floor.

Benton jerked his own gun up and fired. Splinters leaped shining from the floor. Watson pulled himself back, sat hump-shouldered, scowling.

"Try that again," invited Benton.

Watson shook his head.

Benton nodded at the girl. "You have her to thank you're alive right now. If I could have brought myself to kill Jennie Lathrop's husband, you'd been dead a good long minute."

He wiped his face again, scrubbed his hand against his shirt.

"After this," he said, "be sure you hit a little harder when you want to kill a man."

"Next time," Watson promised, "I'll put a bullet through your skull."

Benton spoke to the girl. "Better get that shoulder of his fixed up and get him in shape to travel. I don't want to find him around here when I come back."

Feet scuffed swiftly and Benton whirled about. Gray was leaping for the window, arms folded above his head to shield his eyes against the flying glass, feet swinging outward to clear the sill and crash into the already shattered panes.

Benton snapped his gun up, but before his finger pressed the trigger, Gray had hit the window in a spray of showering glass and splintered wood.

Benton's shot hammered through the broken window, a coughing bark that drowned out the tinkle of the falling shards. Outside, on the porch, a body thumped and rolled, crashed into the railing, flailed for a moment as Gray thrashed to gain his feet.

Benton bent his head, ran two quick steps, hurled himself after Gray, went sailing through the broken window, landed on the porch floor with a jar that shook his teeth.

Out in the moon-washed yard the banker was swinging on his horse at the hitching rack. And as he swung up, his hand was clawing at the saddle, clawing for something hidden there . . . a metallic something that came up in his fist, gleaming in the moonlight, and exploded with a gush of flame spearing through the night.

Benton, staggering to his feet, ducked as the showers of splinters leaped from the railing of the porch and the whining bullet chugged into the window sill behind him.

Gray's horse was rearing, wheeling from the rack, puffs of dust beneath his dancing feet.

Benton snapped up his gun and fired, knew that he had missed.

Cursing, he vaulted the porch railing, ran for his own mount while Gray ham-

mered off into the night, heading south, heading for the hills.

V

MOONLIGHT made the hills a nightmare land of light and shadow, a mottled land that was almost unearthly . . . a place of sudden depths and crazy heights, a twisting, bucking land that had been frozen into rigidity by a magic that might, it seemed, turn it loose again on any moment's notice.

Ahead of Benton, Gray's horse crossed a ridge, was highlighted for a single instant against the moonlit sky. Then was gone again, plunging down the slope beyond.

Gaining on him, Benton told himself, gaining all the time. He bent low above the mighty black and whispered to him and the black heard and responded, great muscles straining to hurl himself and his rider up the slope.

Faint dust, stirred by the passing of the pounding hoofs ahead, left a faintly bitter smell in the cool night air.

Another couple of miles, Benton promised himself. Another couple of miles and I'll overhaul him.

The black topped the ridge and swung sharply to angle down the trail that led toward the blackness of the canyon mouth below.

Ahead of them, halfway down the slope, Gray's horse was a humping shadow that left a dust trail in the moonlight. A shadow that fled before them in the tricky shadows that laired among the hills.

A shadow that suddenly staggered, that was a pinwheel of dust spinning down the hill . . . a pinwheel that became two spinning parts and then was still. The horse lay sprawled against the slope. Probably dead with a broken neck, thought Benton.

But the man was running . . . a tiny furtive rabbity shadow that scuttled across a painted landscape.

With a whoop, Benton spurred the black horse off the trail, went plunging after the running figure in a shower of rocks and talus. For a moment Gray halted, facing about. Flame blossomed from his hand and the flat crack of his gun snarled across the night.

Benton lifted his gun, then lowered it again. No sense of shooting at a ducking, dodging figure in the shadowed light. No sense in wasting time.

Gray faced about again and once more the gun barked an angry challenge. Far above his head, Benton heard the droning of the bullet.

Then the man was just ahead, dodging through the brush that covered the lower reaches of the slope. Benton drove the horse straight at him and Gray, seeing the gleam of the slashing hoofs above him, screamed and dived away, caught his foot and fell, skidded on his shoulder through the silty soil.

Benton spun the horse around, leaped from the saddle. He hit the ground and slid, ground crumbling and skidding beneath his driving boots.

Gray clawed his way to his feet, stood with his hands half raised.

"Don't shoot," he screamed. "Don't shoot. I lost my gun."

Benton walked toward him. "You always manage to lose your gun," he said, "just when it will save you."

The banker cringed, backing down the slope. Benton followed.

"We're going to have a talk," he said. "You and I. You're going to tell me a lot of things that will hang a lot of people."

Gray babbled, wildly. "I'll talk. I'll tell you everything. I'll tell you all about . . ."

Suddenly a rifle cracked from somewhere beyond the ridge . . . a high, ringing sound that woke the echoes in the hills. And cracked again, a vicious sound that cut through the night like a flaming scream of hate.

Benton stiffened, startled by the sound, startled by the knowledge that other men were close.

A pebble clicked and a boot scraped swiftly through the sliding sand. Warning feet jigged on Benton's spine and he flicked his attention from the rifle shots to the man before him.

Gray was charging, shoulders hunched, head pulled down, long arms reaching out. Coming up the hill with the drive of powerful legs that dug twin streams of pebbles from their resting places and sent them pouring down the hill in a rattling torrent.

Benton jerked up his gun, but the shoulders hit his knees before he could press the trigger and steel arms were clawing at his waist, clawing to pull him down even

as the impact of the driving shoulders hurled him off his feet.

His body slammed into the earth and his gun went wheeling through the moonlight as his elbow hit a stone and his arm jerked convulsively with pain.

Above him, Gray loomed massive in the night, hunched like a beast about to spring, face twisted into a silent snarl of rage. Benton lashed up with his boot, but as he kicked, Gray moved, was running down the hill after the gun that had been knocked from Benton's hand.

BENTON hurled himself to his feet, strode down the slope. Gray was on his knees, clawing under a bush where the gun had lodged, mumbling to himself, half slobbering in his haste. Then he was twisting around, a brightness in his hand.

Benton flattened out in a long, clean dive that smothered the gun play, that sent Gray crashing back into the bush. The man fought back, fought silently with pistoning fists and raking fingernails and pumping knees that caught Benton in the stomach and battered out his breath.

Clawing for the second gun that should have been in his belt, Benton's fingers found the empty holster. The gun had fallen out somewhere, perhaps when Gray had first tackled him farther up the slope.

The other gun also had disappeared. Gray had lost his hold upon it at the impact of Benton's charge and it lay somewhere beneath the battered, tangled bush.

The knee came up again and plunged into his stomach with a vicious force. Retching, Benton slid forward, rolled free of the bush, crawled on hands and knees. The hill and moon were swinging in gigantic circles before his eyes and there was a giant hand inside of him, tearing at his vitals.

Off to one side a tattered form struggled up into the moonlight, took a slow step forward. Benton wabbled to his feet and stood waiting, watching Gray advance.

The man came on slow and stolid, like a killer sure of the kill but careful to make no mistakes.

Benton sucked in careful breaths of air, felt the pain evaporating from his body, sensed that he had legs again.

Six feet away Gray sprang swiftly, right fist flailing out, left fist cocked. Benton ducked, countered with his right, felt the fist sink into the banker's belly. Gray grunted and let loose his left and it raked across Benton's ribs with a searing impact.

Benton stepped back, trip-hammered Gray's chin with a right and left, took a blow along the jaw that tilted his head with a vicious jolt.

Gray was coming in, coming fast, fists working like pistons, Benton took one quick backward step to gain some room to swing, brought his right fist sizzling from his boot tops. It smacked with a terrific impact full in the banker's face, jarred Benton's arm back to the elbow. In front of Benton, Gray was folding up, fists still pumping feebly, feet still moving forward, but folding at the knees.

Strength went out of the man and he slumped into a pile that moaned and clawed to regain its feet.

Benton stepped away, stood waiting.

Painfully, Gray made it to his feet, stood staring at Benton. His clothes were ripped and torn and a dark stream of blood bubbled from his nose and ran black across his mouth and chin.

"Well?" asked Benton.

Gray lifted a hand to wipe away the blood. "I've had enough," he said.

"Talk then," said Benton. "Talk straight and fast."

Gray mumbled at him. "What you want to know?"

"About the ranches. It was a put-up game?"

Gray shook his head. "All legal," he protested. "Everything was . . ."

Benton strode toward him and the man moaned in fright, putting up his hands to shield his face.

"All right, then," said Benton. "Spit it out."

"It was the Watsons that thought it up," Gray told him. He stopped to spit the blood out of his mouth and then went on. "They knew about the market up north and they wanted land and cattle."

"So you fixed it up to go broke," said Benton.

Gray nodded. "The bank really didn't go broke, you see. We just doctored up the books, so there'd be some excuse to foreclose on our loans."

"Then what?"

"That's all," said Gray. "I foreclosed

and the Anchor brand took over. Paid the bank the money and took the land."

"And you'll testify in court?"

Gray hesitated. Benton reached for him and he backed away. He wiped his mouth again. "I'll testify," he said.

Suddenly Gray straightened to attention, head cocked to one side, like a dog that has suddenly been snapped from sleep by an unfamiliar sound.

Then Benton heard it, too. The click and rattle of horses' hoofs, somewhere across the ridge.

Gray whirled about, staggered up the slope.

"Help," he yelled. "Help!"

Benton leaped after him, swift rage brimming in his brain.

"Help!" yelled Gray.

Benton reached him, grasped his shoulder, hauled him around. The man's mouth was opening again, but Benton smashed it shut, smashed it with a blow that cracked like a pistol shot. Gray sagged so suddenly that his falling body ripped loose the hold Benton's hand had upon his coat.

This time he did not moan or stir. He lay huddled on the ground, a limp pile of clothing that fluttered in the wind.

The hoofs across the ridge were speeding up and heading for the top. Frantically, Benton explored the ground for a gun. Three guns, he thought, and not a one in sight.

For a single instant he stood in indecision and that instant was too long.

Mounted men plunged over the ridge top, black silhouettes against the moon, and were plunging down the slope. Dust smoked in silver puffs around the horses' jolting hoofs and the men rode silently.

Benton ducked swiftly, started to run, but those on the ridge top saw him, wheeled their mounts, tore down upon him.

Faced about, he waited . . . and knew that final hope was gone. Gray had yelled when he heard the hoofs, but he could not have known that the riders were from the Anchor ranch. He had only taken a chance, gambling on the fact that they may have been.

And they were.

FOUR men, who wheeled their horses in a rank in front of Benton, reined them to a sliding stop, sat looking at him, like gaunt, black vultures perching on a tree.

Benton, standing motionless, ticked them off in his brain. Vest, the foreman of the Anchor spread, Indian Joe, Snake McAfee and old Dan Watson himself.

Watson chuckled in his beard, amused.

"No guns," he said. "Can you imagine that. The great Ned Benton caught without no guns."

"I shoot him now?" asked Indian Joe and lifted up his gun.

Watson grunted. "Might as well," he said.

Indian Joe leveled the gun with a grossly exaggerated gesture of careful aiming.

"I nick him up a bit," said Joe.

"None of that," snapped Watson, peevishly. "When you fire, give it to him straight between the eyes."

"No fun that way," complained Indian Joe.

Watson spoke to Benton. "You got anything to say?"

Benton shook his head.

If he turned and ran, they'd stop him with a storm of lead before he'd gone a dozen feet.

On the hillside above a rock clicked and Vest stiffened in his saddle.

"What was that?" he asked.

Snake laughed at him. "Nothing, Vest. You're just spooky. That's all. Shooting at them shadows back there."

Slowly, deliberately Indian Joe raised his gun. Benton stared straight into the ugly bore.

The gun flashed an angry puff of red into his eyes and the wind of the screaming bullet stirred the hair upon his head.

"Missed, by Lord!" yelped Indian Joe in mock chagrin.

Watson yelled angrily at him. "I told you none of that!"

Indian Joe was the picture of contriteness. "I do better next time."

He leveled the gun again and Snake growled at him. "You take too damn long."

"Got to hit him this time," said Indian Joe, "or boss get awful mad. Right between the eyes, he said. Right between . . ."

Up the hill a rifle snarled and Indian Joe stiffened in his saddle, stiffened so that he was standing in the stirrups with his body tense and rigid.

Vest yelled in sudden fright and Indian

Joe's horse was pitching, hurling the rider from his back, a rider that was a tumbling empty sack instead of a rigid body.

With a curse, Snake swung his horse around, reaching for his gun. The hilltop rifle spoke again and Snake was huddled in his saddle, clawing at his throat and screaming, screaming with a whistling, gurgling sound. Blackness gushed from his throat onto his clawing hands and he slumped out of the saddle as the horse wheeled suddenly and plunged toward the canyon mouth.

Benton dived for the shining gun that fell from Snake's hand, heard the hammer of the rifle talking on the hill. A horse screamed in agony and far off down the slope he heard the hurried drum of hoofs.

Scooping the weapon up, Benton whirled around. A sixgun roared and he felt the slap of the bullet as it sang across his ribs.

In the moonlight Dan Watson was walking toward him, walking slowly and deliberately, gun leveled at his hip. Behind him lay the horse that he had been riding, downed by the rifle on the hill.

WATSON'S hat had fallen off and the moon gleamed on his beard. He walked like an angry bear, with broad shoulders hunched and bowed legs waddling.

Benton snapped Snake's gun up, half fumbled with the unfamiliar grip. A heavy gun, he thought, a heavier gun than I have ever used. Too heavy, with a drag that pulls the muzzle down.

Watson fired again and something tugged at Benton's ear, a thing that hummed and made a breeze against his cheek.

By main strength, Benton forced Snake's gun muzzle up, pulled the trigger. The big gun jolted in his hand . . . jolted again.

Out in front of him, Watson stopped walking, stood for a moment as if surprised.

Then his hand opened and the gun fell out and Watson pitched forward on his face.

From up the hill came a crash of bushes, a cascade of chattering rocks that almost drowned out the beat of plunging hoofs.

Benton swung around, gun half raised. Two riders were tearing down upon him.

One of them waved a rifle at him and screeched in a banshee voice.

"How many did we get?"

"Jingo!" yelled Benton. "Jingo, you old . . ."

Then he saw the second rider and his words dried up.

Stones rattled about his boots as Ellen Madox reined in her horse less than six feet from him.

Jingo stared at the three bodies on the hillside.

"I guess that finishes it," he said.

"There were four of them," said Benton. "Vest must have got away."

"The hell he did,' snapped Jingo. "Who's that jigger over there?"

He pointed and Benton laughed . . . a laugh of pure nervousness.

"That's Gray," he said. "I got him and he coughed up everything. He'll testify in court."

"Dead men," said Jingo, sharply, "ain't worth a damn in court."

"He isn't dead," protested Benton." Just colder than a herring."

"Young Watson should be around somewhere," said Jingo. "What say we hunt him up?"

Benton shook his head. "Bill Watson is riding and he won't be coming back."

Jingo squinted at him. "Gal riding with him?"

"I suppose she is," said Benton.

"Did a downright handsome job on them cows," said Jingo. "Take a good six weeks to get them all together."

"You had good help," said Benton, looking at Ellen Madox. She no longer wore the dress that she had in town, but Levis and a flat felt hat that must have been her brother's, for it was too big for her.

Jingo snorted. "She wasn't supposed to come. Sneaked out after the rest had gone and joined up with us."

He spat disgustedly. "Her pa was madder than a hornet when he found out about her being with us. Told me off to take her home."

He spat again. "Always something," he said, "to spoil a man's good time."

Benton grinned. "I'll take her off your hands, Jingo. You take care of Gray over there and I'll be plumb proud to see Ellen home."

STRANGER'S LUCK

BY DAN CUSHMAN

The sorriest man in Union Bar was wealthy Roger Quail when he directed the tall stranger to put the deadwood on the notorious Johnny Blue.

THE conductor paused to remove the pink slip from the band of the tall man's hat.

"Union Bar," he announced.

The tall man stood, slowly shaking the cramp from his long legs. He removed his wide hat to smooth his graying hair, adjusted the knot of his black string tie, and felt reassuringly of the pearl-handled object of weight in the holster beneath his left armpit. Then he lifted his little black satchel from the luggage rack. In a moment the brakes clutched howling at the wheels, and the train lurched to a stop.

The tall man was one of five pasengers to alight. First came a little old lady carrying a net covered canary cage, and, following her, a Chinese herb doctor, a plump salesman of the Immerhall Pneumatic Tool Co., and the tall stranger. The fifth was a young hobo who climbed nonchalantly off the blinds.

The stranger was probably the only one who noticed the hobo—and that but casually, because he was in the habit of noticing things. The hobo was in his early twenties, snub-nosed, freckled, reddish haired. He didn't seem to be a common bum, and, judging by the way he started down the street without first looking around, he already had some acquaintance with Union Bar.

The tall stranger paused on the platform, holding his little black satchel. The little old lady was accepting the kisses of several relatives, and allowing her canary and herself to be stowed away in a waiting buggy. The Chinese herb doctor was hurrying toward a jumble of rough-board shacks which lined the edge of an old mining cut a short distance back from the railroad.

The red-faced drill salesman approached the tall man with a patronizing swagger, "Stranger here in Union Bar, friend?" he asked.

The stranger set down his little black bag and fumbled for tobacco and papers. "Why, no. Seems like I've seen this camp before—several places."

"I see what you mean," the salesman said, laughing in a way which indicated he was not sure at all. "Are you headed for the local hostelry?"

"The which?"

"The hostelry—you know, the hotel."

"No. Not just yet. I was lookin' for a man named Roger Quail."

"Roger Quail, president of the Golconda Company?"

"Yes, so I believe."

"That's a funny one! I came to see Quail myself. My concern—I'm with Immerhall, you know—we've supplied him with his test drilling equipment ever since he started out. Good customer. What's your line, friend?"

"My line? Oh, several things. Yes, several different things." Slowly, with deft fingers, the stranger twisted up a brown paper cigarette. The salesman couldn't help noticing those fingers, strong and perfectly formed as the fingers of a pianist.

"Salesman?"

"Why, I don't know. Maybe. I guess everybody sells somethin', one way or the other. Where did you say I'd find Quail?"

"Don't think I said, but you'll probably find him at his office back of the Paystreak Saloon."

The salesman was disappointed when the stranger showed no surprise at the location of Quail's office. The salesman had been making Union Bar each three months for two years now, and each trip he'd managed to tell some stranger that the office of the camp's biggest operator was

located in the rear of a saloon, and each of these strangers had been gratifyingly amazed. But not the tall man.

"I guess that's the Paystreak sign down the street," was all he said.

"That's it." The salesman rushed on to save some of his story. "Funny thing, a big-shot mining man with an office in the back of a saloon. But that's the way Quail is, talks poverty and banks millions. He came here to Union Bar when it was a worked-out ghost camp. Started that saloon. Then he began buying up those bench claims when nobody thought the gravel could be worked at a profit. But Quail showed 'em. He's got two dredges going now. There's other outfits came to Union, once Quail showed the way, but Quail is the biggest. . . ."

The stranger said goodbye, and sauntered away. "Damned secretive," mumbled the salesman, toting his bags toward the Union House.

THE stranger walked so casually that anyone noticing him might have supposed he was a resident. There were lots of new faces in Union Bar these days. But despite his appearance, the stranger missed little. Already he had a good picture of the camp set in his mind—its general form, the course of the railroad, the deep hy-

Tom spun, ready for trouble. But a flash of gunshine in the man's hand told him it was too late.

draulic cuts and growing ocean of dredge gravels, the scattering shacks, the chief buildings. He also noticed that the red-headed hobo had paused near Roger Quail's Paystreak Saloon. The hobo passed through the swinging doors, but, when the stranger followed a half minute later, he was nowhere in sight.

The Paystreak was an ordinary looking saloon, even though it did belong to Union Bar's largest operator.

"Roger Quail around?" he asked the bartender.

"Busy." The bartender swabbed to the end of the bar and back again.

"When can I see him? I got a piece of news that's half-way important."

"He's doin' somethin' that's all-way important. You come back in half an hour. Quail's in his office most all day, but if you busted in on him now he'd be mad enough to blast you with his derringer."

The stranger stalled around a while. He sauntered to the end of Union Bar's planless street and back again. Yes, he'd seen twenty-odd camps like Union. The high and low platform sidewalks, the log buildings, and frame buildings, and log buildings with frame false fronts—these gold camps were all the same. The hobo, he noticed, had just come through the swinging doors of the Paystreak. There was something about the young fellow's jaw that made the stranger wonder.

Roger Quail was alone in his office when the stranger went in. Quail was a beefy man with sloping shoulders, and a drooping underlip made to seem even more drooping by the soggy cigar that rested in it. From a distance his face seemed to be flushed, but closer inspection revealed that its hue came from the thousand-odd purplish veinlets which branched just beneath the surface of the skin. Quail squeaked back in his swivel chair to look at the tall man.

"What can I do for you?" He cut the question in half with a wheeze.

"Quail, I understand you store considerable money in your strong box from time to time," the tall man drawled, dropping his satchel and easing himself into a chair without waiting for an invitation.

Quail's breath came with a hard snort. "What the hell buiness is it of yours whether I keep money in my strongbox, and how much?"

The tall man went on like he hadn't heard, "I have it on good authority that you make your gold shipments to the Territorial Trust Company in Butte, and that they give you your returns partly in the form of credit, and partly in currency, and that you store the currency in your vault so you can meet local obligations in cash. That correct?"

Quail sat forward in his chair, and planked his forearms solidly on his desk. "You seem to know considerable about my affairs, stranger."

"Knowin' little facts like that about other folks' business is a habit of mine," the stranger smiled, not without pride.

"Why?"

"Business reasons." With a casual gesture the tall man drew forth a silvered shield and tossed it on Quail's desk.

"Detective!" Quail now spoke with a new tone.

"Right. W. T. Tilson of Denver."

They shook hands. "Glad my conscience is clear," Quail sniggered around his damp cigar.

"Uh-huh." Tilson sat back, fished for tobacco and papers, twisted a cigarette into shape, lit it. "To be truthful, Quail, I don't give a hang whether your conscience is clear or not. I'm not one of these reform law-dogs out after crime in general. Far from it. Why, I'm favored toward crime, more or less. It makes my business good."

Quail smiled. "I see."

"But I'm deeply interested in a particular criminal."

"One you followed here?"

"Yes, more or less."

"Who is he?"

"Johnny Blue."

Quail lifted his eyebrows. "Not *the* Johnny Blue! Say, that ought to put Union Bar on the map."

"Sure, it ought." The tall man chuckled. "The board of trade can tender him a banquet if it likes—after I catch him."

"You say you followed him here 'more or less.' I take it by that you haven't actually seen him."

"I might have seen him, and I might not. I never met Johnny Blue."

"But you must have a description."

"No. I've picked up several descriptions of him from time to time, but they

differ. However, Blue left a trail." The tall man dipped into his coat pocket and tossed three crumpled banknotes to the table beside the badge. "Hundreds. Not many hundred dollar bills floatin' around the country, so they aren't too hard to follow. Blue obtained these particular specimens from a strongbox belongin' to my client, the Midland National Express."

"They're marked?" Quail asked, examining them.

"No. But marked or not, these big notes aren't too hard to follow."

"I suppose not. Did he pass some of those here, in Union Bar?"

"Butte was the closest."

"Then how did you trace him here?"

THE tall man chose not to answer this question. "Quail," he said slowly, "if I answered that in a satisfying manner, it'd take me the better part of the next twelve months, and you'd know as much about detectin' as I do. A man learns considerable about the habits of folks durin' ten years in my line o' business, and in the past six months I've learned considerable about one particular person—Johnny Blue. This learnin' has told me Blue is headed for here, and I know what he's after. Let it go at that."

"What's he after?"

"One of the rolls of currency you're in the habit of gettin' from the Territorial Trust Company in Butte."

Quail thoughtfully rolled his sodden cigar from one side of his drooping underlip to the other. He examined each of the hundred dollar bills. Suddenly he straightened up, snapped his finger as though he'd just thought of something, and heaved his hulk from the swivel chair.

"Now, don't call the law!" the thin man warned. "Help from one o' your hill-town law-dogs would be enough to hamstring me."

"Don't worry about that. I'll keep my mouth shut. I happened to remember somethin' . . ." Quail wheezed through the door leading to the saloon. The cash register jingled, and a minute later he returned and slapped down another hundred dollar bill.

"Feast your peepers on that, Detective!"

The tall man carefully smoothed the bill. "Know who passed it?" he asked.

"Sure thing! It was a young fellow in here not ten minutes ago. Why, you might have seen him—short chap, reddish hair, freckled face. Used to live here. One of them no-good Rusk boys. Lived with his paw in a cabin up near the mouth of the Muskrat. Old man was a trifle cracked. Had some second bench placers, dry as a bone, and he spent fifteen or twenty years tryin' to invent a dry washer that would work 'em. Fool! No dry washer ever worked. This boy, this Tom Rusk, he was never any good. Never a bit of good. I've suspected him from the first. Comin back here to smile in the face of his old friends and try to rob 'em!" Quail had worked himself up to a fine state of indignation.

"Why, the low varmint!" drawled the tall man. His face was devoid of all surprise, all emotion. It was, as ever, a gambler's face, animated only by a cynical glint in the icy blue eyes. "So you think this Tom Rusk went out into the world and became the notorious Johnny Blue. It's possible. How long did you say he'd been gone?"

"Three, maybe four years."

"Yes, it could be. Blue ain't come into the picture more'n that long ago, I guess."

Quail rubbed his fat palms and gloated, "It ought to be easy to catch him now!"

"Just when folks say it's goin' to be easy to catch Johnny Blue is just when it ain't."

"We know that Blue and Tom Rusk are the same person, don't we? I got witnesses to prove he passed the hundred dollar bill, and—"

"Sure, we can prove he passed the bill, but there's a good many people around the country passin' hundred dollar bills who ain't Johnny Blue. Nope, Quail, such evidence as that won't convince a jury. He's got to go a heap further'n that. We got to catch him right in the act. We got to catch him robbin' that currency out of your safe."

"That's right! We'll catch him in the act, the ungrateful little—"

"When do you get that currency, Quail?"

"Why—" The fat man hesitated. He wasn't in the habit of trusting people. Finally he said grudgingly, "We get it

in tomorrow on the morning train. Everybody thinks we get it on Friday because we send a couple of armed men to the station to get a box from the express, but that's just a dummy. We make a big show of hauling it down here and storing it. Put it in that safe right there."

"A good idea." The detective nodded his approval. "And all the while this business is goin' on, the real money is safe and sound in another strongbox."

"Right."

"Where do you keep the money?"

"In the ledger vault at the warehouse office. So, you see, my money isn't in the danger you thought it was. Rusk had no means of knowing—"

"I've learned not to wager too much on what Johnny Blue knows and don't know. In fact, I sort of think Blue knows more about your money habits than you think. I've followed his trail for a spell now, Quail, and I'm sort of learnin' not to underestimate him."

"If that's the case, I'll wire the Territorial Trust not to send that money tomorrow—"

"No. You let that shipment come through. Handle it just the same as you always do. You don't need to be scared for your money. Leave it to me to put the deadwood on Johnny Blue."

Quail was doubtful. He showed this in the manner he shifted around in his chair. "But you yourself said this Blue was pretty smooth. I don't know . . . Tilson, do you realize that I stand to lose eight thousand dollars?"

"You don't stand to lose a cent."

"But if—"

"If he gets from under my nose with your money, you can hold my employers, the Midland National Express Co., responsible for every cent, and I'll sign a statement to that effect."

"It's a deal," Quail gloated, champing on his swollen cigar. "Detective, it's a deal!"

TOM RUSK, the freckled faced young man who had climbed off the blinds, had been brought up within four miles of Union Bar. His father, "Crazy" Rusk they called him, had spent the last third of his lifetime trying to invent a dry washer to work his claims on the high, number two bench near the mouth of the Muskrat. At the age of eighteen Tom became tired of poverty and hit for the mines of Coeur d'Alene, and from there he went to Seattle, and the Klondike. He'd heard of his father's death from One-Arm Higbe at Whitehorse on his way outside. And Higbe had told him something else—he said Roger Quail was getting ready to grab those number two bench claims for a bill his father had run at Quail's Union Bar Hardware.

Even though the elder Rusk had wasted a good portion of his life trying to develop these number two benches, Tom had never believed they would not some day be worked at a profit. So he took steerage passage on the first ship down from Skagway, and from Seattle he grabbed the blinds of a passenger bound for Montana. In Union Bar, his first stop was at Quail's.

"I wouldn't need to pay you a cent for those bench claims, Rusk," Quail had remarked smugly from around his fat cigar.

"No, not a cent. I could just attach, and that would be the end of it. But I'm not that kind of man. No, I'll pay you for them. Pay damned generous. There's seven claims up there. What do you say to fifty dollars each?"

Fifty dollars! They were worth that many thousand, once Quail did what he planned to do—bring the long ditch and flume around the hills from the Thousand Springs. Tom held his temper.

"How large is my father's bill?" he asked, knowing it amounted to about five hundred dollars.

Quail got out a ledger and pretended to go to some bother running down the amount. "Seven thousand. To be exact, $7,102.75."

"That's a damned lie! My father never owed such an amount. I know how much it was when I left, and One-Arm Higbie—"

"The bill is what I said!" Quail's face had gone a shade deeper red, and one hand crept beneath his coat to where he kept his derringer. "Don't come into my office and call me a liar! I've been fair to you, and that father of yours, too. Trusted you all these years, and now I offer to pay a decent price besides—"

"You've always been after those claims."

"And this time I'll get them! Quail could see that Rusk was unarmed, so he removed his hand from the butt of his

derringer. He wheezed a few times from the excitement, then smiled. The smile was intended to be friendly, but his little eyes glinted like a weasel's. He hooked a chair with the toe of his boot and slid it across the room.

"Here, Tommy lad, sit down and let's talk this over. Let's sit down and go over the accounts. See what it was the old gentleman bought, and maybe I'll be able to raise my price on those claims a little. Maybe I'll see my way clear to pay you seventy-five, or even a hundred . . ."

Rusk could see that Quail held all the aces. He had doctored the books to make it seem that the seven thousand was owing, and a court would probably believe him.

"I'll sell the claims to somebody else," said Tom.

"Try it!"

He knew what Quail meant: The big operators of Union Bar had formed a combine to keep claim prices down. They had divided the country among themselves, and the Muskrat benches had gone to Roger Quail.

Tom left the office to wander along the street. A few old acquaintances greeted him, but only a few—Union Bar was a city of strangers these days. New faces everywhere—dredge laborers, dragline operators, drillers, muckers and their assorted parasites. Union Bar—a new camp with the old name.

Toward evening Tom walked to the old cabin at the mouth of the Muskrat. It had a dreary deserted look. He slept in his old bunk, the top one against the north wall. Next morning he searched for his father's grave and found it in a clump of scrub pine overlooking the bench. He walked back to Union Bar. The sheriff, a stranger, hunted him out to deliver a notice. Legal paper with a purple strip down one side. Attachment, Quail attaching the claims. It occurred to him that the area included his father's grave. He laughed an empty, flat laugh. Attaching his father's grave. There was something symbolic in that, if he had the brains to see it. He decided he needed a drink or two.

"Down on your luck, kid?"

Tom turned to locate the voice. His eyes fell on a smiling man of forty or forty-five, sleek and well dressed.

"Maybe I am." Tom still had fifty cents. "Have a drink?"

The stranger dipped into his pocket and let a ten-dollar gold piece ring on the bar. It made a pleasant sound.

"I'll buy," said the stranger. "I know you're up against it, kid. How do I know? I'll tell you why—because I work for the bloodsucker that put you there." He laughed cynically and poured a drink from the bottle that was set before them. "Yes, I'm an employee of Mr. Roger Quail. It's a job, you see, and a man with a wife and kids can't be too choosy. Sometimes it isn't a pleasant job, but I must say he pays well." To prove this he pulled out a wallet to show its thick padding of bills. He also jingled some gold pieces in his coat pocket. "Yes, Quail pays off, that's one thing about him. You don't know me, do you? Clausen—chief clerk."

Clausen was already slightly tipsy, but he kept drinking more and more. He talked. He became confidential.

"Sure, I got a pocketful of money. I get a percentage of the profit. Damn small percentage, but even that's good on Quail's deals. He'll be a millionaire a couple times over by the time he works out Union Bar, so he can afford to brush a few crumbs my way. Should, too, the dirty work I do for him. Say, there's too many people here. Let's go down to the end of the bar . . . Or that table, let's sit there."

Clausen leaned close over the table. "As I said, the boss trusts me. Why, he even trusts me with the combination of the safe!" He giggled drunkenly and bumped against the bottle, almost upsetting it. "Why, here it is! We just changed it, so I wrote it down on this slip of paper. But don't look! Lord, what if it should be robbed now? It wouldn't be much risk between twelve and one, when the watchman goes home to supper. He isn't supposed to do it, but I know he sneaks out. Why, Rusk, I wouldn't dare say a word if somebody did rob it—not after flashing this combination. Wouldn't dare make myself the goat, not with $8,000 in it. But I'm just fooling, Rusk. Just fooling. I know you didn't have a chance to read the combination, anyway."

Clausen forgot about it then. He made a pass at shoving the paper into his vest

pocket, but it just hung there, two-thirds out. He leaned over for the bottle, rubbing the table. The paper fell to the floor. It lay there, apparently unnoticed. Five minutes later, Tom Rusk purposely dropped a match. When he raised up after leaning for it, he had the slip of paper in the palm of his hand.

THE Golconda warehouse stood on a long triangle of land where Union Bar's main street was intersected by a forty-foot deep hydraulic cut. As the hydraulic cut had been made many years before, its sides were weathered to less than the perpendicular, and its bottom was a tangle of willow and young pine. It was almost midnight, there was little moon, and Union Bar boasted no street lights. That made it easy for Rusk to approach the side of the warehouse without detection. He climbed the steep bank of the cut and rested for a while in the deeper darkness next to the building.

He managed to make out the hands of his watch. Still ten minutes before twelve. Clausen said the watchman was in the habit of sneaking out for a lunch between twelve and one. He waited. In a few minutes he heard somebody moving around inside. The door rattled, its hinges squeaked. Tom watched the man lock the door, and then strike out toward some cabins at the upper end of Main Street.

The windows at the side were out of reach, so Tom went around to the back. He looked through the dirty, barred window in the door. The long main room of the warehouse was lit by a single, gasoline lantern. Its front end was divided off, and a stairway ran up to a balcony and a row of doors. That must be the office.

He tried the windows. The first two were locked and he was afraid he would have to force one with the iron bar he had brought for that purpose—but the third was unlocked. He raised it and climbed inside, quietly lowering it after him.

Avoiding the light of the gasoline lantern, he hurried the length of the big room, climbed the stairs. He opened a door. The room was dark, but something about it—the high stool he stumbled against, or maybe the smell of the room—told him it was the office. He closed the door and stood for a while in the blackness, listening to the hammer of his heart. Slowly a couple other sounds became audible—the tick-tick of the watch in his pocket, and the slower beat of a clock somewhere in the room.

He decided there was no window, save for the skylight, so he drew a bit of candle from his pocket, lit it. He looked carefully around. The office was empty. Just the desks, high stools, waste baskets, water cooler—and at one side the steel door of the vault with its dial, its handle, and the gold-lettered words "Mogler Safe and Lock Co., Minneapolis."

He couldn't open it the first time. His hands were trembling too badly. He tried again, failed again. He looked at his watch, fearing it was time for the watchman to return, but it was only ten minutes past twelve. He calmed down then and worked the dial slowly. This time the door opened. There was a second door, of sheet metal, just inside the heavy one, but this was not locked. He held the candle inside to examine the safe's contents. Papers in pigeonholes, ledgers—and there, in the large compartment at the bottom, a green tin box with the mark of the Territorial Trust, Butte. The box was locked, but he pried it open with his bar. He examined the banknotes that partly filled it—fives, tens, twenties all in neat, flat bundles. And at one side a few rolls of gold coins.

He was burning to escape now that the money was in his hands, but he forced himself to move slowly. He dumped the money in a small sack he had brought along, put back the green tin box, closed the doors of the vault, gave the dial a whirl. He blew out the candle and crept from the room.

Terror seized him when he reached the balcony. He went down the stairs three at a time, ran the length of the large room, flung open the window, leaped outside. He forced himself to stop and close the window, and in another five seconds he was safely among the willows at the bottom of the old hydraulic cut.

He followed the cut for half a mile until he was well out of the town, then he took a hillside trail toward the Muskrat. The old cabin was dark and friendly. Once inside its familiar old walls he felt safe. He lit the candle, barred the door, curtained the two windows with fragments of

an old quilt, and dumped the money on the table.

It was then he noticed the man who was quietly sitting on the three-legged stool in the shadow of the far bunks.

Tom exclaimed something and started for the door, but a flash of gunshine in the man's hand told him it was too late.

"Nope, son, I wouldn't try it!"

The man rose slowly. He was tall, slim and cool-eyed. He strolled over casually to run his long, sensitive fingers over the neat stacks of bills, and finally he got around to flashing his badge.

Tom laughed bitterly and sat down. "Guess I've been framed all around."

The tall man thought this over. "Why yes," he agreed. "I guess you have."

"What will they do with me?"

"Depends. Ordinary circumstances, robbery like thisn' first offense, about five years. Home town boy like you, maybe get off in two or three. Just enough time to learn to make a respectable hair bridle. However, if they prove you're really Johnny Blue, it'll go a lot harder."

TOM had heard of Johnny Blue. The papers that got into the Klondike had things to say about him from time to time.

"*Me,* Johnny Blue? They could never prove a thing like that."

"Quail says you are. Blue left a trail of hundred dollar bills behind him all the way across Montana, and Quail claims you passed one in his saloon yesterday morning."

"That's a damned lie!"

"Sure," the tall man agreed, gathering up the bills.

"I know it's no use talking to you," Tom blurted, "but actually I'm not guilty of a robbery."

"No? How did you figure that one out?"

"Because Quail doctored his books to make it look like my dad owed seven thousand dollars instead of five or six hundred. He knew he could make it stick when Dad died and I was out of the country. He wanted to attach these claims that Dad spent half his life trying to develop. Quail is planning to ditch and flume water around the hills from the Thousand Springs just to work such high-and-dry benches as these. He tossed his so-called debt in my face yesterday morning. Today he started attachment proceedings. Then, I guess he got scared I might raise the money after all, so he framed me into robbing his safe. Had one of his sneaks give me the combination while he pretended to be drunk, knowing you'd catch me. Oh, it worked out!—just like all of Quail's ideas work out."

"Hm!" The tall man pondered for a while. "Accordin' to human hoss-sense, I guess you're right. It ain't really robbery to open a safe of the party of the second part, when party of the second part has falsified a debt to the same approximate amount. Yep, son, that's Blackstone." The tall man put his gun away with a gesture of finality. "Son, blamed if I don't find in your favor."

"You mean you aren't going to arrest me?"

"That's exactly right. And not only that, I say take this here money and sin no more. Use it to pay off that fake debt and redeem your claims. But mark my words, robbin' safes is a very bad business. I'd never recommend it to a young man for a career. It's a hard life a robber leads, never knowin' just which man is goin' to up and put the deadwood on him. Take my advice and follow the narrow trail."

It was like a fairy story. For a while, Tom wasn't sure that the tall man was really serious. And then, after thinking it over more, he shook his head.

"I can't let you do it."

"Can't? Why, don't be an idiot. Didn't this here Quail varmint—"

"It's not that. It's because of you. You came here intending to catch Johnny Blue. Instead, you allow a safe to be robbed right under your nose. I'm not so much an idiot that I can't see how that will make you look. It might ruin you as a detective."

The tall man chuckled. "I wouldn't worry too much about that, son. It's an old habit of Johnny Blue's—foolin' this detective."

The tall man paused with his hand on the bar of the door,

"You see, son, I'm Johnny Blue."

THE BRAND-TWISTERS

By LES SAVAGE, JR.

She was the Devil's sister. He was the Dean of Brands. When they tied in together Sweetwater County started oilin' its guns . . . for lawlessness fitted the pair like a custom made kack.

Lariat's Long Novel

I GUESS it was dumb, but I was tired as a hoss after roundup, and I'd left Bibo at the shack that morning. I come through that downslope meadow so thick in blueroot the smell almost gags you and got down off my blowing dun in the pines out front and slung my sweaty kack off, all without even looking at the cabin. I unbridled him and gave him enough slack on the picket rope to graze a little and had to kick open the door because I was carrying the saddle inside. Then I realized no light was showing inside the place.

"Bibo?"

"Come on in," and it wasn't Bibo's voice. "I have a gun on you. Shut the door afterward."

Maybe I was too played out to feel much. The loose board near the threshold squawked with my weight when I crossed it. That was about all the farther I went. I let the saddle down and shut the door behind me.

"Now you can turn up the light. It's on the stool to the right of the door."

We'd found an old hurricane lamp when we came here, and I got me a match out of my levis and lifted the cracked glass shield to get at the wick. My hands weren't shaking, but they was sort of tense by now. I wasn't surprised when the light revealed her.

"Running Iron Smith?" she said, and looked me up and down, and a smile began to grow on her face, and it was different when she said it again, and I didn't like it. "Running Iron Smith."

I been around a little, and I seen a few women, but never anything to sit a fancier saddle than this. There was two bunks at the back end of the room, and she sat on the lower one. No hat on her head and hair like midnight parted in the middle

"Don't be a fool," shouted Manners, fighting at the horses which kept bumping him. "I never even saw your cattle."

and hanging long and glossy down around her shoulders. If you never seen that gleam in an outlaw hoss's eyes, you don't know what I'm talking about.

There was a cayuse down in Cheyenne I tried to tame once and never could. Nobody else could either. They said the devil made him and then had to kick him out of hell. His eyes looked just like this woman's. She had on tight levis that showed off bigger hips than a girl would have, and I figure may be thirty. Her Justin boots look custom, and her leather jacket must have come expensive, too. The gun was one of those old Spencer falling block carbines across her knees.

"Where's Bibo?" I said.

"Safe," she told me, still studying that way. It was almost like a hand feeling my face to have her eyes there. She had full red lips that should have looked nice when they smiled, but I knew what they were smiling at, and they didn't look nice to me. All right, lady, I thought, I never claimed to be a Handsome Harry. Then her glance dropped down my dirty white shirt to where the hardware hung. Not many people would have taken in those nail scratches across the top of my holster, but they're usually a good sign, and she took them in. Suddenly she laughed. It was low in her throat and husky like a man's. "How do you get your pants off?" she said.

"I'm sensitive about my bow-legs, lady," I told her. "If you don't tell me where Bibo is, I'm coming over there and get that gun."

She jerked the rifle up at that, and it was the way I'd figured, she was a little spookier about this than she wanted to let on. She saw it in my face, then, and tried to settle down a little.

"That's one for you, Running Iron," she said. "I told you Bibo was safe. He'll remain that way if you tell us where you've cached those Cut-and-Slash cattle you appropriated last Tuesday." She saw me looking at the smashed table, then, and the broken chair, and she shrugged. "He's just got a bloody nose."

"You didn't have to do that," I said. "He's an old man."

"A stubborn old man," she said, standing up, and I see her eyes begin to smolder like banked coals, and it was the same way in that hoss. "He wouldn't tell us where the cattle were. Now you're going to. He's an old man, and we know how much he means to you, and we won't even have to bloody your nose. Where are the cattle?"

"You from the Cut-and-Slash?"

SHE saw what I meant. "It doesn't matter. Let's just say there won't be any trouble with the law in this if you tell. As soon as we have the cows, you get Bibo back and twenty-four hours to shake the dust of Sweetwater County from your hocks."

My fists ached, and I realized they had been clenched like that since I saw the busted table. I still got those scars across my cheeks from the time some ranny worked me over down Austin way, and they never found out what they wanted. But Bibo—

"You let me see him first?"

"He's too far away by now," she said. "We weren't taking any chances. I'm getting impatient. Let's have it."

'There's a pocket near the upper end of Hoss Creek," I told her. "We got them there."

"You'll have to show me. I've lived around here some time and never heard of any pocket there."

"That's why we put them there," I said. Then I turned around, to get my saddle. While I was bent over that way, I felt the tug at my belt. I started to straighten up up, then stopped. I hadn't heard her come up behind me, but I knew what it was. The mad was beginning to build up in me now. I felt like kicking myself for walking in this way. But what else? I picked up the kack and opened the door, and when I walked through my empty holster flopped against my leg with every step. The dun didn't want the saddle again, and he puffed up, and that only riled me worse. Then I saw why I hadn't spotted her horse. She gave a swing to those nice hips and was on my dun and made me walk in front of her through the upper meadow. A mocking bird was singing from the Douglas firs along the ridgetop, and I was puffing by the time we reached her horse, a classy-looking black with four white socks, tethered in a coulee on the other side of the ridge. I got a good look

at the silver-mounted Cheyenne rig she climbed into, and figured I would remember it next time I saw it. We dropped down through a little talus that skeered her black some to a string of cottonwoods beside the stream in the next valley, and then I turned northward toward Hoss Creek, and now it was beginning to reach me. If she was from the Cut-and-Slash, it didn't set right about no trouble with the law if I told. A rancher running a straight rope would more likely have a posse right on the spot. And if she wasn't with the Cut-and-Slash—

"Don't strain your brain about it, Running Iron. You're hardly in a position to be looking in the other fellow's poke."

That almost made me jump out of my kack. She had come up beside me, smiling that way, a little twisted on one side, the way you'd smile at a greenhorn, maybe, and it aggravated me.

"You a mind reader?" I said.

"No," she said, "but you aren't a poker player, either. At least you wouldn't make a very good one. You just show me the cattle and leave the figuring to men with a few more marbles."

Up to now I'd been so mad about walking in on this and about Bibo and about the way she riled me with this smile that I hadn't rightly appreciated her. Maybe it was the way the moonlight glistened on her lips, or the way her thigh curved against the horse. Bibo and me don't travel a trail that takes in many women. The last one was that Mex gal down in Austin. I found myself suddenly wondering if this woman's kisses wouldn't taste even better than the Mex gal's, and then I give a jerk on my reins that makes the dun jump, because how can I be thinking of that, when they have Bibo?

Hoss Creek itself was nigh onto dried up, and the timbered slope above its bed was where the railroad got a lot of its ties. We kept passing piles of pole ties with only two sides surfaced and slab ties with three sides and quarter ties with four, and finally I pulled up into the higher slope for fear we'd hit some of the tie cutters. The only way into the pocket was along the bottom of a dry stream that used to run into the bigger creek; the willows and cottonwoods were so thick here a man wouldn't see the dry bed unless he fell right into it. We'd busted out a lot of the service-berry bushes and ripped through most of the vines driving those critters in, but even then it would have been hard to find. The bed cut the ridge and dropped down the other side between some high shoulders into a little cup of a valley with another stream watering its bottom. The whitefaces were lying around on the sandy banks or standing knee deep out in the gurgling water, and looked happy enough.

The woman got off her black to look at the brand on the hip of a heifer. "You haven't changed it yet," she said.

"That's right," I told her.

"Then you might as well start doing a little decorating," said the man sitting his horse where he had come out of the timber behind us.

HE had a load of hay on his head thicker'n bunchgrass, and it was mostly grey, but that didn't tell anything. He was an ageless ranny; his face must have been carved out of granite with a dull Bowie, and it probably looked the same when he was weaned as it did now. There was a faint pattern of scars across one cheek that struck a familiar chord in me, but I couldn't place it right then. He was big enough to hunt bears with a switch, and his mare must have been seventeen hands tall, if it was one, and the heavy way he sat the kack I figured the poor horse was nigger-branded from withers to hocks. He must have weighed two twenty on the hoof, and his chest like to bust out his plaid shirt every breath he took, and his hips so negligible I wondered how he kept his forty-five from sliding down his legs.

"You weren't going to follow us," said the woman.

"We changed our minds, Ardis—"

"Damn you," she flared, "I told you not to—"

"Oh hell," he swung off his horse, heavy dark brows almost hiding his eyes when he frowned, "what does it matter?"

"All right," she said, those black eyes snapping, "all right. If you're going to let him know our names, it might as well be formal. Running Iron, this is Wolffe Farrare. He's too tough to kill, and too mean to die, and if he carved a notch in

his gun for every man he dusted off, there wouldn't be any handle left—"

"Never mind, never mind," he said. "Some day somebody's going to get tired of that hot head on you and slap it off."

She got so stiff she looked like a Sharp's ramrod. "It won't be you!"

"No?" he said, and took a step toward her.

"No," she said, and he stopped, looking at that falling block gun she had pulled up till it levelled on him. He let his breath out his nose like a bull does when it's disgusted, but he didn't go any farther toward her. "I told you I'd come back and tell where the cattle were, didn't I?" she said. "How did you know he wasn't just bluffing?"

"What's the difference?" Wolffe asked her. "I didn't show till you found the cattle, did I? If he'd been leading you a blind trail, I wouldn't have come out. Now we've got the critters, there's no use hiding the old man from him longer. *Cadaver.*"

That last was louder, and it called a man from the trees, so narrow he could take a bath in a shotgun barrel. He looked about as happy as a duck in Arizona. His black, flat-topped hat sat square on his thin head, and his black tail-coat hung down over the back of a horse as gaunt as a gutted snowbird. Then I see who is riding the cayuse behind him.

"Bibo," I said.

"Couldn't help it, Running Iron," Bibo said, taking a swipe at his nose with his bandana, and I can see it's still bleeding. "They come up on me so quiet I didn't know they was there till they was inside the cabin. I wish you hadn't brought them here."

"What's a few cows?" I said.

"It ain't the cows." He stopped his horse in front of me, slouching over in his saddle, and I saw what else they'd done beside his nose. "It's our reputation. Those coots down in Austin never made you talk."

"But this is different—"

"Ah—" he waved the bandana disgustedly—"you getting soft or something? You know I wouldn't of talked if they'd had you."

I knew different, but before I could say anything, Farrare jerked his arm at me. "Get that iron off your saddle and start to work. Cadaver'll build you a fire. We want that Cut-and-Slash changed to an A Bench."

Cadaver kicked away some growth till he had clear sand and begun hunting for dry wood. Springtime, and most of the cottonwood was green nearby but finally he found an old dead one and built his fire. I got my running iron from under my saddle skirt and put it in the blaze to heat. Not much else to do, considering that hogleg the dark damsel kept swinging my way.

The mournful gent took off his black coat and uncoiled a dally off his horn. I don't see how he got that bag of bones he rode into a trot, but in a minute he was hazing in a big steer, and his throw was good enough to drop it six or seven feet from the fire. I had my rope and hog-tied the critter and got my iron. It squalled and flopped around some, getting sand in my eyes. Before I let it up, Farrare came over to see the brand. Ardis followed him, and I found myself wondering how hard it would be to jerk that falling block gun out of her hands.

"Hell," said the big man, jerking a hairy hand at my work, "that's too good. Time it cools, not even a brand inspector could tell it had been worked over. Nary a one. Never."

"What do you think I am, an amateur?" I said.

"You are this time, whether you like it or not," said Farrare. "Next one, you botch it a little so an ordinary hand could spot it."

"You can't talk to my boy that way," Bibo told him. They had made him get off his horse, and he had been laying down on his back trying to stop the nose bleed, but now he had jumped to his feet. "Why you think they call him Running Iron Smith? He's an artist. He never botched a job in his whole career. If you took all the hides he's decorated and laid 'em tail to snout, you'd have a rawhide road from here to the border and back again, and not one of 'em that ain't so perfect they could pass every brand inspector west of the Mississippi. I taught him that. I taught him all he knows, and I ain't letting you ruin his rep any more than you already—"

IT was a backhand blow. Farrare didn't even turn toward him to do it. He just swung with his arm coming out, and the back of his hand hit Bibo in the face, and Bibo must have dragged his heels through the sand ten feet before he went down for good. I already had both hands out for Farrare, and my knees bent for the jump when I heard that sharp click at my side. The woman stood there with her hand still holding the lever down on her Spencer, and she knew I'd heard it, and she didn't say anything. I looked at my hands, and they were shaking like fillies spooked by a rattler. That's how much I wanted to get them on Farrare. Finally I put them down.

"I'll kill you for that some day," I said slowly.

"Never mind the dramatics," said Farrare. "Finish blotting these brands. And do it the way I tell you."

There was two dozen head, maybe. Cadaver certainly hadn't looked like any top hand, but his work on the rope opened my eyes, and I've seen the best there are. The morning star was out, time we finished. Farrare had got a coffee pot off his saddle and boiled some java for him and the gal, not offering us any. She sat there with the firelight catching those outlaw eyes, and I felt her watching me more than I liked. After the last steer was decorated and Cadaver was circle riding them into a little bunch to quit them. Farrare got up and dumped the coffee, sloshing the pot in the river. He went over and talked with the mournful man, and pretty soon Cadaver started working the cattle toward the dry bed that led out of the pocket. Ardis stood up.

"I guess that's all," she told me. "Texas is a mighty pretty country in the spring, they tell me. Nice and far from Wyoming."

"Nobody's going to Texas," said Farrare.

The woman turned on him. "Wolffe, don't be a fool. They wouldn't be loco enough to stay around here after we found them with Cut-and-Slash cattle!"

I began to understand what Farrare was driving at, and I looked over toward Bibo, because we'd come up against this sort of tight once or twice before. Bibo's eyes were on the last embers of the fire where the long running iron still lay, and he was closest to it, and that's what decided that.

"Nobody's going to know our connection with these cattle," said Farrare, looking straight at Ardis.

"Then why did you make him blot the brands?" she said. "We could have let them go before."

"Blotting the brands don't matter," said Farrare. "Just knowing we were interested is enough," and moved his right hand toward his gun. "If you don't like it, you can go on with Cadaver—Ardis!"

But she had already swung that rifle on him. "No. I won't let you, Wolffe!" He tried to jump back and knock her rifle aside and go on drawing his big Smith & Wesson Shofield all at once. Bibo'd already taken the dive and rolled through the fire, catching at the running iron and throwing it while he was still rolling. It struck Farrare across the face, and I've heard the big cats scream the same way in Texas swamps.

As Farrare staggered back, dropping his Shofield and pawing at his face, Ardis tried to whirl around toward me. But I hadn't been wearing hobbles, and I went into her even before she started around. She tried to keep her feet, and it carried us back through the brambles. She tripped in some thick chokecherry, and still fighting to keep her from getting that falling block gun in line, I went down with her, and we rolled over and over into the trees.

I've stepped on enough broncs to know how to be on top when it's over, and that's where I was when it ended up against a juniper, both of us hitting the trunks so hard the alligator bark showered down on us with a crackling sound. I had the rifle by then, twisting it from her hand.

"Damn you," she panted, and I don't like that in most women, but it seemed to fit her like a custom made kack. Before I could do anything with the rifle, she started clawing at my face, and I heaved the gun aside in order to grab her hands and stop that. I finally got her wrists crossed above her head, holding them there in one fist while I used my other to snake my own gun out of her belt. Behind me I could hear someone crashing through the trees, and I had that last minute with her body warm and writhing against mine. I couldn't feel mad at her,

really, and I wanted to kiss her for sometime, now.

She stiffened, suddenly, beneath me, and stopped breathing, for that moment. Maybe I stopped breathing, too. I hadn't meant to be quite like that. My ears began to roar so loud I couldn't hear that noise behind us, and I forgot all about Farrare and everything else, and when it was over, I couldn't have told how long it lasted—a minute, or a year, or a thousand. I let her hands go and raised up a little, looking at her face.

Then someone was shaking me by the shoulders and shouting in my ear. When I got up off Ardis she didn't even try to grab me, just lay there looking up with that startled look on her face. Bibo pulled me through the trees upslope, jerking on my arm like he wanted to pull it off.

"What the hell's wrong with you," he said. "The hosses spooked and ran up thisaway."

I could hear Farrare coming through the trees. My Bisley felt good in my hand. We were breathing hard, time we spotted the animals near timberline. I was running behind Bibo because he didn't have no gun, and I kept looking behind me, but I didn't know how close Farrare really was till he came into plain view from behind some junipers all of a sudden and opened up. It must have been his second shot that got me. My leg gave way, and I fell flat on my face. I rolled over on my back and set up and threw down on one with my .38-40 that made him jump back in the trees. Bibo tried to get me up, but I waved the smoking Bisley at him.

"Get out. I can't walk. I'll hold him here till you're skee-daddled. Go on, damn old fool. Getting soft or something?"

I eared back the hammer, hearing him stumbling off through the last of the timber back of me. Beginning to feel the pain of my leg now. I rolled up my levis and wondered if the slug had smashed the bones in my calf. Those Shofields always did throw a wicked hunk of lead.

"Come on out, Farrare. I'll give you one for Bibo. What's the matter, Wolffe? Come on out."

He tried it from behind a juniper, and my Bisley bucked in my hand, and I saw alligator bark fly from the tree about the height of his head. The snort behind me made me jump like a roweled bronc.

"I could only get one," said Bibo. "Now give me that gun and climb into the kack. I'll hook on behind."

It was some job getting in that saddle. Bibo kept Farrare back, and he was the one who taught me to sling that Bisley iron, and Farrare didn't have much chance to do any shooting. Then I felt the horse grunt with Bibo jumping on behind, and he gave it a kick in the kidneys that made the critter start off like a jackrabbit. Farrare's last shot sang over our heads, and then we were in talus above timberline and across the ridgetop. I don't know when Bibo started shaking me.

"Come out of it, boy, come out of it. You get hit that bad?"

"Pretty bad," I said, and didn't mean the bullet. "You know, I was right about that Mexican gal."

"What Mexican gal?"

"The one down in Austin. She was a piker."

II

DOWN where Hoss Creek runs into the Green, the balsam poplars were dropping their red blossoms and perfuming the air. We'd got shuck of Farrare, though he and the woman tried to follow us when they coralled their nags, and washed my leg out at a crick that night. It took a good hunk out of my calf muscle, but no bones, and I'd tied worse wounds than that up in Bibo's bandanna. The hoss he'd snagged was the gal's black, and carrying both of us two days hand running had played him out some. He sang:

"Swing yo' partner, form a ring,
Figure eight an' double L swing."

"Quit jiggling around," I told Bibo. "You'll have this pore hoss so low he has to climb a ladder to kick a grasshopper."

"Can't help it, can't help it," he cackled. "Smell that wheat grass, boy. Spring in the air. I feel like singing. I feel like dancing. I wisht we was at one of them old square dances they had down Austin way—

"Ducks in the river, goin' to the ford,
Coffee in a little rag, sugar in a gourd.
Swing 'em once and let 'em go,
All hands left and do-ce-do . . ."

He went on that way, and I couldn't help laughing, hanging onto his skinny old waist with his stringy grey hair in my face and all his smells of dirty leather and sour tobacco and sweat fanning my face. I'd been with this old ranny most of my life, and the old home I remembered was a saddle beside him or a sougan next to his. But the other thoughts was still with me.

"You know," I said, "those Cut-and-Slash cattle. There was something going on there."

"When the beef smells bad, it's the smart man who leaves it to the coyotes," said Bibo. "Though it did rile me to have them horn in on our deal there. We could've got ten dollars a head at least out of those Cut-and-Slash critters. We'll find that Farrare gezabo some day and take it out of his hide."

"He wasn't going to sell those cattle?"

"Not the way he had you blot those brands," snorted Bibo. "A greenhorn could've spotted the botch. That don't add up."

He had stopped his horse and was looking around. "What's in your poke?" I said.

The brim of his battered old John B. was always flopping down in front of his watery eyes, and I guess I've seen him shove it up that way a thousand times, or a million. "This place look familiar."

"We never hit the Green country before," I told him.

"Something about those hills I recall," he says.

"Or the cattle," I told him.

"Ah?"

"Look at the earmarks on those whitefaces."

He looked toward the animals grazing on a slope to our right, then gigged the jaded black that way, crossed a rutted road and stopping just beyond. That's what the earmark's for, to spot a longer distance away than you could see the brand. It was a steeple fork and that had been the earmark Farrare had made me put on those Cut-and-Slash cattle.

Bibo was squinting at the brand. "These ain't your decorations."

"These ain't the cattle I work on," I said, "they've only been branded once't. That A Bench is a stamping iron job."

"Like the looks of our cattle, gentlemen?"

We had been too interested in the critters, and the road was still soft enough from the last spring rain to muffle most of the noise that rig had made coming down the hill. It was a nice new spring wagon with a pair of neat little bays, and the girl sitting in the seat had hair the color of ripe corn above her sunburned face, and blue eyes so big I could see them from here. Always equal to anything, Bibo turned our black around as calm as you please and walked over toward them. The man beside the girl was tall and gaunt except for his shoulders, which were broad and heavy and stooped, more like a farmer's than a rancher's. His shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbow, revealing long-sleeved red flannels beneath that, and his mop of grey hair might have been the same color as the girl's once, because his eyes were as blue as hers, except they weren't as big, or as soft. It was the man who had spoken, and Bibo answered him, scooping of that battered Stetson for the girl.

"We are interested in your cattle at that, sir. Adams is my name, Adams, and my friend here is Mister Smith."

I COULD feel the girl's glance drop across me from the top of my matted hair down through my brown stubble beard and dirty shirt to my levis that would probably stand up themselves by now; she didn't stop at the gun, the way Ardis had, or take in those scratches across the top of the holster, and that might have been one way of knowing how she was different from Ardis.

"Smith?" she said.

"Yes—uh—R. I. Smith," Bibo told her. "We're up this way looking for cattle—"

"Or horses?" said the grey-haired man, and lifted a scattergun from beneath the seat and laid it across his lap before I realized what had happened. "I think you better come with us, Bibo."

This is one time Bibo lost the reins. "Would you mind chewing that hay a little finer?" is about all he could say.

"What I mean is," said the other man, "around here, they usually hang horse thieves."

The A Bench wasn't a very big spread,

and the house was set down between two spur ridges, the narrow valley in front of it widening to a slope that ran down toward the Green river. The road wound over the north ridge and cut down its side through a snake fence, flattening out when it passed the pack-pole corrals and shabby-looking barns. There were a couple of horses hitched to the ring-post in front of the long porch the house sported. It was one of those steep-roofed Wyoming buildings with no windows on the north side on account of those winter blizzards.

I slid off the black as easy as I could, but I almost fell as it was. The grey-haired man stiffened up, suspicious as a dog smelling a stranger on the street.

"What did you do to your leg?" he said.

"I—"

"Got it hurt when his horse rolled on him," Bibo finished for me. "Yeah, when his horse rolled on him. It was a big fat nag, and you should have seen—"

"Shut up," said the man, and then it was the woman, opening the front door of the house and coming out on the porch, and he turned toward her. "Ardis," he said, "we found the men who took your horse. Sheriff Hale is riding out this way this afternoon. I won't even have to send Marval for him."

She stood there with those outlaw eyes staring at Bibo and me, and she must have been as surprised as we were. I had to admire her then, because her laugh was easy, and she came down the steps swinging her hips that way. "Took my horse? I guess you gave them a scare, Leo."

"Damn right," he said. "I'll give 'em a bigger scare when they see that rope." He was looking at Bibo in a strange, tight way, and I never seen so much bitterness in one man's eyes. "And that's too good for 'em to begin with."

"Don't be a fool, Leo," said Ardis, swinging her head so's that long bob spun black and glossy around the white line of her neck. "Nobody took Satan. I was up at Daniel last night and he pitched me coming home."

He looked like he hated to believe it. "That why were you so late?"

"Why else?" she said, and I could have answered that. "You were all asleep when I got in, and I didn't want to wake you to hunt the animal. Everybody around here knows him, and I figured somebody would pick him up sooner or later. All you've done is scare a couple of saddle bums out of a year's growth." She turned to us, and the smile was mocking. "Where did you find the horse?"

"Up near Hoss Creek," Said Bibo, and he was smiling too, because he could appreciate something like this. "Yes, up near Hoss Creek."

"You mean he ran that far and you brought him clear back here all in one night?" said the blonde girl.

"You know what kind of a horse he is, Marval," said Ardis, angrily. "Look at the sweat caked on him."

"But Horse Creek—"

"Never mind," snapped the older woman. "Will you take Satan to the barn for me when you put up the buggy? I think you might as well put that shotgun away now, Leo, and let these men go."

THE one named Marval had hitched the black to the buggy. "I think we ought to at least give them a meal for the trouble we caused them," she said. "Looks like they could use it."

"A meal?" The man hadn't put his shotgun away; he stood there with both barrels pointed at Bibo's belly. "I should give them a meal?" He laughed suddenly, and it was harsh and short, like a gun going off, with just about as much humor. "I should give them both loads of this Greener. I should kill you right where you stand, Bibo Adams. I don't know what holds me back. I'll give you just about a minute to clear off my A Bench."

Bibo bent forward a little to peer at him. "I never told you my first name."

"Don't try and tell me you don't remember," the man said, and the muscles around his mouth began to twitch, lines deepening there till two grooves pulled his lips down toward his thin jaw. Bibo was still bent forward that way, and he pushed his hatbrim up, staring at the man.

"Leo? That what she called you?"

"Manners," said the man flatly. "Leo Manners."

"Oh," said Bibo, pursing his lips. "Oh." He straightened, and his voice was sort of soft. "It's been a long time, Leo. You changed at lot."

"You haven't, Bibo," said Leo Manners. "You're the same filthy conniving lying two-faced sonofa—"

"Dad," cried Marval, catching Manner's arm. "What's the matter? What is it?"

Manners jerked his arm away so hard I almost jumped for fear that scattergun would go off. "You better go, Bibo," he said. "You better go before I empty this Greener in your gizzard."

"You better turn that shotgun around, Leo," said Ardis. "It looks like it might be more use pointing that way."

I guess we all saw them, then. They was coming hell-for-leather down the ridge-road, a big pot-bellied man forking a buckskin in the lead.

"It looks like our old crimes is catching up with us fast, R. I.," said Bibo. "That's a Cut-and-Slash brand on the buckskin."

The man on the buckskin leaned back in the saddle to compensate for his bay window, and his face was red and beefy.

"What are you up to, Newcastle?" Manners called to him. "I told you—"

"You ain't telling me anything, Leo," shouted the fat man and waved his arm toward the men behind him, and I seen how many of them had their saddle guns out. "Get his Greener, Farley."

They was all around us now with their Winchesters laying across their pommels and pointing at Manners or me or Bibo, and the one Newcastle had called Farley swung off his horse and wrenched the scattergun off Manners. He didn't make any fuss about what he did, turning back to his horse and lashing the shotgun behind his cantle with swift, skillful jerks, and then untying his forty-foot dally rope from a thong on his skirt. Right then I got the idea.

Giant fists swung inexpertly . . . but the sting of death was in them.

A couple of riders had swung in behind Manners, and their horses kept knocking him in toward me. I couldn't move any farther forward because the pot-bellied jasper had his lathered buckskin up there, and I was already bumping up against it and slopping myself all over with that lather.

"We found twenty-three of my cattle down in Sioux Coulee with my Cut-and-Slash changed to your A Bench, Manners. What kind of fools do you take those brand inspectors for? A tenderfoot could tell the brand had been worked over."

"Don't be a fool," shouted Manners, fighting at the horses which kept bumping into him behind. "I never even saw your cattle. Why should I be crazy enough to rustle them and then leave them with their brands changed right on my own land? Newcastle, I swear—"

"You better pray instead," the fat man yelled at him, and those little veins were beating in his jowls. "We've been bled dry by you these last months, Manners. Every cattleman on the Green. I'm glad I was the one to find out who'd been doing it. You know what I said, Manners. I vowed I'd hang the rustlers when I found them."

"Dad," called someone from outside the horses, and I realized it was the girl, "Dad, where are you? Newcastle, you leave him alone. What are you doing?"

THE man behind Manners had his rope out too and snaked the loop down over Manner's head and jerked it tight around his arms before he could struggle out. Then it was me. I tried to throw up my arms and double forward and slip the loop off, but he'd let it out community, and it caught me anyway, jerking me back up when he pulled. Bibo was the only smart one, but that didn't last long. He ducked under that tall buckskin, trying to get free of the horses, but a rider came in broadside from farther out, pinning Bibo against the buckskin as the old ranny came out on the other side. I saw Newcastle jerk his six-gun free, and it flashed in the sun going up, and down, and I heard Bibo grunt hard.

"Pick him up," said Newcastle. "That poplar will do."

With the stink and sweat of those horses gagging me, they dragged and jerked me along with Manners toward a big poplar growing near the barn. I guess I fought a lot, choking in the dust, swearing at them most of the time. Somewhere outside the bunch of horses I could hear Marval yelling at Newcastle.

"You can't do this to him. It's murder. You can't do this to him, Newcastle, you can't, you can't—"

A lot of help she was, I thought. She sounded half loco, taking a big sobbing breath every now and then that sounded fair to rip her apart, voice breaking and choking on her words.

Reaching that poplar, three of the men got off their horses. They tied my hands around behind me and set me up a skittish little pinto. Farley French had throwed three ropes over the limb and the loops were black against the sky, and suddenly, sitting on that pinto, I quit fighting. The animal rage had passed, leaving only a full realization that this was it. I wanted to vomit.

Bibo was conscious now, sitting on the horse next to me, and he met my eyes. "I'll introduce you to the devil when we git there, boy," he grinned. "I hear he plays a right good game of stud."

I tried to laugh. It had a cracked sound. Farley French adjusted the noose around my neck, drawing it snug, looking up at me with that impersonal ice in his eyes. Manners was sitting stiff on the horse beyond Bibo, staring straight ahead of him. Out farther the other riders had bunched their horses in front of Marval to keep her from this, but I could hear her crazy little cries and see her corn-yellow head moving behind them. French had the ropes all adjusted now and all they had to do was whip the horses out from under us, and we would dangle. Newcastle jerked his arm that way, shouting at French.

"All right, Farley, all right."

Marval stopped screaming suddenly, and the riders quit shifting over there. I could feel the pinto gather itself beneath me as if sensing what was coming. Even the breeze stopped, through the foliage above us. Farley French raised his arm to slap my horse's rump. And right then and there it came.

"You hit that horse and it'll be the last thing you do on this earth, Farley French!"

III

FRENCH stood there with his arm held up, his whole body stiff as a poker. Then he turned toward the voice. We were all looking that way now, and I saw what had happened. In order to do his work here, French had hitched his own horse to a scrubby cottonwood between this poplar and the house, with that shotgun of Manners' lashed on behind the saddle. With all the attention on us, Ardis had been able to reach the horse and jerk the Greener loose, and now she stood there with her legs spread apart and the double barreled iron across her belly and that outlaw look arching her black brows up over her burning eyes. There isn't nothing to hold a crowd of men like a shotgun, and when she jerked it at me, Farley French moved fast enough. I guess he knew her.

"Get him down," she said, "get him down."

French let the rope slack so it wouldn't stretch my neck when he got me off the pinto, and untied my hands. I got his gun out and tossed it over by the tree and then pulled my own Bisley and watched the rest of them while French let down Bibo and Manners. They let Marval in, and she threw herself in her father's arms, crying and shaking like a dogie with the colic. It was when I turned away from this that I saw another rider coming down the road from the ridge. He brought his grey to a stop near us and sat there a minute, taking time to cheek his chewing tobacco and spit.

"Having a little party?" he said.

Nobody answered him for a minute. Maybe he hadn't expected an answer. He wasn't big, but he wasn't small, and his grey hat was flat-topped and sat square on his head, so the brim threw a shadow that didn't quite hide his eyes. They were the same color as his hat and held about as much humor as the business ends of two forty-fives. There was a tarnished star on his blue serge vest, and he packed his Remington .45 stuck right in the middle of his levis' waistband. Down in Austin, they had told me to stay clear of Sheriff Monte Hale of Sweetwater. I saw now what they meant.

He turned to Newcastle. "I told you what I'd do with you if you tried lynching anybody, Owen. I'm not having that in my county."

"And I told you what I'd do if I found the rustlers," shouted Newcastle, gouging his buckskin with grappling irons big as the wheels on a Murphy wagon. "You stay out of this if you know what's good for you, Hale."

"If Manners has been rustling your cattle," said Hale, "I'll take him into Sweetwater, along with the evidence. I don't know but what I'll take you along too, for this little lynching bee you tried."

"Hale, I'll break you—"

"Where's the evidence?" said the sheriff.

"I swear, if you don't—"

Hale turned to spit, and Newcastle jumped like he thought the Sheriff was going to go for that belly gun. "Where's the evidence, Owen?"

Newcastle was trembling with rage now. "In Sioux Coulee. One of my hands is holding them there. The job was so sloppy a child could tell those brands have been worked—"

"We'll go get it. Who are these?"

He meant me, and Ardis answered that. "Just a couple of saddle tramps who found a horse I'd lost. Leo brought them in."

Sheriff Hale turned toward Newcastle, and I wouldn't want his mouth to get thin that way at me. "And you were going to hang them along with Manners," he told the fat man. "Do you know what that would mean?"

"How do you know who they are?" yelled Newcastle.

"That's just it," said Hale. "And you were going to string them up." He turned to Manners. "Come on, Leo, let's go and see those cattle in Sioux Coulee."

I didn't particularly hanker after seeing any more of this lawman than I neeed, and I didn't make no move to go with them, just stood there leaning against the poplar while someone got a horse for Manners from his corral. Marval got her a little pied nag too. Sheriff Hale necked his dun over to me and leaned forward out of the saddle.

"When we leave," he said soberly, "you and your friend better shake this county's dust off your hocks as quick as you kin. I guess you can see it ain't exactly a healthy place for strangers."

THEN they all filed off up the ridge road, Newcastle sulling like a Texas steer tied to a mesquite bush, Hale turning once to spit. When they were out of earshot, Ardis came over to us, still holding the Greener.

"Now you get out," she said. "If Wolffe ever sees you again, he'll kill you. I'm giving you this chance. Get out."

I took a step away from the tree, and my leg gave out from under me, and I went down. Bibo came over to help me up.

"You give us a hoss," he said. "Running Iron ain't in any fix to hoof it."

"You think we give horses away to any saddle bums that come along," she scoffed. "I don't care how you get out. I don't care if you have to crawl. But get out!"

I guess that made Bibo mad. "What are you doing here?" he said.

"I'm Leo Manners' sister-in-law."

"Bibo didn't exactly mean that," I told her. "Your little frame-up almost got out of hand, didn't it? Why didn't you just let them hang Manners? That would have gotten him out of the way for good."

I saw her hands tighten around the shotgun. "You're running across slickrock."

I looked at the dilapidated house, the shabby barn. "Sort of a scrubby spread to go to all this trouble for. You still got to get rid of Marval."

"If you think I'm doing this for the—" she stopped herself, then bent forward. Her teeth were small and white, biting her plump underlip. "Are you going, or do I call the sheriff back here and tell him who really altered the Cut-and-Slash brand on those twenty-three cows?"

Bibo cackled. "You won't do that, honey. We'd just as soon let him know how you're in on the deal as not. You give us a horse and we'll go."

She took a breath through thin lips. It looked like something was going on inside her. "I can't give you a horse," she said finally, shaking her head from side to side in a frustrated way. "Somebody rustled Leo's string of cow animals, and Leo and Marval are out on the last of the saddle stock."

"Rope that," said Bibo, grinning slyly at me. "Somebody rustled their saddle stock!"

She caught the mocking tone of his voice, and her eyes narrowed at him. "You there too? How long have you been working Sweetwater?"

"Why, you know we wouldn't touch another man's horse," said Bibo. "It must be some other fellers doing all this rustling. We're just pore honest saddle tramps that got mixed up in all this innocent as a pair of newborn dogies. How about your horse?"

She looked at Bibo a moment longer, then shook her head savagely. "I couldn't let you have Satan even if I would. He's known all over the county, and somebody'd just pick you up again for horse-stealing and bring you right back here." She shook her head that way again. "Oh, damn you, damn you—"

Bibo cackled. "It looks like you're saddled up with us till this boy's leg's healed enough to hoof it away from here. Funniest part of it is you pulled the cinch tight on this rig yourself."

He turned toward the house, rubbing his belly. "Can't say as I mind that, either. Been a long time since I et reg'lar. A week here on three squares a day would leave me right fat and sassy. What say we git Running Iron inside and look to that bullet hole?"

It had been a good house once. The kitchen had a wainscot of oak halfway up the wall, and a big iron kitchen range that must have come from back east somewhere, and an oak table as big as most kitchens I've seen. They sat me down on one of the heavy chairs, and the woman stood there a minute, looking at me like she didn't know quite whether to go on and squeeze the trigger on that scattergun she still held or put it down and look at my leg. Finally she put it down. She looked at my pants leg and went over to a drawer and got out a big carving knife. Then she hunkered down like a man would and slipped the tip of the knife in the bullet hole some below my knee and slit the pants leg clear to the bottom from there. She didn't need to do that to get the pants leg up, and I had to grin.

"You're the smart gal, ain't you."

"And you're the dumb boy," she said, taking a couple more slices at the bullet hole till it was no longer plainly recognizable.

"How do you expect anybody to believe that story about a horse rolling on you with the bullet hole plain as daylight in your levis?" She had unwound Bibo's bandanna, and the disgust was plain on her face when she saw the wound. She jerked one hand at Bibo without looking at him. "We'll need some hot water first. Well out back."

"You know," I said, after Bibo was gone, "I'd like you even better if you was all bad."

Something wild about the way that black hair always tossed when she turned her head to look at you. "What do you mean?"

"That soft streak in you," I said. "You couldn't let Wolffe kill us the other night. And today, with your little frame fitting so nice around Leo Manners, you couldn't let them hang him."

"You're not so pure yourself." The look in her face made me think maybe she was ashamed of that softness in her, somehow, the way a boy don't want to be thought a sissy. She was looking at the wound again, "What on earth did you do here?"

"Tried to dig it out with a sharpened stick," I told her. "Without much success. You had our horses and Bibo's Bowie was in his blanket roll. Not even a Barlow knife between us." Then I was watching the top of her head where that part ran white down the middle of her black hair and was talking about the other. "I guess that's what's wrong with me and Bibo, too. We're not bad enough. I guess that's why we'll always be a couple of saddle tramps. That Wolffe Farrare, now. He'll go places. He's all bad. When he starts anything, you know just how he's going to ride his horse all the way down the trail, and when he gets to the end, it'll be loaded down. What's he carrying here?"

"Never mind," she said, going to get a smaller knife and a whetstone out of the drawer.

"No use taking that attitude," I said. "If we stick around here we're bound to find out sooner or later what you and Wolffe are after on the A Bench. *He* would have let them hang Leo, I wager."

"Don't try to play dumb." She had been honing the blade easy, but she took a vicious stroke against the stone. "You know what's going on here just as well as I do."

"You'll have to cut the deck a little deeper," I said.

"You know what I mean." She jerked her head up to look at me. "You came back with Bibo Adams, didn't you? You've been traveling with him. You know what's going on here."

"Is that why Leo Manners knew Bibo?" I said.

"Will you quit it—"

"I guess Wolffe Farrare was mixed up with them too?" I said. "He's closer Bibo's and Leo's age than ours, isn't he? Sort of an old man for you to ride with."

"Listen—" she took a step toward me, holding the knife hard on the stone—"listen, when Wolffe was cutting his baby teeth on a six-gun, he was ten times the man you are, and if he grows to be a hundred—"

"I sort of thought it was that way," I told her. "Did you tell Wolffe what happened?"

She waved the knife jerkily. "It isn't *that* way. I can kiss any man I please."

"I sort of thought the saddle was on the other horse," I said.

"All right. So it was *you* that kissed *me*," she said. Then the anger had slipped from her, and she was breathing heavier now so that her silk shirt sort of rippled in the light every time her breast rose against it. She took another step toward me, bending forward slightly. "You've had a lot of practice, Running Iron."

I LOOKED at the way her lower lip dropped a little from the white line of her teeth and the way her pants fitted the line of her hip. "I had a stallion once," I said, "that liked the mares all right, but whenever he went after them, it was like he could take them or leave them, never tossing his head much, or pawing around like you'd expect. Then one spring a black outlaw mare comes down out of the monte, and my stallion snorts so loud they heard him in the next county and paws up so much ground the dirt farmers for ten miles around didn't have to do any ploughing that year and tosses his head so high I thought he'd break his neck."

She bent forward a little farther, and the contour of her face seemed softer, more feminine. "I thought maybe it was that way." She breathed it more than spoke it. "I felt the same way, Running Iron.

There have been other men. But never like that."

I licked my lips. "It's all right for a man to heat himself by a fire, but he's a fool to stick his hand in and let it burn him."

"Can you help it . . . now?" she said.

She was so close her breath warmed my face. "I guess not, Ardis. I guess Wolffe will have to kill me, after all, or I'll have to kill him. It won't be any different than that, will it, or any less?"

She took a breath. "I told you it wasn't *that* way."

"Maybe not with you," I said. "But it is with him. I seen how he watched you. He don't mean to see anybody else's dally on you." Her hand on my arm burned the sleeve.

"Running Iron," she said, "maybe you're right about the fire. You're not burnt yet."

"You asked me to leave before."

"It isn't for that, this time," she said, and looking into her eyes, I could believe it.

"Bibo taught me a few things with an iron," I said.

"There have been other men, that way."

"Did you ask them to go?" I said.

"No," she muttered. "I told you it had never been this way before." Her fingers tightened on my arm, and the strength in them surprised me. "You don't know Wolffe, Running Iron."

"Then I'd better stay around and get better acquainted," I said. "Does he eat old six-guns with his breakfast?"

She looked into my face another moment, then straightened, taking her hand off, and that softness was gone from her. "You've picked the horse you want. You'd better cinch it up tighter than you ever did before."

I watched her face and thought, yes, I've picked the horse I want, Ardis, and I can't help if it's bad or good, and I guess I don't care much, because a man can't care much when it strikes him like this, and my boots are about as muddy as yours, anyway. Bibo came in with the water, then, and Ardis told him to get the whiskey out of the cupboard and finished putting the sharpest point on that knife I've seen outside a stiletto a Mexican had once down in Durango. I took a couple of shots of the coffin varnish and licked my lips and got hold of the table with both hands. Ardis was hunkered down in front of me. She took one look at my face, then ducked her head, and went to work. Bibo stood over against the kitchen sink, finishing the bottle.

"I recall once down in Van Horn a Mexican I was traveling with got his seat full of twelve-gauge buckshot whilst trying to entice some Elbow X cows across the Rio with the help of his dally and sundry other aids they was using to influence cattle in them days. The man with the shotgun didn't have a very good horse, though, and me and this Mexican got acrost the Rio before he could load up again and get close enough to put the second pair of barrels in a more effective place. I don't know how many chunks of lead that Mexican took, but he had about resigned himself to sleeping on his belly the rest of his days, when I tuk a ride into Van Horn, and here on a bulletin board the Rangers always keep in front of their office was a printed circular saying anybody finding a Mexican who didn't seem to enjoy his seat in the saddle would be perfectly justified in killing him on sight for a dirty, thieving, low down—ah, ah, you want another swig of this, Running Iron? No? I think you better have it. Get a better grip on that table."

He put the bottle to my mouth, and I spilled half of it over my shirt front because I couldn't get my teeth apart to let the whiskey through, somehow. Ardis was biting her lip so much the blood trickled down her chin. She looked up at me that way again.

"It's caught in between the bones somehow," she said.

I NODDED, and she ducked her head again, and Bibo went back to the sink, taking a drink himself. "That was the attitude they had toward operators liks us in them day, you see. A man even suspicioned of nefarious cow practice was perfectly legal bait for any rancher's gun, and I seen more loaded tree limbs down there than a man with a weak stomach should be allowed to. Anyways, I went back and told my Mexcan friend about how he was marked for life, everywhere he went with that tender seat of his, he'd be a direct

invitation to a lynching party, and damned if he didn't pull out his Bowie knife and go to work right there. You can understand how awkward it was, but he wouldn't let me do it for fear I'd miss one. Dug that point in till he felt the piece of shot and then pop it out like a peon spitting pinon seeds. Must have tuk him nigh onto a week, working night and day, to finish the job, hunkered there like a turkey gobbler picking the thorns out after it's been getting elm mast in a cactus patch, and I'll be —ah, ah, Running Iron, get a holt there. Another little swig? You better."

I didn't even try to take it this time. The sweat in my eyes blinded me, and I could hear someone breathing like a winded horse, and didn't know whether that was me or Ardis. I guess it wasn't as bad as the time those rannies worked me over in Austin, but right now it seemed worse.

"Better take it before I finish it," Bibo said. Then he saw how it was and went back to the sink, tilting the bottle up. "Yeah. And would you believe it, that Mexican's saddle-sitter healed up till he

"Now you get out," she said. "If Wolffe ever sees you again he'll kill you. I'm giving you this chance. Get out."

could sit down like any other man, and all he had to show for it was a bunch of little holes, like a bunch of small-pox scars, and he could ride right into Van Horn with the best of them and stand there reading the circular they'd put up about him, and nobody ever knew the difference. Well, what do you know, all finished! How about painting your tonsils with what's left of this red ink?"

Ardis got the kettle and washed the wound.

"You must of treated more'n one gunshot wound without a doctor," Bibo told her.

"I guess I have," she said. She smeared the poultice on my leg and then on some clean cloth she'd got, and tied up the wound. Then she pulled the levis down over it. "Now, if anyone asks, your leg was so swollen from that horse falling on it we had to split the pants to get them off your calf and cut the flesh up a lot to remove the pus."

Bibo had a cackle like an old hen. "That about fills the poke all right."

"There's a more comfortable chair in the living room," Ardis said. "Help me get him there."

They had me lifted up between them when the horse pounded up outside. We heard it slide to a halt and saddle leather squeak and then boots clattering up the back steps. Marval came in on the run, and Ardis let go one side of me to stop her, grabbing the girl by her shoulders.

"What is it? What hap—"

"They've got him." It came from Marval in a broken way. "Let me go. They took Dad to town. You know how long that will last. Newcastle's got the other ranchers so whipped up now over those rustlers they'll be storming the jail by nightfall. I tried to stop them. but I couldn't do anything. Let me go, Ardis. They'll lynch him. Let me go. Let me go!"

She tore free of Ardis, but in trying to get around her, bumped into me. Then I realized what it had taken for her to get even this far into the room, and why she had wanted Ardis to let her go. Like a solado horse that can't run any farther, she sagged against me, almost knocking me over, and burst into tears, her whole body shaking like an aspen in a Texas norther.

"Let go the boy," snapped Bibo. "He can't hold you up like that."

He let go me to try and get her off, but she clung to me desperately, the whole front of my shirt wet with her tears, and she was holding me up now as much as I was holding her. "They'll hang him, they'll hang him, you know they will, he never rustled a steer in his life, and they'll hang him, and I'll be here all alone—"

"Shut up," I said, riled by that, somehow, and began shaking her. "Haven't you got any guts. You're a grown woman now. They haven't put the rope around his neck yet. I've seen a newborn dogie with more starch in it than you. Bust out crying every time the wind changes, I swear. Shut up, damn you, shut up!"

She threw her head up, her eyes wide with surprise, and for that moment she had stopped crying, staring at me. Then she pulled free, taking a step backward. Finally she began moving toward the door leading to the front part of the house, her head turning toward me with that dazed expression in her face, and she hadn't started crying again when she disappeared. Ardis was watching me too.

"Well," she said, "you really like them tough, don't you?"

IV

A COUPLE of days in that house and I was getting as restless as a thirsty cow smelling water over the next hump.

Ardis left the second day. I saw her riding that black horse up over the ridge, swaying a little in the saddle with her easy, supple seat, and after she was gone it wasn't as crystal inside me as when I'd talked with Bibo. I heard someone outside and was turned from the window, time Marval opened the door. She had on a pair of blue jeans with hay and dirt all over them, and there was a smudge across her face.

"Don't you have any hands?" I said.

"Never did," she told me, coming in, and with the plaid shirt on her shrunk really too tight this way from a lot of washings, I could see she wasn't as much of a girl as she looked, sometimes. "It isn't such a big spread. Dad was always able to handle things himself."

"Where did he know Bibo?"

"Your friend?" She was studying me. "I have no idea. You've been with Bibo a long time."

It was a statement. "Yes," I answered. "My dad sacked his saddle when I was about three, and Bibo's brought me up ever since."

"He's down in the kitchen getting drunk," she said. "Does he do that often?"

Only when there's a girl, I started to say, and then I stopped myself. He had done the same thing when I started going with that Mexican gal at Austin, and after he couldn't stand it any longer, konked me on the head and tied me behind his saddle and lit out for Wyoming. "I won't let him get messy," I said finally. "He don't anyway. Just goes to sleep."

She laughed, and it didn't have that husky sound Ardis always made. More like the bell in the Alamo, or a crick running over pebbles. "Same way Dad acts when he gets drunk," she said and came on in. "I'm sorry the way I acted day before yesterday. It just hit me hard I guess, and Dad's the only one I have. Nothing's happened so far. I suppose I was wrong about the lynching. They have too much respect for Sheriff Hale's gun to try it. The trial's set for June tenth, and I know Dad will be proven innocent then."

How, I wanted to ask her, how? I had turned to the window, wondering why I didn't want to look at her. Because of what Ardis was doing? Then I realized it wasn't that at all. I didn't feel guilt. It was more a distaste. That didn't seem right either. She seemed nice enough now. And she really had gotten a jolt the day before. But I kept remembering how helpless she had been through it all, and I found myself wondering if she could have dug that bullet out of my leg, or even looked at the wound. Oh, hell—

"You want something special?" I said.

"You seem to be getting around better."

"I could ride a horse, if that's what you mean," I said.

"I wasn't asking you to leave," she told me. "I wondered if you wouldn't like a job." I turned around at that, and there was a pleading look in her face, like a dogie begging for milk after three days of a dry mammy. She held out her hand. "I know it isn't very hospitable. If Dad were here I wouldn't even mention it. You'd be welcome to stay till your leg got well. But I'm in a bad spot. If I leave spring roundup go any longer Newcastle's riders will begin picking up all our unbranded stock and putting their Cut-and-Slash brand on. Dad's bucked Newcastle ever since the Cut-and-Slash was a shoestring outfit down on the Green, and Newcastle's always done everything he could to try and force us out. If I don't get our A Bench on this new stuff, there won't be any spread for Dad to come back to. Somebody has to stay here at the house, either Ardis or me. It isn't a very big herd, but one person couldn't handle it alone."

"I thought your string had been rustled."

"It was," she said, "but I can borrow a few cutting horses and ropers from our neighbors. Newcastle won't loan us anything, of course, but there are a few smaller ranchers still sticking by Dad."

I was about to refuse, but then I remembered Bibo, and that would be one of the few ways to snap him out of this bender he was heading for. "I won't be much good roping with this leg," I said, "but Bibo can make up for it. Now don't start crying again."

"I won't," she told me, swiping the back of a dirty little hand at her eyes. "I just don't know how to thank you."

"Don't," I said, turning back to look out the window. "When do we start?"

NEXT morning. And it was the rattiest string of cow horses I've yet laid my eyes on. The roper Marval had got for Bibo was just an oily little bronc ready to jump every time his own shadow did, and I couldn't see him working cattle from the hind end of a clothes line, somehow. I got a shad-bellied boneyard that passed for a cutting horse, its bedslat ribs sticking out through a winter coat that hadn't finished shedding yet. No chuck-wagon, either. Just a coffee pot and some bacon slung in a tarp on an extra cayuse. I tried to see Ardis alone before we left, but Marval stuck around too close, and the best I got was a good look at the black-haired woman when she came out on the porch to say goodbye. Even then I couldn't look too long for fear Marval would see.

Manners had his line camp in Yallow

Valley, and we dumped our truck there and started right out that afternoon to gather all the unmarked stuff we could find and be back at the holding spot before night. With only three of us, Marval decided it would be better to separate. I got a hog-back called Medicine String that cut east and west along the south side of Yallow Valley, and lifted my shaggy bag of bones right up to the ridgetop so I could see both slopes. I spotted my first bunch in a coulee down the north side and dropped in to cut out three cows with new calves and a couple of long heifers that had missed being branded last fall, somehow. Time the sun was dropping behind the String I had about a dozen head, driving them through a saddle in the String that would lead back to Yallow. Bibo came up from behind with his own bunch a-singing.

"Chase that possom, chase that coon,
Chase that pretty gal round the room."

"You feel pretty good, getting me away from that Ardis, don't you?" I said. "Or is it something else?"

"How'll you swap and how'll you trade,
This pretty gal for that old maid?"

"I saw the way you looked at Medicine String, Bibo," I told him. "Same way you kept looking around when Manners first picked us up south of here. Is this part even more familiar?"

"Wave the ocean, wave the sea,
Wave that pretty gal back to me."

"Maybe that's why you're glad to leave Ardis," I said, leaning toward him. "She knew what had been between you and Leo Manners?"

He didn't look at me, but he wasn't smiling. "It's a smart Injun that don't hunt for live coals in the ashes of a dead fire, and I always thought you was a smart Injun."

"I never asked you things you didn't want to tell me before, Bibo," I said. "But this is different. Don't you think it would be better if I knew, just this once? What's going on here? When did Manners know you before? What's Ardis and Wolffe trying to get off the A Bench?"

His saddle squeaked as he turned toward me. "I tell you what's going on. A boy I know is being a damn fool. It ain't enough that the ranchers around here is liable to find out by some off-chance just who it really was that's been relieving them of their stock. You're in with Ardis now, and if that crooked dally she's throwing on the A Bench happened to snag on a bad steer, you'd be pulled off your feet right along with her, and Sheriff Hale'd be right there ready to hog-tie you afore you could get up again, and if there's one brand of John Law I wouldn't want to have throwing a peal around my legs, it's Hale. And if it ain't the ranchers or the law, it'll be Wolffe Farrare wanting to know just what you're doing with his heifer in his pasture, and I don't think you're in any condition to do much answering, seeing as you can't stand only on one foot."

"All right," I said. "Forget it."

We rode along ringey as a couple of sulling steers, not looking at each other, till finally Bibo spotted movement on the slope to our right and waved his arm up there. "Couple of heifers in that high coulee. Holler if you need any help."

MY nag jumped a little when I jerked it round. It was getting dark, and the old man's beard hanging on the firs on this north slope looked foul, somehow, and a dusky grouse was sitting on a branch with his tail spread and wings hanging, filling his neck pouches with air till they looked ready to burst before he started pumping his head up and down to deflate them and send his hollow hoot through the timber. It's the most mournful sound in the world when the timber's filling up with dusk that way, and I reached around for my mackinaw suddenly, feeling cold. I had just unlashed one whang from the saddle roll behind my cantle when I spotted him.

"Never mind your gun, sonny boy," he says. "I had mine out first."

I sat there a minute with the grouse hooting through the trees, because I never had Bibo's recovery, but finally I got something past my teeth. "Smith," I said. "R. I. Smith."

"Glad to make your acquaintance," he said. "My name's Sean. You wouldn't

happen to know the whereabouts of a man named Bibo Adams?"

"Adams?" I took my hand careful-like off the saddle roll. "Never heard of him. You want him for something?"

"Yes," said the man mildly. "I've been hunting him for some years. I'm going to kill him."

I don't know why that grouse should stop hooting just then. Maybe this Sean saw how I stiffened in the saddle. I couldn't help it. He stood there shifting around as techy as a teased snake, and for the first time I saw he was barefooted. His jeans was patched in the seat and knees, and his buffalo coat was old enough to have been worn by General Custer.

"Git off the horse," he said finally. "We'll wait for Bibo."

"You got your boots in the wrong poke," I told him, but I saw how tight he held that gun and swung off anyways. "I don't know any Bibo. Smith is my name. I trade in horses."

"Looks like you ain't such a sharp trader," he said, taking a gander at my bag of bones. And that was when I saw his eyes. He had a beard shaggier than the buffalo coat, and it grew up high enough to make his eyesbrows part of it. His face was pale and gaunt as a cow-skull on the Cimarron. I seen a Mexican hopped up on peyote once, and his eyes had the same look, like a fire was blazing inside him. "R. I." he said. "Could that be for Running Iron? Down in Austin they told me a man named Running Iron Smith had taken up with Bibo Adams."

"No," I said, "no," and this had to be so fast it wasn't very good. "Real Injun. They called me that cause my pappy was Cherokee."

He bent closer, and he wasn't grinning when his teeth showed, and they were rotten and yellow. "Don't try to fool with me, sonny boy. I been waiting for Bibo Adams a long time. I thought maybe he'd come back to our old diggings some day. We'll just sit down and wait for him."

"But, pard—"

"Sit down."

I sat down. Then he did too, lowering himself cross-legged onto the wheatgrass without a sound. We couldn't see the valley from here, because we were down in the bottom of the coulee, but Sean was facing toward the way Bibo would come from when he got tired waiting for me to ride back with those cattle I'd gone to fetch. Bibo and I'd been in some pretty narrow tights before, but I'd never sat down with a crazy man waiting for the old ranny to come so the loco could shoot him. Oh God, Bibo, I began thinking, don't come after me this time. I'm old enough to look out for myself, you old fool. Don't come after me, just keep riding down into Yallow and wait for me at the line shack. Sean began giggling, bobbing his head up and down.

"Real Injun," he said. "That's pretty good. Be a long time afore anybody tops that. Real Injun. He-he. He-he."

"He-he yourself. Don't I look part Cherokee?"

"You don't."

"Look here, this Bibo . . . Bibo . . . what's his name—"

"Don't try to pretend you don't know him, Real Injun. Adams. And I'm going to kill him."

And he'll come right up over that hump like an old fool looking for me and get it smack in his pickled old gizzard. I was beginning to sweat, with that cold wind beating down off the ridge, I was beginning to sweat. Bibo, for God's sake don't do it, not this time, I don't want to see you killed like this. You're the dirtiest old bull I ever threw a dally on, and you don't know enough to drive nails in a snowbank, but I been with you too long for it to happen like this.

"Bibo Adams," I said. "Yeah. Why you want to kill him?"

He jerked that rifle at me. "Quit moving around. You see that sump over there?"

IT was the first time I saw what was left of the old mine workings on the lip of the coulee above us, a bunch of smashed supports reaching out from the granite and some rotten old hemp dripping off them. Seepage was turning the stone dark and working down the shale to form a foul pool in the bottom of the coulee behind Sean. It didn't make too much impression on me then. That grouse was still calling up in timber, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. Don't, Bibo, please, Bibo, don't . . .

"That's why I'm going to kill Bibo Adams," said Sean, and his eyes blazed up like lanterns in the gathering dusk. He leaned forward, and his voice sounded like a fiddler on a tight string. "I'm going to kill him and dump him down the old Yallow Hole because that's where he belongs. You see how it's seeping. It's full now. It's just a sump. Once the richest mine north of Laramie. Two hundred dollars to the ton once, and now just a sump. Bibo's sump. He did it, and he's going to rot in it."

"Did what?" And the grouse was still hooting, and that wind was whining now so I couldn't hear what I was listening for behind us. Did what, you crazy old coot? Bibo, for God's sake—

"Piney Creek," said Sean. "That's what backed up into it, and nobody could pump it out, and the richest vein north of Laramie was lost. I been waiting a long time for this."

No, Bibo, no. Was it something else beside the wind, now? My gun felt like a ton of buffalo bones against my hip, and I was watching him now like a painter ready to jump a sheep, and he knew what I was doing, and he was waiting. Bibo, please don't—

"Well, it's about time, Bibo," said Sean, and jerked his rifle away so it pointed past me.

But I threw myself at him the same instant he spoke, because I'd been waiting for that. I never saw anything move so fast. Or maybe I didn't see him move. He had to jerk the gun back to keep my body from knocking it aside, and then he was gone from in front of me, and I was rolling into the stagnant pool and knowing it was all over now and waiting for that shot and thinking, why did you have to do it, you damn old coot, why . . .

Then I could sit up in the water, and I realized Sean hadn't shot. He stood there tall and skinny and knobby-kneed in the dusk, holding his rifle across his belly toward the lip of the coulee. The figure skylighted there was as tall as the crazy man, but his shoulders was heavier. His whole body was heavier. He was just about big enough to hunt bears with a switch.

"Runing Iron Smith," he said, and dropped down the shale in a walk that swung those great shoulders like on old Texas cimarrone on the prod. "I've been wanting to see you. About Ardis."

"Wolffe," said Sean, "you promised me—"

"Shut up," said Wolffe Farrare. "You'll get what you want when I've tended to Mister Smith here. Hold your gun on him. And now, Running Iron, I want you to unbuckle your Bisley there right easy."

"Couldn't you do it just as easy without that?" I said.

"No," he told me. "Drop your hardware."

There wasn't anything else I could do. I stood up in the pool, and my iron made a splash when it slid down my legs. Then he unbuckled his own gun. Even in the dark, he must have seen the surprise in me.

"It appears you don't know Ardis very well," he said.

"What's Ardis got to do with it?"

"Do you think I don't know what's going on between you and her?" he said. "She was up here the day after they tried to lynch Manners. She'd changed toward me. I know the signs, Running Iron. There have been other men. It happened the same way. It isn't as simple as just killing you, now."

"You were willing enough to do it in that pocket above Hoss Creek," I said.

"That was for the cattle," he said. "I didn't want anybody wandering loose knowing how we were connected with those Cut-and-Slash cattle they found in Sioux Colee. But this isn't for the cattle. I wish it was. I wish it was that simple. But it isn't. Not with Ardis. Just killing you wouldn't be enough. I'm going to give you a beating. I'm going to give you a beating you can take back and show her, and every time she looks at you she'll know who gave it to you."

"I thought you said you knew what was between me and Ardis," I told him.

"Im not blind."

"I think you are," I said, and all the time he was coming on. "You're treating it like we were a bunch of cows in a pasture. Ardis isn't a heifer that'd take a bull just because he beats all the others. She's a woman. You won't stop what's between me and her by just beating me up."

"She's closer to a heifer than you think,"

he grinned. "She's a very elemental woman, Runing Iron. She's the kind of a woman wants a man, if nothing else. When I get through with you, there won't be enough man left in you to attract a female heel fly."

Calling her a heifer was what made me mad. "Come on, then, Wolffe. There ain't nobody sitting on your shirt tail."

I STOOD there in the water till I heard him grunt. That was when he jumped, and his body came at me so big and black it was all I could see. I doubled up and stepped aside, but he wasn't as dumb as he was big.

Another man would have gone hell-for-leather on forward and tripped over that foot I left behind, but Wolffe was ready for something like that, and even though he couldn't stop himself, he was twisted around for enough to grab my arm and pull me down with him. We rolled into the pool, and when he came on top he let me go and jumped up, and right there I knowed why that pattern of scars on his face had struck a familiar chord when I first seen it. They call it logger's smallpox, and it comes from being stamped on with a caulked shoe, and the lumbermen from Calgary to Santa Fe are marked that way, because it's the way they fight, and it's the way he was fighting now.

But Bibo Adams had taught me a few things beside what to do with the two irons, running and shooting, and as soon as I saw Wolffe shift his weight onto one leg so's his other would be free for kicking, I rolled over on my side without making the mistake of trying to rise, and was already grabbing for his foot when it lashed out. I caught the boot and kept on rolling and pulled him right off his other foot. He came down with a crash loud enough to make the bucks in Montana shed their velvet three months early, and this time I was the one to get up first.

"I can fight with my feet too," I yelled, and I was already running for him when he rose.

He whirled around with his arms out like a grizzly, not meaning to get out of the way of anything, wanting to come to grips again, no matter how. Maybe he wasn't expecting me to take off that way. I hit him feet first and went into his belly so deep I thought I'd get them caught there. It carried him back against the rock wall with all the air going out of him in a hoarse beller. Then I was down on my back in front of him with my feet still in the air, and before I could roll away, he dove. His face was shut hard enough to bust his nut crackers, and his eyes was closed tighter'n a sleeping coon's, and his hands pawed out in front of him like a jumping painter's. I let his chest hit my feet and rolled him over me, using his own momentum. The ground shook when he hit, and I was already coming out of that backward somersault onto my feet. He came to his hands and knees, shaking his head, shouting.

"Sean, Sean."

I saw the crazy man standing there with his rifle pointed at me. He waked up, still looking like he'd give his last boot to let me have it. "Real Injun?" he says, and laughs like a coyote on a moonlit night. "Real Injun."

I was blowing like a boogered bronc, and I tried to reach Wolffe before he got off his hands and knees. I let my whole body strike him, and we rolled over and over, and every time I came up with my right arm free, I hit him in the face with everything I had. I don't know how many times I let my knuckles go into the front of his skull before we came to a stop. All I know is my whole fist left like a chunk of hamburger, and my arm was filled with lead, and he was still fighting as hard when we stopped as he had been when we started. I came up straddling him and caught him by the hair and beat his head against the rocks.

He grabbed my arms, trying to jerk loose, roaring, "That's it, I guess you see how it is now, that's it, that's it," savagely, like he enjoyed it, and then he had my elbows pinned so I didn't have no leverage, and I had to let go his hair. His head smashed into my belly, and I went backward with the whole world exploding.

I tried to get up, but he hit me before I had my feet under me, and I couldn't keep myself from staggering back until I hit that granite slope. Then with his sweating bloody body holding me against it, he grabbed my ripped shirt by the collar in one hand and began hitting me with the other. I must have fought like hell, because I could hear him grunting and

shouting, and feel him writhing back and forth to avoid whatever I was doing, but that free fist kept blowing up in my face, and pretty soon I couldn't see nothing or feel nothing but the way my flesh ripped under his knuckles and the way my bones cracked, and then I couldn't feel nothing.

It was the snapping sound at first. The snapping sound, and then someone's low voice. I had trouble opening my left eye; my face felt all wet. Then whatever sensations came was pushed away by waves of pain lapping at me like the water coming up the ford at Hoss Thief Crossing when the Pecos is bank-full. I guess I didn't even hurt so much that time the wild bronc tromped me.

"Who was it, who was it?" somebody kept saying. Marval? I tried to focus. At first I thought it was the moon. Then I saw it was her yellow hair shining from the light of a fire. I felt the heat of that fire on my left side now. She was washing my face with a rag dipped in warm water. "Adams wondered what took you so long and found you like this in that coulee on Medicine String. Who was it, Mister Smith?"

I caught Bibo's face behind her, puckered up in a sly way. "Some loco ranny," I told her.

Bibo's cackle was pleased. "I guess he's still a little foggy."

"Some Cut-and-Slash men?" she said.

"Some Cut-and-Slash men?" I said.

"Oh, those fools—"

"That mine." I waved my hand and that hurt too. "Those diggings . . ."

"The old Yallow Hole," she said. "Dad and Uncle bought it when I was a little girl. They had pay dirt all right, assayed so much they incorporated. Dad had a a lot of influence around here, and everybody bought shares up to the hilt. It was about that time Uncle married Ardis and brought her here. But Piney Creek backed up into the shafts they sunk and no amount of dredging would empty the water out. It ruined Dad completely. He did what he could about paying off the shares with his private fortune, returned about twenty-five cents on the dollar. All we had left was this land the mine was on. After that nobody would trust Dad for anything. You can understand how it's turned him bitter."

"And your uncle?"

She shrugged. "He lost everything too. He went out of his mind for a while. It was a pretty hard time for Ardis. Then Uncle disappeared. They found him dead in Laramie a couple of years back."

It was something in back of my mind made me ask. "What was his name?"

She looked surprised a little. "Sean," she said. "Sean Manners."

V

NIGHTS like this north of Kemmerer the stars were so thick and so close it looked like heaven was having a Christmas party and you could reach up and pull one of the candles off the tree for yourself. I lay there awake a long time after Marval had rolled into her sougan, staring up at the sky and trying to piece it all together through my pain. I could hear Bibo singing out where he was circle-riding the herd. He don't croon the Texas lullaby like most night herders, but one of those damn square dance tunes, and I never will stop being surprised that it don't stampede the critters.

"Rope the cow and kill the calf,
Swing your partner round and a half . . ."

Then it was the other sound. Marval's sobbing. The old line shack's sod roof had caved in, and we was all bedding outside by the fire. I gritted my teeth with the ache it brought to raise up on an elbow. I might have known it. I had a lot of trouble getting out of the sougan and slipped my levis on over my long flannels. I didn't know what I was going to do. I just couldn't sleep listening to that, and it made me mad, somehow. I grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Listen, you got to stop that. Nothing to do that for now—"

Marvel had turned over so sudden I didn't know what it was till she was in my arms, her whole body shaking against my chest. "I can't help it, I can't help it. Those Cut-and-Slash men are out to stop our branding. Next they'll be stampeding what few cows we've collected. Newcastle isn't satisfied with having Dad. He has to ruin us completely."

"But it wasn't Cut-and—"

I stopped myself, and she turned her wet face up to me. "What?"

Holding her like this was different than Ardis. "Nothing," I said, and I didn't know whether I was mad at myself now, for feeling this way, or at her. "Nothing." And then she had sunk that yellow mane against me and was bawling again. I couldn't help it. Her head rocked back when I shook her so hard I heard her teeth click. "Will you stop bawling like a puking dogie. I swear you ain't got clabber for guts. What's the matter with you—"

"Go ahead," she said, her head thrown back like that, "go ahead!"

That stopped me. "Go ahead and what?"

She was rigid in my grasp. "You looked like you were going to hit me. Why don't you? I'm just a girl. I couldn't fight back like those Cut-and-Slash men. Go ahead and hit me."

"Oh, hell—" I let her go, shoving her away from me—"you ain't worth hitting. If I thought a few knocks could bring a horse's guts out in the open I'd quirt him right enough. But when they got a streak of yellow down their spine so broad it laps over their brisket bones, I wouldn't even bother putting a hackamore in their teeth. Go ahead and cry. I'll go out with Bibo."

"Mister Smith." I'd turned away, but her voice turned me back. She sat there leaning on one arm, firelight lining down one curve of her wet cheek like a piece of ripe fruit. Her underlip was quivering. She bit it. "You've had a hard life, haven't you?"

"It doesn't matter what kind of life a person's had. It's what the Top Screw put in them to start with."

"I guess you're right," she said, dropping her eyes from mine. Then she noticed something and pulled out of her blankets. "Your bandage is coming off."

"No—"

That's about all I got out. She was close enough to reach my pants leg without moving and pull it back off my calf, and there it was, the bandage all pulled down off the wound and trailing around my spurs. She didn't even have to bend closer. Finally she looked up, a strange, new expression in her eyes.

"Ardis knew it was a bullet-hole?"

I licked my lips. "I reckon."

SHE took a heavy breath, getting to her knees and unwinding the bandage. "R. I. Smith?" she said. "Running Iron? I guess I should have known it."

"Word spreads," I said.

"Trail hands passing through here have spoken now and then. The way they talked I didn't exactly know whether you were real or not. The way you were supposed to handle a running iron, I mean." There was something tender about the way she rewound the bandage. She looked up quick-like, then, reaching out one hand and not quite touching my arm. "Running Iron, if you're in trouble—"

"No more than you're in," I said.

"I mean—" she hesitated, and then the fingers touched me— "I mean I want to help you."

"Why?"

"Because you helped me. You took that beating for me."

"You know what I am."

"More than you think," she said. "Maybe that's why. I guess I wasn't wrong about the way you've lived. Bibo brought you up?"

"And taught me all I know."

"The running iron, the gun, the owl-hoot—" she jerked her head impatiently, then looked at me again, as if hunting for something in my face— "I guess you're a lot like me. Maybe I have it in me to be brave, but nobody ever taught me how, before. Maybe you have it in you to ride a different trail, but nobody ever showed it to you—"

"What's wrong with my trail?"

"Don't you know?" she said. "Are you so stupid as to try and convince yourself cutting out other people's cattle and changing the brands is honest and good?"

"I never worried much about bad or good," I said. "They're just words. Most people seem to have them mixed up pretty well anyway. They wouldn't let a man like me in your Kemmerer church, but Newcastle goes there every Sunday and everybody tips their hats and licks his boots like he never heard about sin. How do you justify that? He's appropriated ten times as many cattle as me. He's broken men like your father from here to Texas. Every time a bunch of homesteaders get

pesky or get too strong, Newcastle whispers a word in his assemblyman's ear, and the Grangers find a new law that puts them off their land and out of Newcastle's way."

"Running Iron—"

The surprise in her face maddened me. "Don't pretend you don't know. Maybe you don't know everything about him, but you know enough. And he ain't the only one. The cottonwoods talk a lot plainer along the owlhoot than your minister does in his pulpit. We got a grapevine that'd make Sam Morse blush for shame, and I know enough about half the big, honest, good ranchers in this county to send them to hell on a hot shutter. I've probably made a few men curse with the cattle I've borrowed, and Newcastle's made a few die with the deals he's pulled, and they'll make him governor some day, and hang me. So now ask me what I know about bad and good."

"Oh, Running Iron, Running Iron." She had me by both arms now. "Is that what Bibo's taught you? Haven't you ever tried to figure it out for yourself? You were brought up by him and never knew any other teachers, and he was already so far down the wrong trail you couldn't see where you'd turned off even if you looked back, and I can't blame you for the way you've lived. But haven't you ever tried to think it out for yourself? Would you take my cattle from me?"

Her eyes were big and bright and blue, and I couldn't meet them. "I—I—"

"That's what I mean," she said. "You wouldn't, because you know how it would hurt me. It's all we have left, and you know how it would finish us, and you wouldn't touch them. That's what bad and good is, Running Iron. Not what people think of you. Not what they say of Newcastle because he's rich and powerful and goes to church and hides what he does, or what they say of you because you're a known rustler. Bad and good is inside yourself. You'd know it if you ever tried to think it out for yourself. The good in going to church isn't the mere fact that you're there. The bad in rustling isn't in the rustling itself but the harm you do to others by it. You've got just as much good in you as anybody, and just as much bad. The only trouble is all anybody ever showed you before was the bad."

Talking to me like I was a kid or something that way. But somehow it touched me, like a hand would touch you. I shook off her arm and turned away from her face and then got up and limped off a bit toward the herd. I realized she was right. I'd never thought about it before. I'd had plenty of time to, a thousand nights, or a million, lying beneath the stars with my head in my arms, and all I'd thought about was the way that Mexican gal in Austin kissed or how nice the beef we'd roasted for dinner tasted or how good that ride down through the timber had been beside Bibo with a posse yapping at our heels. I'd never asked myself if it was bad or good to kiss the gal, or bad or good to eat beef that wasn't yours, really, or bad or good to have a posse chasing you all over Texas. I just liked things, or didn't like them, and that was enough, the way Bibo took it, the way he had taught me to take it. I felt like an animal, suddenly. A hog that had been rooting around with his snout in the dirt after onions because he knew they tasted good, and then had looked up to see the sky and realized it had been there all along, if he'd just got his nose out of the dirt long enough to take a gander—

My head jerked up, and I didn't know what the sound had been, at first. Then I realized Bibo wasn't singing any more. I had my Bisley out and was already running toward the herd. "Bibo? Bibo?"

I MUST have fell a dozen times on that bum leg before I reached the cattle. They were milling around, spooked by the gunshot, and I knocked a couple of wobbly calves over before I could get through the bunch to where the horse stood. I had been a good roper once, and as soon as Bibo left the saddle, the animal must have stopped. The reins was still on the horn, and he lay on his back in the deep wheatgrass. I started to go one way, then the other, and finally almost jumped on the horse.

"Nev' mind, boy," said Bibo. "They did it from the timber over there, and you might as well try to find hair on a frog as trail them. Help me up. Got something to tell you before I sack my saddle." Time I lifted his head he'd got his shirt all wet bleeding at the mouth, and there was a

funny glazed look coming into his eyes. He waved his hand toward Medicine String. "Funny. I pulled so many deals I forgot some of them, I guess. I'd forgotten this one, till we met Leo Manners. I knew the country smacked familiar, somehow, but I couldn't recollect anything. Didn't even recognize Leo, remember? It was the Medicine String, boy, I should have recalled. Twenty-odd years ago. Before I put you in my poke. Twenty-odd years ago and now it's starting all over again. Funniest part they never did know the real truth. Piney Creek backed up into it, and they never did know the real truth. They still think it's rich. Doing all this because they think it's rich. Even Leo. Leo and all of them. And it's salted. Not like you'd take a shotgun and blow some dust into a rock. A ton of good rock, see. Packed in on mules and dumped down the hole. That's really salting it up right—"

"Running Iron, what's he talking about?" Marval had crouched beside us now, her face white in the dark.

Bibo saw her and cackled. "Like corn, ain't it, boy, yellow as a Kansas cornfield. This is the one for you, boy. You got your heifers mixed. Ardis'll give you a crooked ride and a knife in your back at the end. All the time you thought it was that hellcat, and it should have been Marval here. You need her, boy. You're all hard, and that ain't good. I guess I made you that way, didn't I? I couldn't help it, boy. We had a good ride anyway you look at it, didn't we?"

"We had a good ride," I said.

"You can be soft with her, boy," he babbled. "You can be soft with a woman and that ain't weakness. It's something you got to learn I couldn't teach you. Neither could any of the women you ever knew.

"Marval can. Let her teach you, boy. A man sees the last ridge ahead, and a few things are clearer. She can give you softness and you can give her guts—" he shuddered in my arms and for the first time I realized how really little and dried-up he was. He waved his arm again toward the Medicine String, so hard it almost knocked me over. "Don't let them do this to her, boy. Tell 'em old Bibo salted it. Tell 'em they're doing all this for a bunch of salt. A ton of it. That's all, boy. A ton of it, and then they're through. Salt, boy, salt. . . ."

"Bibo," I said, "what do you mean?"

VI

A HIGH wind was coming down out of the Salt Rivers when we got back, and a loose shutter was flapping somewhere on the second story of the A Bench house. There was a gaunt sorrel standing hipshot at the hitchpost in front of the porch, and I pulled up just below the top of the ridge.

Marval turned in her saddle, pulling her animal to a halt. "It's not Sheriff Hale's sorrel, if that's what's worrying you."

"Looks familiar," I said. It was three days since Bibo had died out there in my arms, never even answering my question. I'd finished branding for the girl because I'd promised, and I wanted to see if I couldn't find anything on who murdered Bibo. But I didn't find nothing. Even the trail into timber had petered out in shale, and an Injun would have been hard put to trail, and I'm no Injun. It had been too big a shock at first for me to feel much, or even realize Bibo was gone. But now it was beginning to come when I was alone in my sougan at night, and I felt mean as hell right now. I took out the bullet. It had gone clean through him and been stopped by the cartridges in his belt at the back, and when I buried him, it dropped out his shirt.

"I still can't figure any of the Cut-and-Slash men in on that," she said. "None of them would use a steel-jacketed slug in their saddle guns."

I could have told her I never figured the Cut-and-Slash from the beginning. "This don't come from no ordinary carbine. It looks a little bigger than thirty-thirty."

She was watching me closely now, strangely. "And when you find the gun it came from?"

I put the bullet away without answering, turning my horse on down the road. I could hear her animal trotting up behind me.

"Running Iron, you can't do it that way, you can't just go out and take vengeance like a wild animal. I thought you understood that night, before Bibo was killed, I

thought I'd showed you, it was in your face, your eyes. Killing someone else won't help now. Two rights don't—"

"Keep that in your own poke," I told her. "Nobody bothered about right or wrong when they dry-gulched Bibo. And when I find the man with the gun this shell came from, I'm not going to bother about bad and good. I don't know whether it's bad or good. All I know is Bibo's dead and they killed him."

"You didn't understand that night." She spat it like a treed cat. "I thought there was something good in you, something decent. I thought you'd just been given the wrong horse. But you would have picked that horse even if Bibo wasn't there to rope it for you. You're no better than a wild animal. You're worse than an animal. At least they don't know any better—"

We were at the porch then, and she was almost crying again. I dropped off my horse and threw the rawhide reins over its head, my face clamped shut. All right, so I'm an animal—I feel like one. I'd like to get something in my hands and tear it apart. Thinking that, I limped onto the cool stone porch. It was then the door opened, and I knowed why that gaunt sorrel had looked familiar. Ardis came out behind the man and introduced him to Marval.

"This is Mister Carnes, Marval," she said.

"Cadaver Carnes?" I said.

"What?" said Marval.

"How did the branding go?" asked Ardis quick, and seemed to cover it up that time anyway, because Marval's mouth pouted out and she took a heavy breath.

"Not good, Ardis. Not enough to make a day's work for Running Iron, and him not able to get around very well as it was. I don't think the cattle alone will see us through this fall, even if we sell the whole herd."

"Running Iron?" said Ardis, turning toward me.

"Yes," I said, watching Cadaver Carnes. "Bibo didn't get a chance to do any branding. Somebody killed him."

THE rich color left Ardis' face, and her mouth opened without any sound coming out; she put up her hand to indicate something, then dropped it again. The mournful man's features never changed. He held his dusty black flat-top against one side of his dusty black tail-coat, and three cartridges in his gunbelt glittered between the front edges of his coat, and he stood without moving, my gaze making no visible impression on him. Finally Ardis could speak, and her reaction was genuine enough. She said something about how inconceivable it was or how terrible, or something, I didn't hear rightly, and then we were moving into the big living room. Ardis nodded at a mahogany Morris chair with reversible cushions and four reclining positions the way it's advertised in the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, and Cadaver took it; she kept looking at me, and I decided she wanted me out.

"I'll go wash up," I said, rattling my spurs across the hooked rugs to the kitchen door. They expected me to go on outside to the washrack the hands must have used, and I knew that, and it was why I closed the kitchen door and went to the tub they had inside. It had enough water in it, and I could hear well enough through the door what they were saying.

"Mister Carnes is here for Headway Lumber," Ardis told Marval. "They're still willing to buy that strip along Medicine String."

"Yes." Cadaver's voice, hollow and dusty. "We're hard-pressed to fill our tie-contracts with the U.P., and we're willing to up the price we quoted last fall."

"I know—" I could hardly hear Marval, she was across the room—"but Dad didn't want to then, and I can't—"

"Your father was just being stubborn, Marval," said Ardis. "Unwilling to sell the String because of his fool sentimental attachment for the Yallow Hole. Newcastle's out to get you now, and if you don't have hard cash when this next payment comes due on that trust deed he holds, he'll foreclose and get the whole A Bench, much less Medicine String. Sell the String to Headway now, and it will give you enough to see you through this year regardless of how your beef turns out."

Marval hesitated a moment. "But Dad—"

"Yes," said Ardis, "what about your father? Do you think you're doing him

any good stewing around like this? With money you could fight Newcastle. It's the only thing that can fight him. If you don't care about the A Bench, at least think of Leo. It's for his own good now. You're lost if you don't see that, Marval, everything's lost. You'll just have to sit here like this and let them railroad your father to the pen or a lynchrope and then come and take the A Bench right out from under you."

Marval's hesitation was longer this time. Finally she sighed. "I guess you're right, Ardis—"

"I have the contracts right here," said Cadaver.

"What good will that do?" Marval asked.

"Your father being imprisoned loses all his civil rights," said Cadaver, "consequently the title to his property falls under the jurisdiction of the legal heir. You being of age, your signature on the deed ratifies it completely. I have pen and ink in my case here, and if you'll just sit down at the table. . . ."

"Don't do that, Marval."

The three of them turned like I'd jerked a string, all at once, to stare at me where I had opened the kitchen door. The blond girl was sitting at the sideboard with a bunch of papers spread out across its cracked glass top. Ardis flushed dark, and her lips twisted around the words.

"You were eavesdropping!"

"I sure was," I said. "My ethics don't prevent peeking through the fence when a couple of old mossyhorns are trying to hornswaggle a pore little dogie. You leave those papers alone, Marval. As long as your dad hasn't been convicted he remains in full legal possession of his property. Whatever you're trying to do here, Cadaver, you jumped the gun a little."

Cadaver's voice was expressionless. "I don't think I've jumped any gun, Mister Smith. I didn't want to be the one who broke the sad news to Miss Manners here. The circuit judge arrived a week early from Kemmerer this year. Owen Newcastle brought pressure to bear and had Manner's case shoved to the head of the list. A jury was sworn in last night, and all the necessary witnesses subpoeneaed. The trial was already over when I left town this morning."

"You mean Newcastle bulled it through like that without even giving them time to notify me—" Marval had almost knocked the chair over, getting up, and then it struck her fully, how he had finished. She stared at him. "Dad . . . Dad. . . ."

"Was convicted," said Cadaver.

Marval collapsed into the chair, still staring up at him; then she buried her head in her hands, body shaking like a dogie with colic as she sobbed.

"You better go, Cadaver," I said.

"Miss Manners hasn't signed the papers yet," he said, and somehow his coat had got shoved back far enough for me to see all the cartridges in his gunbelt, and the big black-handled Colt in its slick holster.

"Any other time I might try to reason with you," I told him, "but right now I feel mean enough to eat off the same plate with a snake. Either you get out right now or you pull your gun, and I don't care which."

The only sign Cadaver made was the way his big sad eyes suddenly grew opaque, like water when a cow stirs the mud up, but Ardis must have seen it the same as me, or known it, because it was her speaking. "Don't be too quick with your reins, Mister Carnes, she said softly, "you're on the toughest bronc in the String this time."

CADAVER stood there another minute. Then he turned toward the door, his tail-coat making a soft dry whisper in the hush, and left without speaking or looking at any of us, and we heard his saddle-leather creak outside, and then the sorrel passed the open door going up the road. Marval was still crying, and I didn't know whether I was going over and slap her face or leave the room, that's how mean I felt. Then I turned and went out through the kitchen. The air smelled fresher outside, and I stood there sucking it in a while and then went around front to unsaddle the horses and turn them out just for something to do. I'd slung all the kacks on the opera seat and was just closing the corral gate after the horses when Ardis came down from the house. I took a hitch in the rawhide latching and stood there waiting for her, knowing what was coming.

"So you had to butt in," she said.

"Why didn't you let Cadaver go on?" I asked.

"I didn't want him to get killed," she said. Then she was standing up to me, bosom heaving, face flushed. "Listen, Running Iron, I told you how I felt about you and that won't ever change, no matter what, but it has nothing to do with what I'm doing here."

"Just what are you doing here?"

"Don't bother acting dumb," she said. "You know what's going on. You know more about it than I do. You and Bibo thought you could come back and cash in a second time? That's all right. I can forget that. I told you what we're doing here has nothing to do with the way I feel about you. But if you try to stop it, Running Iron, no matter how I feel about you, I'll kill you, do you understand that, if you try to mess things up now, I swear, I'll kill you!"

That bronc in Dallas held his mouth the same way when he kicked me, all twisted up like that, the outlaw in his eyes turning them hot and blazing. "I understand," I said, and I did. "That's the kind you are, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's the kind I am," she said, and then leaned back a little, something like a smile catching at her mouth. "And it would take a man like you to understand it."

I shrugged. "Wolffe said it right, maybe. Elemental. I never knew what the word meant before, exactly."

She reached up to touch my face, and where Marval's fingers had felt soft and cool, this woman's were like hot pokers touching me. "Looks like Wolffe did more than explain my character to you."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"No other man would mess you up like that, Running Iron, no other man could. It was Wolffe, wasn't it? He did it deliberately, didn't he?" She laughed suddenly, pulling her hand back. "So you thought he was a little old for me?"

That riled me so I grabbed her by the shoulders, and her flesh was hot against my dirty hands through the thin silk shirt. "Maybe Wolffe was right. Killing me wouldn't have been enough. Any man can pull a gun and kill another one. That wouldn't have been enough. He had to beat me up so you could see. Is that it? Like a couple of bulls in a pasture goring each other to see who gets the heifer."

"Don't call me a heifer!"

"I guess that's it then. He was right. Elemental. Just beat me up so you can see who's the best man—"

"You fool, do you think that matters? Do you think he could change anything that way? Do you think it's that simple, now?" She almost shouted it, to stop me, and then her body was up against me, heaving with the breath passing through her, and it was like that first time back in the pocket by Hoss Creek, only more so, and all the meanness that had been in me at Bibo's death left in a flood, and all my anger at Ardis, and all of everything, except the terrible burning consciousness of her there against me. She had her eyes closed when she finally took her mouth away. "Now tell me Wolffe was rgiht," she breathed.

"I guess he didn't know his woman as well as he thought," I said.

She pulled away. "I've got to do something now, Running Iron. This will end it. When I come back we can go away or do whatever you want."

She had carried a saddle gun out in its scabbard, and a leather case, and for the first time I realized what the case was. "You mean you got Marval to sign that deed after all!"

ARDIS had picked up the brief case. "Carnes left them on the table. It's for her own good, Running Iron. The A Bench is through without that money."

I grabbed her wrist so hard she let out a cry of pain. "Don't try and tell me you're doing it for the girl's own good, Ardis. You're doing it for her dad. Her dad and Manners' dad."

"Do you think I care about Leo?" she said, trying to tear loose. "Blind, bigoted, miserly old fool. Do you think I give one damn what happens to him. I saved his life. That's about all I would do. Whatever else happens to him is his own fault. He could have sold the Medicine String a year ago and saved himself all this, but he wouldn't listen to reason."

"Forget Manners," I said. "I saw what he was. What about the girl? I'm not going to stand by and see her hurt."

She drew up. "Oh, aren't you? Why the sudden solicitude for Marval? Maybe you kiss her like that too, when you're out branding her cows—" The way I squeezed her wrist made her cry out again. Panting, she tried to tear loose once more.

"You know it isn't that," I said. "She's just a kid, that's all, caught in this, and I can't see you or anybody else hurt her any more than she's hurt now."

"Hurt?" She almost laughed. "She was never hurt in her life. She doesn't know what it is to be hurt. She'd bawl like a sick dogie if you so much as gave her a hard look. She's a spineless, sniveling little brat. A spineless sniveling little brat and a bigoted miserly stupid old man, Running Iron, and you don't know what it's been like having to live with them, and I don't care what happens to either of them now!"

"Why have you *had* to live with them?" I said. That stopped her, and she stood there, licking her lips, staring wide-eyed at me. "Because of Sean?" I said.

I hadn't expected such a violent reaction. Her face turned the color of dead ashes and with my fingers on her wrist I could feel the stiffening of her body start from there. She took a breath through her teeth.

"What do you know . . . of Sean?"

"I met him up on Medicine String," I told her. "He said he was hunting for Bibo Adams to kill him."

It came out of her brokenly. "Sean—"

"Yes," I said. "Your husband. As crazy as loco weed. Now, Ardis, don't you want to tell me what's going on here?"

"No—" she tore loose this time and turned and started running toward the front of her house where her horse was hitched—"no, Running Iron, you know what's going on as well as I do, and if you try to stop me now, I told you what would happen."

My leg hurt bad trying to run after her, and she was already at her horse by the time I reached the corner of the house. She jammed her gun in its scabbard beneath the left stirrup leather and lashed it in with a tie-thong. Then she ran in the house, and I could hear her boots clattering around in the front room. When she came out, she was stuffing a handful of shells into the pocket of her levis, spilling a couple of them as she half-ran across the porch. She threw a look at me, but I didn't move from in front of the porch, because that outlaw light was flashing in her eyes, and I could see there would be no stopping her. She knocked the reins off the hitching post and threw them over the black's head and jumped up saddle like an Indian, hooking under the horn with her left hand and kicking her right leg up so it carried her into leather without touching the stirrups. She jerked the black around, jamming her boots into the ox-bows, spitting it at me.

"Don't try to follow me, damn you, don't try," and then she wheeled the animal and raked it with her can-openers and jumped it into a gallop up the ridge road. I stood there till she had topped the rise, trying to decide whether I wanted to follow her or whether the feeling for her was so strong inside me I didn't care about anything except waiting for her to come back and then going away with her the way she had said. I turned around and went up the steps, and something bright caught my eye. Marval came to the door about the time I stooped to pick it up.

"Where did Ardis go in such a hurry?"

I didn't answer. I fished in my shirt pocket for the bullet which had killed Bibo. I held it up with the cartridge I had picked off the porch.

"Running Iron," said Marval, "what is it?"

I turned around and walked back out to the corral and got a kack off the fence. Marval had followed me, and it must have been about then she understood. I put the saddle on one of the horses I had turned into the corral and led it back out and closed the gate and stepped into the stirrup. I turned the horse up toward the ridge road.

"Running Iron," screamed Marval. "You can't. Not Ardis, Running Iron, for God's sake, not Ardis!"

VII

UP where the blue spruce sheds its needles so thick your horse sinks into the carpet like a bog, and the black bear roots through the choke-cherry for wild onions, and a marmot startles the quaking aspens with his shrill whistle from

some higher talus. Up where the air is so pure it hurts to breathe, and the piney smell is so strong it almost chokes you when the wind is right and the silence is so big a pine cone dropping from a tree sounds like a cannon going off. Up where Bibo belonged.

Sitting there on the first ridge of Medicine String, that's what I thought. How many times had he and I sat our horses on a topland like this drinking in the sweetness of spring in the wind and sounds of a country where a man knew how free a bird felt in flight? How many times had they—

The hell with you, Running Iron, I thought, clamping my teeth shut, because to think of anything now was only pain. My nag was no equal of that black stallion Ardis forked, but I had managed to follow her this far, trailing her most of the time, guessing her directon some, sighting her once or twice when I got to a ridge behind her. No remembering what was in my mind all that ride. Looking back it seemed a black emptiness of purpose. But there must have been thoughts. Hate and anger and love and passion and bitter reluctance and driving vengeance all spinning around, each trying to top the saddle and ride roughshod over the others, none clear enough or strong enough to do it.

From this ridge I could see Yallow Hole above the cut I had been driving the cattle through that day, and when I saw movement about the rotting workings of the old mine, I turned my weary horse that way, dropping down through thick strands of spruce that were crowded out finally by juniper on the lower slopes, riding in the darkest shadowed lanes and avoiding every open patch until I reached the spot where I could no longer approach mounted without showing myself. I stepped off and hitched my horse and stood there watching for a while.

Down in Yallow Valley the cedars cling warped and stunted to the bases of the foot-slopes, but up here they're like tall queens, and they were the last patch of timber I moved through before the Hole. A black stallion was tethered to one of the shattered supports of the shaft. It nickered as I stopped at the edge of the cedars.

"Wolffe, is that you?"

It was the voice of Ardis, from the mouth of the mine, and I walked out without answering; that first terrible craving for vengeance had subsided in me now, and I felt dead inside, somehow, knowing only that this had to be done, that I couldn't live with myself on past this day if I didn't do it, that I couldn't die without doing it.

"Wolffe—?"

She started to call again, but I had appeared at the mouth of the cave. I could see her dimly inside, staring at me, the pale blot of her face, the mature line of her hip in those levis. I walked on in, boots sinking into the boggy ground here, taking the two bullets from my pocket.

"I want you to know why I'm doing this, Ardis. Bibo would want you to know." I held up the lead slug and the fresh cartridge. "This steel-jacketed .45-40 is the bullet that murdered Bibo. And this steel-jacketed .45-40 is one of the shells you dropped when you left the A Bench."

"You fool—" it was almost a gasp—"you shouldn't have followed me. Running Iron, you shouldn't." It wasn't what I'd expected. There wasn't even any fear in her face as she clutched at me. "Please, get out, get out before it's too late!"

I tried to tear her loose. "You don't seem to understand."

"I understand," she said. "It's you who doesn't understand."

"I've come to kill you."

"Running Iron! Please, get out of here. I told you not to follow me—"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you—" She stopped, clinging to me like that, and her face was turned past me. Then I felt her arms tighten around me. "Wolffe," she screamed, "Wolffe," and slammed me up against the wall of the tunnel as the shots thundered from behind. I got my Bisley out while I was rolling across the floor. I struck one of those rotten timbers, and it crashed down somewhere to one side of me. Choking and gagging in the wood-dust it raised, I got to my feet. I heard someone running down the tunnel and couldn't see Ardis any more between me and the lighted end and thought she had gone on in. I thought of Wolffe in that moment, but I didn't want to lose Ardis—I wanted to reach her while this was still strong and black enough inside me, and I turned on into the mine.

THE floor was rotten mud that sucked me down sometimes to my boot tops, and after a few feet I couldn't run. Then I struck a strata of rock and some old timbers fallen across the bottom and made my way a little faster, jumping across deep pools of water in the bottom. She couldn't go far, if this mine was filled with that water like they said. I could hear somebody coming in behind me now. Wolffe?

It was too dark to see, finally, and I began feeling my way along one wall, and it was then I came to the first branch tunnel. I stood there, realizing what that meant. No telling how many of these branches on ahead. Without a light, I'd have about as much chance of finding Ardis as I would finding hair on a frog.

"Rope the cow and kill the calf,
Swing your partner round and a half . . ."

I don't know how long I stood there after it came. It chilled me so I was actually shuddering when I recovered from the first shock. Then I tried to tell myself it had been in my head. I clamped my face shut and started moving on down the main tunnel. The water sucked at my legs with a sloppy, mournful sound. The dampness of the earth around me seemed to press against my body like a cold hand. The darkness was suffocating.

"Ducks in the river, going to the ford,
Coffee in a little rag, sugar in a gourd."

Bibo? It welled up in me and slapped against the roof of my mouth, and I didn't know whether I had said it aloud or not. Bibo? Don't, Bibo, please. Ain't it hard enough without that. Ain't it dark enough. I'm after her, Bibo, she's right ahead somewhere. I began stumbling faster through the muck, bumping my head against rotting timbers, knocking a support down with a crash, lurching into a rusting ore car on a siding that turned into the next branch tunnel.

"You swing me and I'll swing you,
We'll go to heaven in the same old shoe . . ."

"No, Bibo, please. For God's sake, Bibo, don't plague me like that. I'm doing the best I can, Bibo—" I stopped myself, crouching there, realizing how far I had gone gibbering in the dark like that. I never was afraid of anything I could fight. But this was different. I clutched the Bisley out in front of me, trying to make my call quiet. "Bibo, if that's you, come out. I'm here. Running Iron. If you're not dead, come on out."

And if you are dead—

"Swing 'em once and let 'em go,
All hands left an' do-ce-do . . ."

Bibo, damn you, quit it, quit it. "Bibo, damn you, quit it, quit!"

I stopped myself again, my breath coming in hoarse sobs. It was Bibo's voice, all right, no denying that. And his laugh. I could hear it ringing down the mine, that crazy old hen-cackle. Not in my head now. I knew it. Nobody else. Nobody else could sing the old square like that, or laugh like that. Oh please, Bibo, for God's sake, Bibo, don't. Pleace—come on out of that hole—

"How'll you swap and how'll you trade
This pretty gal for that old maid?"

Bibo. I started running wildly down the mine through the water then. Bibo. The tunnel had a deep slant, and I went headlong more than once, keeping my gun out of the water by instinct more than intent. Bibo! I don't know what I meant to do, all I know is I couldn't stand there in the dark and hear him singing like that. Bibo!

I followed the sound of his laughter through a maze of tunnels, turning off the main one into a branch, turning off that into another. First I thought it was the woman mocking me, but she couldn't have made her voice sound like that, or laughed like that. Then I thought Wolffe. But he couldn't have done it either. Finally I stopped the loco running, crouching there with my own breath deafening me. The rotten timbers were dripping ooze constantly around me. The water was up to my knees, freezing cold now. Then I heard movement. Ahead? I took a step that way before I heard it again. Behind? I whirled around. Oh damn you, Bibo, damn you—

The shot stopped that. It sounded muffled. I moved toward the sound, then saw the light filtering into this end of the tunnel, revealing the framework of supports and buttresses. The opening it came from was in the ceiling, and I had to holster my gun to climb up the timbers and claw through the hole. Sunlight hit me like a blow, and I couldn't see for a minute. I rolled over, and what I did with my right hand was automatic. Then what I did with my right hand stopped, because I could see. I was on a slope, and below me about ten feet were two men, one of them lying stretched out on his back. The other man stood above him, twisted toward me with the tail of his long black coat shoved away from the black butt of his six-gun. We had both reached that point about the same time and now both stopped there, the way two men will when they're equally surprised, both waiting now for the other one to make the break.

"Go ahead," I said.

He did. There was no sensation in me. It's always that way. Feeling nothing from the time I saw his move till when my Bisley crashed in my hand. Cadaver's long body jerked to the .38-40, and stiffened, and hung there with his right hand gripping the gun he had gotten halfway out of its slick holster. Then all the muddiness went out of his eyes, and they turned glassy, and he fell over on his face. Bibo was a good teacher.

"How'll you swap and how'll you trade . . ."

I got to my knees, staring at the man lying on the ground. Sean Manners. Sean Manners, and he gurgled on the song, and I could see the blood all over his chest. Cadaver must have plugged him like that and been putting his gun away when I arrived. I stepped over Cadaver's body, kneeling beside the loco man.

"It was you in the cave," I told him. "Singing Bibo's song."

"This pretty gal for that old maid," he choked, and one of his hands was lying across that Spencer falling block. "Bibo's song? I'll kill him. Where is he? I'll kill him."

"Never mind," I said, and I understood now why Ardis' reaction hadn't been what I expected. "You've already killed him."

THEY made two tiny figures down on the river. Sean Manners was dead behind me, now, and I had turned down the slope, seeing them below me. I was close enough to recognize them now. In late spring like this the lumbermen float their ties down the streams like Hoss Creek and Piney Creek and stretch cables across the streams at a wide spot to boom the ties, holding them there till the spring freshets have filled Green River to the proper depth for driving the ties on down to the town of Green River. The ties had jammed up here till they were solid from one bank to the other, and Ardis was already out on the boom, crossing the water that way, with Wolffe behind her. The slope here was mucky, like the water from Piney Creek might have backed up here in flood season, and I could slide down most of the way like a kit beaver, reaching the sandy shore before Wolffe was very far out onto the boom. It was only then I realized he had been chasing Ardis. She had Cadaver's brief case with the deed in her hands and was too far ahead to have been with Wolffe.

"You'll have to take care of me before you get that deed, Wolffe," I hollered, and it turned him around, like I wanted. "Is that why you wanted Medicine String? How long has the water been out of Yallow Hole?"

He swayed back and forth on the bobbing ties, having to shift his feet constantly to keep from slipping down between them. "Come on then, Mister Smith. You know as well as I do how long Yallow Hole's been dry. When Bibo Adams sold Yallow Hole to Leo and Sean Manners twenty years ago, he knew it would be full of water within six months. Leo and Sean could never empty the Hole by dredging because they were working at the wrong stream. They thought the water came from Piney Creek here, because of those seepholes it had made in the bottom of Number Two shaft during flood season. But that only put two or three inches on the floor of Number Two. The real water was coming from the underground source of Horse Creek. Bibo must have tapped it sinking his first shaft. When Bibo heard Horse Creek was drying up, he thought he'd come back and cash in a second time, is that it? Only we happened to

be here first. Manners hadn't been to Yallow Hole in several years. It was me discovered the Hole was drying when I was cutting ties in the timber on that slope."

All the time he had been shifting around trying to get a solid footing to shoot on when I drew near enough. I was on the boom now and could hardly keep my feet on the treachery of bobbing, jerking, twisting ties. And all the pieces were together for me now, and I knew what Bibo had been babbling about just before he died.

"Leo wouldn't sell you Medicine String?" I said, the constant clatter of the ties almost drowning my voice.

He spread his legs a little, and I knew I couldn't get much closer before he started it. "Leo was a stubborn old fool. We represented ourselves as the Headway Lumber, tried to buy the String off Leo. He thought he could never work Yallow Hole again, but he wouldn't let go of it. Then Sean Manners showed up, wandering loco over the String. Everybody thought he'd died in Laramie. Must have been some rumpot they identified as him. We knew Sean would give us a hold over Ardis. Marval was a weak, sniveling little brat, and if we could get Leo out of the way, Ardis would have a strong enough influence on the girl to make her deed us Medicine String. I wanted to eliminate Leo for good, but Ardis made us do it with that cattle deal."

"You went to a lot of trouble for a worthless hole in the ground," I said.

He set himself, raising his gun. "You're crazy. That mine's worth a million dollars. You know what it assayed before the water filled it up."

"Bibo put that assay in there," I said. "He salted it. Not ordinary salting. Not like you'd take a shotgun and blow dust into a rock. A ton of good ore. Packed in on mules and dumped down the hole. That's what you've done all this for."

"You're a damn liar," he shouted, and his first shot banged out above the slapping ties.

I PULLED up my Bisley to fire, and then stopped like that. Beyond Wolffe, Ardis must have seen it. Maybe another woman wouldn't have had that much sense. Marval wouldn't. Ardis threw herself flat on the ties so I could shoot without fear of hitting her, and I let my first one go. It was a crazy way to shoot, jerking back and forth on those shifting ties and firing at another target jumping around as much as I was. He didn't back up. He just let me come on, taking time with each shot. I saw him jerk the second time I fired and thought for a moment I had hit him. But it must have clipped his coat or something because there was nothing unsteady about the way he answered my shot. It was his third or fourth that took my hand. I heard his gun cough and felt the shock almost instantly. I must have shouted with the pain, and I knew my Bisley was gone. I didn't even look at my hand. It felt wet and messy, and I hugged it in against my belly and caught myself from falling on the jumping ties and started on forward again.

I saw Wolffe spread his legs and set himself, and I couldn't feel any fears, especially. Maybe the wound made me a little dizzy. I was pretty close now. He leveled down on me, and then, just as he fired that last round, a sudden new shift of the ties unbalanced him. The slug whined by me somewhere above. He bent forward, lowering the gun, and began punching at the chambers. Then he must have realized I was too close for that; he quit trying to reload and stuffed the iron back into its holster, and bent forward a little.

"Running Iron." It was Ardis, and she was fighting her way toward us across the ties. "Running Iron. No. He used to be on the river. No—"

I know what he used to be. I know what he is now. And how it has to be. He was right that first time. A gun wouldn't be enough. Just taking a gun and shooting you wouldn't be enough. That's the way it was inside me as I took that last step and went for him. I didn't realize there was a grin on his face till I struck him. That was the way he met it. I guess he knew too. Just a gun wouldn't be enough.

"Damn fool," he grunted, and shifted his weight even as I hit him, skilfully, the way a man used to riding timber on white water would shift it.

His right foot came out and caught me in the middle. The force of it bent me almost double across his knee, and my head rocked down to his blow behind my neck. I caught his ankle and pulled toward

my head, jack-knifing the leg beneath me. He spun on his other foot and kicked the leg straight, but it had caught him off-balance long enough so he couldn't follow up that sock behind the neck, and I gave a heave on that straightening leg which threw me away from his arms. One of my feet went through the slippery bobbing ties up to the hip, and I was caught there, struggling with both hands to get out of the soggy wooden trap, the weight of all those other ties crushing my thigh as they jerked back and forth all around me. Wolffe was still grinning as he jumped toward me. He was as much at home here as I was on a bronc. I saw all his weight go to his right leg and dodged the kick of his left boot an instant before it reached my head.

Then, somehow, I had torn my leg free of the ties and was on one knee. He shifted in close till his levis jammed harsh and wet into my face, doubling over to give me an uppercut. It would have knocked me sprawling if I hadn't caught him around the knees. The blow left my head blind and spinning. I tried to fight up his body, feet seeking some sort of foothold on the treachery of those twirling, clattering, shifting ties. I felt like a dogie when it first tries to walk. He hit me again and I thought he'd knocked my head off my body. I felt his weight jerk for the next blow and let go his legs to reach blindly for his arm.

I knew what side it would come from, and somehow I got my hands in the way. Wolffe's sleeve ripped through my fingers with the force of his blow, but I had his elbow, and I jerked down with all my weight. His feet made a desperate slipping, kicking sound as he tried to remain erect, but he lost the foothold and crashed down on top of me. I caught him with one hand in the hair, taking that moment while he was still off-balance to spraddle around on top of him, one of my legs going through the ties again into the icy water. But I was on top of him. I held him by the hair that way and hit him in the face. His hands clawed upward at my own face, my neck, my eyes, anything. He tried to put a knee in my groin, but I let my weight go down on him hard to block that, and hit him again. Still fighting blind, I heard him shout something in a choked way, and that cut off with a gurgling sound. I hit him again, and my fist came back dripping water. Then my knees were in water on either side of him. I struck again and shouted with the pain of my knuckles beating into wood. Then my whole body was in the water, with the ties crashing in against me, trying so hard to knock me under they seemed alive. I had to let go Wolffe and grab at the wooden planks. My hands slipped off the wet, smooth surface of a pole tie. A slab tie knocked into my head, stunning me. The clattering sound rose about me, and the slopping wash of the water. My legs slipped through the ties with a jerk, and I was in the freezing water up to my hips. I fought like a crazy man to get my legs out again, but the weight of the other ties pushed in, holding me tighter and tighter. Then I was down to my armpits. A quarter tie hit my elbow, stunning that arm so I couldn't flail with it. My forearms went beneath the ties, then up to my shoulder. Only my head and one arm above it now. I was shouting something, or bawling, or cursing, I don't know which. I was beating blindly with my arm at the ties. Somehow, like the fear of a wild animal, way back in my mind, I knew it would be through when my other arm went. The ties were like ice. Once under them there would be no getting above again. Then my other arm slipped through.

"Running Iron, Running Iron . . ."

I GUESS it must have been Ardis calling that. I guess it must have been her dragged me to the bank. I didn't know much between the time my arm went under and when I sat up with the feel of sand beneath me and looked dazedly out over the sea of clattering bobbing ties.

"He's gone," she said, like she knew what I was looking for. "He was under the ties. I had all I could do to drag you out." Then she clutched at me with wet hands, and the smell of her hair in my face was damp, and her voice was intense. "I had to do it, Running Iron, they made me, they had Sean up there at the mine. They wouldn't even let me see him, but they had proof he was alive."

"How did Sean get the gun?" I asked her.

"The falling block?" Her face was

twisted. "The last time I was up at Yallow Hole to see Wolffe my gun disappeared from my saddle boot. Sean must have hooked it while I was with Cadaver and Wolffe. Cadaver brought it back to me when he came down to the A Bench to get Marval to sign that deed."

"And in between that time, your husband killed Bibo with the falling block?"

Her face was against my chest. "Forgive him, Running Iron. Sean was just a poor crazy broken old man. He was weak to begin with, the way Marval's weak, and when he lost everything in Yallow Hole, it broke him. He disappeared a few months afterward, and I thought he had died down in Laramie till Wolffe proved to me they had him up here. It was the hold they had over me. They could have done anything to Sean, up here. I couldn't let them do that."

"You still loved him?"

"No," she muttered. "How could I? How can you love a crazy man? He isn't the same person I married. But I couldn't let them hurt him. And then when I'd thought him dead so long and found out he was alive again—"

"I guess I know," I said.

"They kept Sean in the mine," she said. "When you came, there was so much confusion Cadaver must have lost him. Sean followed me out that seephole at the bottom of Number Two. Cadaver killed him when he tried to escape. When I saw that, there was nothing to hold me any longer. I wouldn't let them have Medicine String then."

"Why wouldn't you tell me what they were doing here?" I said.

"I thought you knew," she told me. "We all did. Leo never told Marval it was Bibo Adams who sold them Yallow Hole, but I knew, and I thought you'd come back with Bibo to cash in a second time when he heard Horse Creek was dry and knew the Hole would be empty.

"It was your idea to make it look like Leo had been rustling the stock?"

"I had to think of something to keep Wolffe from killing him," she said. "I never liked Leo. He was a stubborn, bitter, bigoted old fool, but I couldn't see him murdered. First Wolffe and I were going to brand a few Cut-and-Slash steers ourselves. With all the rustling around here, we knew it would mean jail for Leo. It's bad enough to send a man to jail, but it's the best I could do at the time, and it's better than being killed. Then we hooked onto your fresh trail that night you took a bunch of Newcastle's steers. Bibo was alone in the cabin when we reached it. I guess you'd gone on with the cattle."

"I'm glad to know all that," said a dry voice from behind us. When we had turned enough to see him sitting his sorrel there, it was Sheriff Monte Hale, chewing a hunk of plug like a cow on its cud. His rope-scarred old saddle creaked as he eased his weight forward a bit. "I'm glad to know it was Wolffe forcing you to do it, Ardis. Technically you're just as guilty as he is, no matter what means he used to gain your aid. But I never like technicalities, and if that's the deed to Medicine String in the brief case, you can hand it over and we'll forget what you was going to do with it." Then he was looking at me. "I'm glad to know it wasn't Leo doing the rustling, too . . . Running Iron Smith."

One of his hands had left the saddle horn, and there was a big six-gun in it. I stood up, feeling helpless as a dogie by his dead mama without my Bisley weighting my holster. Hale cheeked his tobacco.

"Marval hit for town as soon as you and Ardis left the A Bench. She told me who you was and who that old man was, and where you'd likely be heading for after you left the spread. Marval thought you'd come out here to kill Ardis, and that's the only way she knew to stop you. She's follering pretty close behind me with Newcastle and Farley French and some others. If they find out it was you doing the rustling, I don't know whether I can keep them from hanging you this second time or not."

"Here's the brief case, Sheriff," said Ardis, and held it out toward him, and the rest happened so fast I didn't rightly see it. He made a move to grab it, automatically, but he was an old fox, and I saw the sly look slide through his eyes. But before he fully understood what Ardis was up to, she had taken a step toward him as if to hand over the case, and then made a slapping downward motion with it that knocked his gun toward the ground. The iron bellowed, and I saw the dirt the slug

kicked up and Ardis had jumped at Hale, hauling him from the saddle of his spooked sorrel. They rolled to the ground with Ardis on top. She spraddled out her legs and grunted and got to her knees straddling Hale. Then she was on her feet, and I saw what had made her grunt. It's the way anybody would do when they give a jerk on something. She had jerked his gun from his hand while they were down there, and she had it now. He sat up, staring from Ardis to me.

"That's how it is, Sheriff," she said. "I'm sorry."

He didn't look as angry as he should have, and he didn't say anything I'd expected. "Then you'd better get a move on before Newcastle gets here, Ardis."

"Before we trail out, I'd like to ask you a favor," I said. "The horse I rode in is hitched up by Yallow Hole. It's got an old running iron beneath the saddle skirt. You might pick it up, and on your way back to Kemmerer, put it in that grave by the old A Bench line shack. Bibo might like to have it as a marker."

"Ardis turned to me. "Running Iron—"

"Yes," I told her. "I guess I'm through with the running iron. When me and Marval were out herding the A Bench beef that time, she told me something that struck home. She said I'd never stopped to think whether my trail was crooked or straight. She was right. I'd ridden with Bibo so long I accepted his way of life without ever stopping to question anything or ask myself whether it was right or wrong or good or bad. That night after Bibo was killed, I did stop to ask. I got some answers."

"Then you and Marval—"

"No," I said. "Bibo thought Marval was the one for me. Maybe I thought so too, at one time. Maybe when I thought you was double-crossing me. Or when I thought you'd killed Bibo. But Marval ain't my kind. I'm no one to say whether she's weak or strong or big or little. All I know is she ain't my kind. And I ain't hers. Maybe I can throw away the running iron, but that won't change me completely. You can't ask a man to turn his horse smack the other way in the middle of a river."

"You're going to need a lot of help to keep you from finding another running iron," said Hale.

"I guess so," I said. "There's still a lot of crooked turns in my trail that'll take a sight of riding to straighten out, and my horse is still a wild bronc. I sort of hoped I'd have someone to help me, like you say. A woman, maybe. Bibo told me that. He said a woman could give a man softness without making him weak. Maybe that's what I need. It'd take more of a woman than Marval to ride my trail. It'd take a woman like you, Ardis."

"Then get on your horse," she said, "and let's go."

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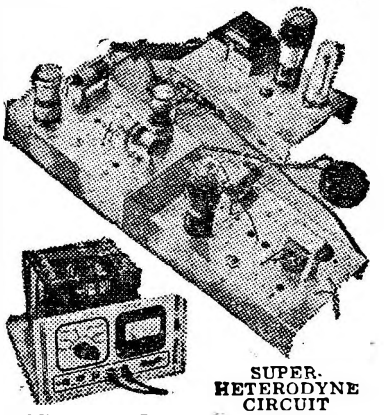

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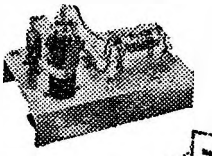

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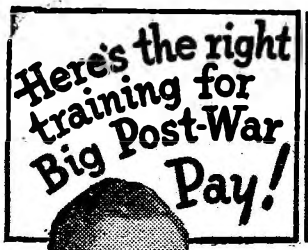

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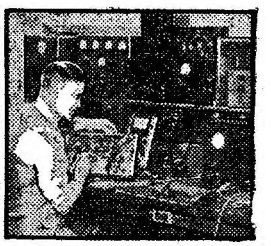

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